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# Life Positions

Tony White

## Abstract

This article examines the transactional analysis concept of life positions (Berne, 1962/1976) and what various authors have written about these positions since Berne. A two-level model is proposed to clarify some of the confusion that currently exists in the transactional analysis literature. An analysis of the four life positions is presented followed by some suggestions for new positions and some changes in old ones as well as for new clinical options.



This article examines several facets of what is known in transactional analysis as life position, which was originally described by Eric Berne (1962/1976) in an article entitled "Classification of Positions." He delineated four life positions: "I'm OK, You're OK" (I+U+); "I'm not-OK, You're OK" (I-U+); "I'm OK, You're not-OK" (I+U-); and "I'm not-OK, You're not-OK" (I-U-). During the last three decades, much has been written on life positions. This article examines the nature of life positions and considers some of the different ways they have been conceptualized over the years. A two-level model is proposed to clarify some of the confusion that currently exists, and an analysis of the four life positions is presented. Based on this analysis, I have concluded that it is necessary to add some new positions and to change some of the existing positions to provide a more complete explanation of human behavior and personality. Finally, new clinical options for dealing with clients--in particular, narcissistic, borderline, and I+U- clients--are offered.

## What is a Life Position?

In *The Treatment of Character* (White, 1987), I emphasized how concepts in psychology and transactional analysis have been changed, unknowingly, over the years. People seem to have an innate desire to become specific and concrete about concepts that are difficult to understand. For example, Berne's original conceptualization of script has been altered over the years. In the beginning, a script was viewed as an overall life plan, a life path that each of us seemed destined to follow. In recent times, script became equated with the script matrix. In this process, it has become less a life plan and more a set of injunctions, drivers, and Adult ego state programs.

This is probably shown best in Steiner's (1967/1976) article, "A Script Checklist":

Because of the various referents given to the word script, it is suggested that script properly refers to this checklist and that ideally, when talking about a patient's script, the observer is referring to the whole checklist rather than to one or a few of the items. (p. 30)

This, I contend, is a clear example of how the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Although the injunction, program, payoff, and so on are all integral parts of the script, they do not explain it as it was originally conceptualized. Script is more, or different than, just the checklist.

A similar process has occurred with the concept of life positions. Early on, two articles (Berne, 1962/1976; Haiberg, Sefness, & Berne, 1963/1976) described life position as a total life direction or a person's overall life destiny. This is similar to what Eric Berne called someone's life script theme. Berne (1962/1976) stated, "Every game, script, and destiny then, is based on one of these four basic positions" (p. 3).

By now, this conceptualization of life positions has generally been lost. Instead, people tend to equate life positions with the OK Corral (Ernst, 1971). It was Ernst's article, in fact, that was largely responsible for this change. As Stewart and Joines (1987) said:

Each of us arrives in adulthood having written a script based on one of the four life positions. But we don't stay in that position every hour of the day. Minute by minute, we shift between positions.

Franklin Ernst has developed a way of analyzing these shifts. He calls it the *OK Corral*. (p. 119)

This view of life positions is quite different from Berne's original conceptualization. One cannot change one's total life destiny rapidly, let alone minute by minute.

Woollams and Brown's (1978) concept of life position was similar to the one I am proposing. They suggested that life positions are fairly permanent and do not change easily. However, Ernst showed that people can behave in an I+U- position at home, then go to work and be I-U+ with the boss, and later that evening be I+U+ with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Woollams and Brown said that what Ernst was describing should be viewed as "feeling states" (p. 120). Separating what Ernst and Berne called life positions is helpful, but it does not appear to be enough, perhaps because both Berne and Ernst used the same terms.

