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EGO STATES REVISITED ONCE AGAIN

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Introduction

One of the most potent articles on TA in the recent past is an article by Robert Goulding (1981), titled 'Challenging the Faith'. In this he makes the point; "We cannot afford to say, 'but Eric said' as if his picture would really fall off the wall if we stated that something he said was no longer valid" (p. 53). A very good notion indeed; that of acknowledging Eric Berne's brilliance, and of refusing to mummify it. This idea is further expressed in the author's Letter to the Editor (1989). In fact one could go a step further than Goulding and say that we cannot state 'what Eric really said'. All we can do is state what we think Eric said. Of course, we will all see in Berne's theories what our Parent, Adult and Child ego states will allow us to see. This is no better illustrated than in a recent *Transactional Analysis Journal* that was devoted to articles on ego states (1988, Vol. 18, No. 1). In this journal a number of prominent transactional analysts expressed their views on ego states and all were different.

As a consequence, the present article on ego states contains the writer's Parent, Adult and Child ego states' views of Berne's theories. Some of it is what he thinks Berne said, what he thinks about what Berne said, and what he thinks himself.

The Nature of Berne's Theories

Much has been written on ego states since they were first conceptualized by Berne. Some of it is congruent, and unfortunately, some of it is conflict-

ing. In order to present a consistent statement on ego states, it is necessary to understand why there can be congruence and conflict about the same theory. In order to do this, I will firstly look, not at what Berne said, but how he said it. This considers the quality, or style of his theory, rather than its content.

Eric Berne was originally trained in psychoanaly-

Figure 1
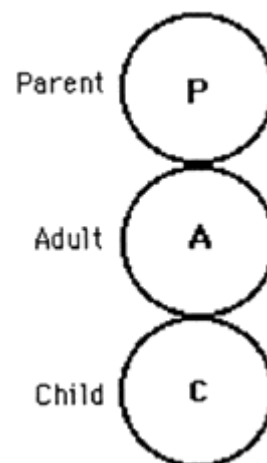
sis. He also underwent personal psychoanalysis for four years in the 1940s. In essence, he must have thoroughly assimilated psychoanalysis in his thinking. It was not until the mid 1950s at the age of 44, that Berne first began to elucidate the concept of the ego states (Stern, 1984). This culminated in 1972 in his book, *What Do You Say After You*

Say Hello?, in which his concept of ego states was very different to that in his original model.

In my opinion, Berne took on an awesome task in this period from 1954 to 1972. He had to change his thinking from psychoanalysis to transactional analysis. So what was that change? One of the ways to understand this best is to examine the difference between Berne's ego states, and Freud's super-ego, ego and id.

The Ego States and Super Ego, Ego and Id.

Berne's ego state model is essentially a spatial or diagrammatic model. That is, Berne describes the ego states in a diagrammatic form, and to understand the theory of ego states it is necessary to understand the diagram.

In his earlier writings in *Intuition and Ego States* (1977) he spent time and energy explaining why the ego state diagram is constructed as it is. For instance, he says that the circles of the ego states are to be seen as semipermeable membranes. In addition to this, Karpman (1981), in his description of Berne's scientific methodology, quotes Berne as stating; "Don't say anything you cannot diagram". Logically then, many other areas of TA theory are also diagrammatic. We have the transactional diagram, the script matrix, the OK Corral, the Karpman Drama triangle, the mini-script, etcetera.

Along with this diagrammatic quality of TA there is a mathematical quality to some of Berne's theories, for instance Berne's Formula G for games. Also, Berne's transactional model can be seen to have an arithmetical or mathematical quality. In his book *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?*, Berne defines, or examines, transactions in a mathematical sense. He calculates the mathematics of possible transactions, in order to demonstrate another facet of his theory. That is, his theory of transactions can be explained in mathematical terms. Therefore in order to understand TA theory, one must be able to think in diagrams and think in mathematical terms.

