

This handout is based on information in Finlay, L. (2015). *Relational Integrative Psychotherapy: Process and Theory in Practice*, Chichester, Sussex: Wiley.

## Chapter 16 Transactional Analysis

Transactional Analysis (TA) provides both a theory of personality and an approach to psychotherapy. Initially developed by Berne (1961) who was originally a psychoanalyst, as a kind of **cognitive-behavioural** therapy, the field has evolved through different manifestations such as psychoanalytic versions, the Cathexis school and Redecision therapy. Contemporary versions tend to be theoretical, relational and integrative. TA can be adapted in different ways and used in other fields (including coaching, education and management).

### The three ego states: 'PAC' model

The basic model of three stacked circles represents three ego states of Parent, Adult, Child to symbolise parts of ourselves (see figure 1). (The capitalised letter is used to distinguish the ego state from the usual use of these terms). In everyday interactions we can move rapidly between these, for instance, I could be functioning in Adult at a formal work meeting when I have a brief argument with a colleague, which puts me into Parent but ends me in Child.

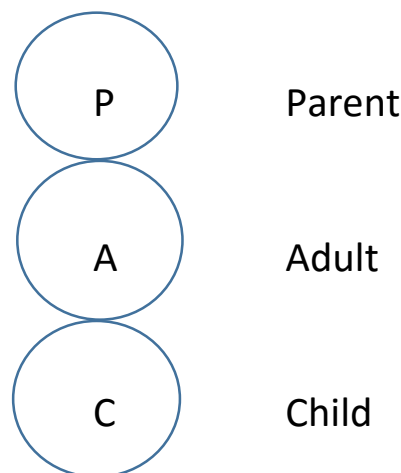


Figure 1 Three Ego States

The **Parent ego state** is made up of behaviour/responses which mirror those of parents and other authority figures. It carries our personal values, internalised cultural norms and social rules about how one 'should' behave. It manifests as being either a Nurturing or Critical Parent. The *Nurturing Parent* is loving, caring and compassionate, producing behaviours we might have experienced when we were being comforted and cared for as a child. The *Critical Parent* is the internalised parent side who judges, criticises and controls: "You are being silly; boys don't cry"; "You shouldn't smoke". The positive impulse here is one of trying to protect others but applied negatively the person becomes punishing or persecutory.

The **Adult ego state** is a repository of our grown-up resources comprising our feelings, thoughts/attitudes and behaviours that are present-centred (i.e. not controlled by past experience/scripts). This involves a way of being that is aware and in contact with self/others. This

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part is resourceful, creative, curious, responsive and has clear, healthy boundaries. It is the part of us which can make choices and mindfully modify more compulsive-impulsive Parent or Child responses. It mediates between working out how our Child ego state can get what it needs while acknowledging how our Parent says what 'should' be done. In other words, it takes the best and most healthy bits of Parent and Child and draws on them appropriately, for instance, stepping in to stop a negative dialogue between Parent and Child, and choosing to replace it with a more nourishing one. Sometimes, this Adult part is seen in a restricted, dissociated way as being just the part where we think, analyse, evaluate, be rational, make decisions and problem-solve. But head and heart (thoughts/feelings) are connected. The idea of an integrated and integrating Adult is more helpful.

The **Child ego state** is the aspect of us retained from our childhood, representing the full gamut of emotions: joy, terror, rage, sadness, delight, curiosity, frustration, jealousy, love etc. It represents the parts of us which can play spontaneously as well as be naïve, unknowing and confused. It manifests as Free or Adapted Child. Our *Free Child* is most clearly seen when we shout with untrammelled joy when our team wins or dance playfully at a party without inhibition. Our *Adapted Child* is the part of us which reacted to parent/teachers expectations and rules by obeying authority to please the 'grown-ups' or to rebel against them.