What I am suggesting here is synonymous with my earlier work on "character" feelings and "temporary/surface feelings" (White, 1985a). It seems that Berne was talking about a character-level idea, and Ernst was talking about a surface-level, minute-by-minute concept. Consequently, I propose two types or levels of life positions as shown below:

## SURFACE, MINUTE-BY-MINUTE LIFE POSITION

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### CHARACTER LIFE POSITION

Figure 1  
Levels of Life Positions

A surface life position is temporary and changes many times each day. It may be reflected in the types of ego states or transactions that we use. Such positions can be chosen by free will, or they may be specific reactions to the environment. For example, at work someone might use many Critical Parent to Child transactions reflecting the I+U- position. However, when this person visits a domineering friend he may become quite sheepish, compliant, and feel down-trodden, all of which reflects a different life position of I-U+. This position is viewed as a reaction to the environment, and it demonstrates the nature of surface life positions. They are temporary, reactive, and can be controlled by conscious decisions.

Metaphorically, "underneath" these surface positions are the more basic character positions. These are not temporary, but far more permanent; they reflect the individual's basic character. In most instances, each of us has a single character life position that we maintain for our entire lives. This position is resistant to influence from the environment and cannot be changed by free will or conscious decision alone. They represent the foundations on which the rest of the personality is built.

Figure 1 shows the character life positions underneath the surface, minute-to-minute life positions because, although an individual may have the entire range of life positions on the surface, he or she may consistently maintain one character position underneath.

As with the two levels of feelings, the two levels of life positions are not mutually exclusive. They can influence each other. The character life position will influence the amount of time and the ease with which one adopts a certain position at the surface level. For example, someone who is I-U+ at the character level will tend to use that most often at the surface level, particularly under stress. However, "allowers," "permissions," and the requirements of various daily situations lead each of us to use all the life positions in our daily lives.

One way to influence one's character life position is by doing things differently in everyday life. For instance, if one's character position is I-U+ one can make a social contract to engage in I+U+ behavior and transactions at work. If one persists with this new surface-level behavior, the Child ego state will slowly begin to alter its character position to one that is more I+U+.

### **What is OKness?**

This question seems crucial to any discussion on life positions. However, the transactional analysis literature shows a surprising lack of debate about and definition of this concept. For

example, Stewart and Joines (1987) seemed to define the degree of OKness a person feels as the "essential value" (p. 117) that one perceives in oneself and others. This implies that it is more than just behavior. Steiner (1974) gave a more philosophical definition of OKness. He said that Berne had a conviction and "faith in human nature" (p. 2) about the OKness of people. As a result, we all are OK, even those who commit the most heinous deeds. Such individuals are not responsible for their genes or early backgrounds and thus are OK, even though their behavior is not.

For his part, Novey (personal communication, March 1, 1994) sees OKness as meaning "I am an acceptable human being, with the right to live and meet my needs, and you are an acceptable human being with the right to live and get your needs met." For him, "rights" and "acceptability" are used in defining OKness. Finally, Harris and Harris (1985) saw OKness almost as a comparison of strength, power, and dependency between a child and his or her parents.

Obviously, none of these descriptions of OKness is right or wrong, and indeed, together they suggest all different aspects of OKness. However, for the purposes of this article, the definition of OKness that I am using is similar to Stewart and Joines's (1987): that is, the degree of OKness a person feels relates to the value he or she feels about self and others. This has both cognitive and feeling aspects, just as script injunctions involve a cognitive statement and a feeling that goes along with the cognition. We can think about the value we have for self and others while at the same time having a feeling about that value. Thus we have the experience of OKness as well as being able to see the OKness expressed through behavior.

I suggest viewing these two parts hierarchically, with feeling- and thinking-value aspects taking a more basic position than behavior. Most often the behavioral display of OKness will concur with the feeling value of OKness, although this is not always the case. For instance, some individuals show "I'm OK, You're not-OK" behavior, but their experience of OKness is quite different from what is suggested by the "I'm OK" part of the equation. In fact, I contend that they feel and believe that they are not-OK, but are trying to convince themselves that others are worse. In such cases the feeling and thoughts about OKness take precedence over the behavioral display.

With this definition in mind we can proceed to an examination of life positions.