In conclusion, we could now argue that Berne's theory is a diagrammatic, spatial and mathematical theory. In other words, this is the language that Berne uses when he talks about his theory. It is this, the writer contends, that led Berne into innumerable problems with psychoanalysis, culminating ultimately in repeated failures in his psychoanalysis examinations. This occurred because he spoke the wrong language. When discussing personality he used a spatial, diagrammatic language, whereas the language of psychoanalysis is neither of these. Metaphorically, during his psy-

choanalysis examinations, Berne was attempting to take a German examination while speaking English. He spoke the wrong language. What he said may have been correct, but how he said it was incorrect.

In psychoanalytic literature, how many diagrams are there? Very few. The rare diagrams that do occur are complex and detailed, unlike Berne's ego state diagram. For instance, consider one of Freud's (1952) diagrams of the personality.
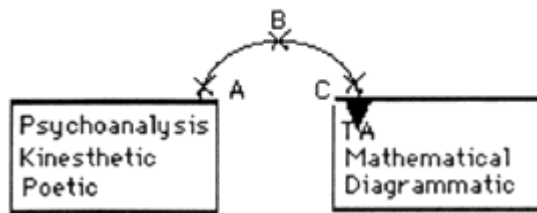

Figure 2
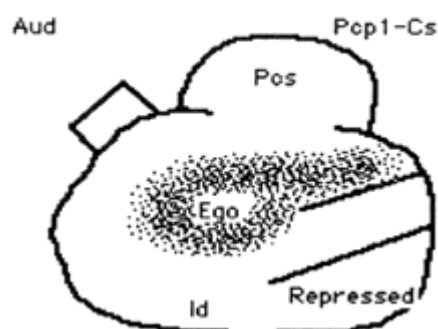
How often is psychoanalytic theory explained or examined in mathematical terms? Never to my knowledge; and if it has been, it is rare. So what language is used when Freud created the super-ego, ego and id? This is probably no better answered than by Bruno Bettleheim (1984) in F*reud and Man's Soul*. In this book he looks at Freud's writings as they were originally in German. He contends that Freud was one of the great writers of modern times. His use of the written word made his writings equivalent to the great classics in terms of literary style. He was really a poet, with a verbal poetic and kinesthetic language. So the super-ego, ego and id are in these terms.

As a consequence, a comparison of the super-ego, ego and id to the ego states does not really make sense. For example, Wiedeman (1972) notes that Freud clearly stated that one cannot draw concrete boundaries between the psychic subsystems. "Boundaries between the psychic subsystems can be visualized as frontier areas without fixed border lines" (p. 311). Berne did not accept this because his language permitted him not to. Therefore, the primary difference between the three ego states and the super-ego, ego and id, is that they both represent two different styles of thinking. To compare the content of the two theories is to miss the point. As a result, Berne needed to change not only what he thought, but the way he thought it, when he developed his concept of ego states. Changing the way one thinks is extremely difficult, and Berne made

the shift as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 3

As indicated above, psychoanalysis is a kinesthet-ic/poetic thought system, whereas TA is a mathe-matical/diagrammatic thought system. It took Berne 25 years to make the transition.

Definition of Ego States

If we again look at Figure 3, we can ask the ques-tion, Where does psychoanalysis stop and TA start? The answer to this depends on one's defini-tions of the two systems of psychology. The dia-gram does however explain why there is some conflict among different writer's understanding of the ego states.

Obviously Berne did not stop thinking psychoanal-ysis one day, and start thinking TA the next. In-stead, there was a transition over time. However, during that transition in time, he developed a se-ries of different ego state models. The way he de-fined ego states in early publications, such as *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* (1961), is not the same definition as he used in his last book, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* (1972). Un-fortunately, many people assume his definitions are the same over time, and the writer believes this explains why there is some conflict about ego state theory. People assume they are talking about the same thing, when they are not.

It appears there are three stages in this transfor-mation of ego state models made by Berne. Of course, the boundaries between these three groups are fuzzy, rather than three distinct entities. It is possible however, to isolate three groupings and these three theories of ego states have been called Type A, Type B, and Type C; as shown in Figure 3.