## Developmental-relational elaborations

A **developmental** perspective considers the evolution of the ego states and focuses on Child deficits. When we're children our Adult and Parent parts are simplified childlike versions, still in the process of being elaborated (these parts are sometimes referred to as  $P_1A_1C_1$ ). Consider the client who has been referred to counselling to develop her mothering skills. At times this client shows her baby love/care similar to the way a child plays with a doll; at other times she gets frustrated and is at risk of damaging the child. This mother could be said to be 'parenting' from the (Nurturing and Critical) Parent-in-her-Child ( $P_1$  in  $C_2$ ).

In addition to seeing these ego states as describing parts of our subjective experience, the theory can be usefully applied *inter*-subjectively, i.e. **interactionally**. Here, transactions between people can be complimentary, crossed and ulterior. Explicit and implicit meanings can get entangled resulting in confusion when messages are not received in the way they are intended! For instance, in a *crossed transaction*, the ego state spoken to is not the one that responds, such as when an Adult to Adult transaction is intended but is responded to from a Child or Parent position.

Another example of transactions can be found in the **drama triangle** ('game'). Originally created by Steve Karpman (1968; see also 2014), the triangle plots behavioural (transactional) moves between people, where the roles of Persecutor, Victim and Rescuer are played out – often as habitual positions - in a psychological attempt to meet unmet needs.

*Persecutor*: Persecutors use their power against others to blame, punish, abuse, put down, neglect and attempt to control others.

*Victim*: Victims are needy and feel hurt, powerless, hopeless and helpless. Sometimes Victims will seek out Persecutors to confirm their belief that they are helpless. They also tend to seduce Rescuers sending messages like "I need help; only you can make me feel better".

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*Rescuer*: Rescuers are driven to try care for and help victims. Often the Rescuer can be found rescuing to bolster their own self-importance or to give to others what they are needing themselves.

These positions are not fixed and it can be helpful to explore how the client might **step back** and engage in more healthy dynamics, e.g. owning one's power without becoming a Persector; being vulnerable without being a Victim; being responsive without being a Rescuer.

## Applying TA in relational-integrative ways

I tend to use TA concepts in five main ways to guide therapy:

- 1) **Strengthening or Growing the Adult** – Strengthening the client's Adult is often a central strategy given how the Adult mediates between Child needs and Parent demands. Here we would invite the client's Adult to be present by being in Adult ourselves. We might ask analytical questions like "What part of you is talking now?" to encourage the client to become aware of their feelings, thoughts, and impulses arising from different ego positions.
- 2) **Decontaminating the Adult** - An early aim of a lot of TA orientated therapy is to 'decontaminate' the Adult from the intrusion of archaic messages (Hargaden & Sills, 2002). Work on decontamination, involves probing and challenging the client's beliefs, helping them recognise the nature of any distorted or magical thinking. For instance, we might say, "Does that mean you must never make a mistake? Whose voice is that?"
- 3) **Working with the internalised Parent** – When faced with a dominant Critical Parent (seen in expressions of shame and self-loathing), I might encourage the client to "turn down the volume" of those critical voices. At the same time the aim is to encourage the client's Nurturing Parent so they can give their own Child the care and compassion it yearns for.
- 4) **Deconfusion of the Child** – In contrast to work with the Adult which is often more cognitive, work on Child deconfusion is relational and developmental. The focus is on exploring the Child's unmet needs and longings. Over time, healing emerges when the client internalises the therapist's empathy and compassion.
- 5) **Practicing new alternatives** – We also have an important role to give 'permissions' for the client to behave, think and feel in ways that run counter to critical injunctions and restraining *scripts*. "It's okay to cry; it's not a sign of weakness". Sometimes the therapist might even model the process, for instance, when we tear up or model playing freely.

## Reflections

TA offers user-friendly but elegant short-hand way of explaining behaviours to clients which is both simple and profound. Clients' ensuing insight can be transformative as they are then in the position to make active decisions to engage in a different ways of being.

With our project of integration through relationship, a key goal must surely be awareness and acceptance of *all* those different parts of us which emerge in our intersubjective relating. Then we are able to be more fully present when interacting with others. As we engage these fuller relationships with self and other, we are *en route* to some healing.