## **The Psychological Positions**

When one looks at life positions, one is confronted with a nice, symmetrical theory. The four life positions fit well, in that the OKs and not-OKs cover the four possibilities in a systematic way. In addition, the OK Corral (Ernst, 1971) diagram shows four geometrically balanced quadrants. Although as humans we like things to be balanced and symmetrical, the question is whether a given theory is a good reflection of reality, or whether it is nice and balanced because people like it that way. In fact, reality more often than not is unbalanced and asymmetrical. I believe this is what happened with the theory of life positions, that is, the OK Corral should actually not be symmetrical and balanced. I propose that there are, in fact, seven life positions: three as currently described, one that needs altering, and three new ones.

## **Altering One Position**

The life position that I think should be altered is "I'm OK, You're not-OK." It is generally understood that for someone to believe that another person is not-OK, they must at some level believe that they themselves are not-OK. For example, Stewart and Joines (1987, p. 123) said "that I+U- is often a *defense* against I-U+." I recommend that the "I'm OK, You're not-OK" position be described as "I'm not-OK, but You're worse" (I-,U--). This more accurately describes how such an individual tries to perceive others as bad so he or she can feel good.

As mentioned earlier in my definition of OKness, this redefined life position is based on internal experience. The individual's experience is "I'm not-OK, but You're worse" (even though the feeling may be denied). However, from a behavioral point of view it looks as if the person is feeling I+U-. Even though the person may blame or discount others (i.e., I+U-), his or her belief or experience of self must be "I'm not-OK." This assumes that it is not possible to view others as not-OK unless one views at least part of one's self as not-OK.

From a therapeutic point of view, it is often counterproductive to suggest to someone that they are I+U-. They may almost enjoy or feel satisfaction at being thus diagnosed. However, to confront such a person with the diagnosis of "I'm not-OK, but You're worse" is far less palatable, and the desire for change is often heightened.

*Clinical Example:* Nathan, the 21-year-old son of a wealthy car dealer, was working his way up in his father's business and anticipating that he would eventually take it over and carry on its good name in the business community. One of Nathan's most obvious features was his arrogance. At work he was the boss's son, and he let his fellow workers know it. He had the use of any car in the business and would pick the most expensive to impress his peers and ladyfriends. He felt he was the prince of this new dynasty-in-the-making.

As he became familiar with TA, it became obvious to him that he was in the I+U- position. He liked this because it was further proof that he was better than others. "Yes, that's the way life is, and someone in my position should believe that," was Nathan's response to this diagnosis.

However, when confronted with the idea that this position is better described as "I'm not-OK, but You're worse," this was far less acceptable to Nathan. The idea of "I'm not-OK" did not fit or feel right to Nathan: "I know I am better than others, so how can I be not-OK?," he began to wonder. He was confronted with his own feelings of not-OKness about himself. This led to more work and had a positive, grounding effect on him.

## **Two New Life Positions**

In addition to the four life positions described, I propose two additional ones based on the theories of Mahler (1965). She demonstrated that the newborn from birth to 12 months feels omnipotent. The infant sees mother/caretaker and self as having a common boundary and does not perceive himself or herself as being a separate entity. The infant is in a state of twilight

existence in which he or she does not seem to know where he or she begins and where the other leaves off. It is only after achieving this strong attachment in the first 12 months that the baby spends the next 24 months endeavoring to become a separate individual. (See White 1985b, for a description of a triphasic separation-individuation theory which suggests that, after the initial bonding, it takes three stages of rebellion, up to the age of 18 years, to become a psychologically separate individual.)

In light of Mahler's (1965) theory, two new life positions are created. I propose that in the first one or two years of life the infant adopts a life position of either "I'm OK, You're Irrelevant" (I+U?) or "I'm not-OK, You're Irrelevant" (I-U?). In the first years of life the infant only considers itself; others are irrelevant to its psyche.