* **Type A ego state theory.** This theory is best represented in Berne's writings in *Intuition and Ego Sates* (1977) and some of his work in *Transac-tional Analysis in Psychotherapy* (1961). In his ear-liest writings he discussed concepts such as the way in which ego images relate to ego states, and the linking of the psychic organs to the ego states. In addition, as Erskine (1988) explains, Berne orig-inally conceptualized ego states as states of the ego, as if found in ego psychology. The definition of type A theory of ego states is probably best put by Berne (1961) as: "The term 'ego state' is intended merely to denote states of the mind, and their re-lated patterns of behaviour" (p. 11). In summary, in type A theory, ego states are understood in the realm of ego images, psychic organs, states of the mind and ego psychology.

* **Type B ego state theory.** Berne's *Games Peo-ple Play* (1964) and part four of *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* (1961) best illustrate the type B concept of ego states. As Mc Cormick (1977) notes, Berne originally made the ego states synonymous with the psychic organs. Later howev-er, he was very careful to distinguish the two. This indicates type B theory, together with other fea-tures, including changes by omission. At this stage of his theorizing, he no longer talks of states of the ego, ego psychology and ego images. His type B the-ory has none of these qualities.

Instead, he arrives at a position which the writer believes is the most currently used official defini-tion of ego states.

> "An ego state may be described phe-nomenologically as a coherent system of feelings related to a given subject, and operationally as a set of coherent behaviour patterns; or pragmatically, as a system of feelings which moti-vates a related set of behaviour pat-terns." Berne (1961) (p. 17).
>
> "The Child ego state… is a set of feel-ings, attitudes, and behaviour pat-terns which are relies of the individual's own childhood.
>
> The Adult ego state is characterized by an autonomous set of feelings, atti-tudes, and behaviour patterns which are adapted to the current reality…
>
> The Parent ego state is a set of feel-ings, attitudes, and behaviour pat-terns which resemble those of parental figure…" Berne (1961) (pp. 75-78).

At this point the writer believes transactional analysis became an entity in itself, rather than a derivation of psychoanalysis. In his type B theory, Berne had deviated sufficiently from psychoanalyt-ic theory to arrive at a new concept called transac-tional analysis. Type B theory can be seen as an original statement of Berne's observations and hy-potheses of personality.

* **Type C ego state theory.** This stage of theory development is best characterized by Berne (1972) and Berne (1976). In these, he refers to ego states (transactions and games) in very functional terms that precisely define which behaviours are, and are not, components of the various ego states. This writing is best illustrated in chapter two of *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?*. It illustrates ego states in concrete, pragmatic, simple, diagrammatic and mathematical form. Very little energy and time is given to the definitions found in type B theory.

In his article on standard nomenclature, Berne (1976) seeks some consistency in the way ego states are represented in the literature. Again, the ego states diagram is presented, together with precise, clinical statements about it. Thus ego state theory at this stage can be seen as precise, diagrammatic, and clinical. In addition, he omits to standardize a written definition for ego states as presented in type B theory. As a result, in the writer's opinion, a new era or direction in ego state theory has been reached. Ego states were being presented by Berne in a functional, usable and precise fashion.

Obviously, type C theory of ego states developed from type B. At what point this actually occurred is debatable, but if one compares type A to type C theories, the transformation is very noticeable. The type C theory of ego states is commonly used in organizational TA literature. Abe Wagner's (1981) book *The Transactional Manager* is a clear example of this. The focus of attention is pragmatic, so the ego states are defined in clear understandable and usable terms. For example, Wagner begins his statement on ego states with

> "You are six different people, and so am I. You have six different personalities, and so do your subordinates, your customers, your boss, your spouse, and your children. Right now you are operating within one of those personalities, and at any moment you may activate another one instead" (p. 1).

Wagner's statement refers to ego state functions. Statements about ego psychology, states of the ego, or ego images are given little or no attention. Nor should they. Wagner's goals are clear, and he has identified which theory of ego states will allow him to achieve those goals.

Conclusion

The writer believes that most writers on TA have used either the type B or type C theory of ego states

since Berne's death in 1970. Type A is rarely used. If the reader accepts that there are three types of definitions of ego states, then one not only avoids considerable confusion, but one also has a powerful base from which to comprehend ego states. This, it is believed, will not only benefit the individual, but also benefit transactional analysis as a theory.

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