Further support for these two new life positions comes from the work of Piaget (1926/1929). In fact, his theory suggests that they last longer than just the first two years of life. Piaget says that a young child's thinking is animistic, that is, it attributes consciousness to inanimate things. For instance, a young child may be under the illusion that the moon and sun follow him when he is running. He may think magically, "I make them move," or he may think animistically, "They follow me." These beliefs show an egocentric perception of the world, one in which external events or others only have a relevance to self and thus to one's OKness. Such egocentric beliefs continue up to the age of six or seven, at which point they go through the four stages of animism until they are finally discarded around age 12. This suggests that the life positions of I+U? and I-U? last at least in some rudimentary form until the beginning of adolescence.

### **Features of I+U? and I-U?**

The position of I+U? is the normal state of affairs for the very young child. In fact, I suggest that it is the normal position at birth. This differs from Steiner (1974), who said that at birth we are in the position of I+U+. My disagreement with this is that at birth the infant has no conception of others, so he or she can not decide if they are OK or not.

Some people become fixated at these early stages of I+U? or I-U?. They have a poor sense of self and of their boundaries. The first example is the narcissistic person, someone who is so self-centered that others are not even considered to be OK or not. This person stays, to some extent, in the position of I+U?. A good example of this is the character Mozart in the movie *Amadeus*. As portrayed, he was self-centered to the point of not really considering others. Those who did come into his life were dealt with angrily, but in actuality they were viewed as side irritations rather than being defined as "not-OK."

It should be mentioned, however, that the narcissistic person does achieve some degree of understanding of self and others and does define the OKness of others to some degree. To not achieve any understanding leaves one in the position of what Mahler (1965) calls the "symbiotic-psychotic syndrome" (p. 162). This is a true example of the person who does not get past the I+U? or I-U? stage of development. Such individuals are so symbiotic that they never decide about the OKness of others, and as a result they remain psychotic. Whether they become I+U? or I-U? depends on which decision they make about themselves.

Viewing the narcissistic personality in this way suggests new treatment options. If a client views others as being irrelevant, then the goal is for him or her to decide about the OKness of others (e.g., one would hope that he or she decides on "You're OK" rather than on "You're not-OK").

Treatment strategies can be carried out at two levels. First, at the behavioral level it is necessary for the therapist to make himself or herself relevant to the client. These clients naturally view the therapist as irrelevant, so transactions by the therapist need to counter this. Through confrontation of the client's belief and assertion of the therapist's own thoughts, needs, feelings, and so on, the therapist's OKness is almost "imprinted" on the client. Softer, nondirective, nurturing approaches are nonproductive with this group of clients because it is easy for them to avoid feeling any impact, and hence the world remains irrelevant.

The second level of treatment is the transference level (White, 1985b). This is another way in which the client can be forced to notice that there are other people in the world. Establishing a strong transference attachment without a symbiosis means that the client is once again in a position to attempt psychological separation. It is in this separation that most of us learn about the relevance of others. That is, by separating we realize the other is not just an extension of ourselves. Thus, transference treatment is most useful in treating those individuals stuck at the I+U? or I-U? stages.

The position of "I'm not-OK, You're Irrelevant" is best seen in the schizophrenic individual. Anyone who has seen a schizophrenic person moving into a psychotic phase will be impressed by the self-centered quality of the individual. It is as though others do not exist or are, at best, irrelevant. For this reason, I do not see the schizophrenic person coming from the I-U- position. They are too regressed to even consider the value of others, and it is obvious that they view themselves as being worthless. Hence we have the psychological position of "I'm not-OK, You're irrelevant." Such people are turned inward so much that others are not even recognized. In addition, there is often considerable self-hatred, equivalent to the life position "I'm not-OK."

The individual with a borderline personality disorder also manifests the life position of I-U?, but to a less intense degree than the schizophrenic. The borderline has little liking or respect for self ("I'm not-OK") and a poor sense of his or her own boundaries. Those attachments or bonds that are made are so intense that the individual almost cannot distinguish the other from the self. When this happens the other person's OKness is irrelevant.

## **Autonomy and Life Positions**

It has been well documented in the TA literature that "I'm OK, You're OK," (I+U+) is the healthy or autonomous life position. I question, however, how successful and free the I+U+ individual actually is. How effectively assertive are such individuals, especially in conflicts in which they need to state their needs and wants in contradiction to another person's needs? I think that they may be too considerate. I contend that to get one's needs and wants satisfied to the detriment of another person's needs, one has to adopt the life position of "I'm a Bit More

OK Than You Are" (I++U+).

Thus we have the seventh and final life position. Those who operate from an I+U+ position are distinguishable from those in the I++U+ position. The true "winner" position is the I++U+ position. Using my definition of life positions as described earlier, the "++" versus a "+" implies some sort of a rating scale. Although I do not like saying it, I believe it to be true. Certainly it is better if both persons can get their needs met. However, if the needs of two people are in conflict and each consistently feels and behaves as though his or her needs are the ones that should be met, this implies a judgment by each person that his or her needs are more important. This is the assumption underlying assertiveness training, for example.

So, what is it that separates the positions of I+U+ and I++U+? Take the holidays, for instance. When someone enjoys a holiday feast, does he or she think about the starving millions around the world or even those just across town who have nothing to eat? I contend that if one enjoys the food, then one is not viewing others as OK as oneself. In contrast, the true I+U+ person must, at least to some extent, be a social activist and not have too many of the finer things of life. In fact, such individuals show characteristics that have been attributed to the I-U+ individual. However, I believe it is incorrect to simply subsume the I+U+ position as a subset of the I-U+ position. There are definite differences in that the I+U+ person does not see the self as bad or not as worthy as others. The I+U+ person is not self-effacing or self-deprecating, nor is he or she depressive or suicidal the way the I-U+ person can be. The I+U+ person is a giver/social activist in the true sense of the word.

The I+U+ individual differs from the I++U+ person in that the latter enjoys the niceties of life if he or she can afford them. At the same time, the I++U+ person sees others as OK so he or she is not greedy or exploitative.

For a more specific example, consider a situation in which my child has a fight with another child at school. I naturally tend to believe my son's version of the story over the other child's. This, I propose, shows my son that I feel he is a bit more important or OK than the other child. My bias is toward my own son; I do not treat him as totally equal to the other child. Hence he will tend to develop a position of I++U+ rather than I+U+.

Why propose the idea of the I++U+ position? First, theoretically the idea of I+U+ is so central to TA theory that it seems important to publicly debate it, not just to take its assumptions for granted. Second, with regard to parenting, this position gives implicit permission to raise children in this way. I believe that to raise a child in such a way that he or she is not treated as special or as having value over others is not healthy.

## **The Need to Teach the I++U+ Position**

As a result of watching children in vivo and in play therapy groups, I have noticed that they do not naturally see other children as OK. Rather, they need to learn this by being confronted by other children, by having limits set by adults, and by having to share and compensate for other human beings in the world. Children raised in too permissive an environment do not naturally see others as OK as they are. I do not wish to sound too pessimistic, and I do agree that some



children make this adjustment better than others, so I am suggesting a matter of degree.

From a developmental point of view, children start in the I+U? position. If given total permission, they will either stay as I+U? or more likely move to I-U--. If, instead, they are given the correct quota of positive conditional and unconditional strokes, as well as negative conditional strokes, then they will end up in either I+U+ or I++U+.

## **Solidness of the I+U+ and I++U+ Positions**

How solid do the life positions of I+U+ and I++U+ become? Perhaps those who achieve these life views only stay there because the world demands it. Maybe these life positions remain fragile and never really take over from the more primal life positions of I+U? or I-U--. I say this because it has been my observation that many people who are either powerful, rich, famous, good looking, or some combination of these, are not particularly nice. They do not have to be nice. As a result of their "specialness," others are attracted to them; they can discount others more and get away with it. I am not suggesting that this is good or bad, or whether perhaps only a certain type of person is attracted to the "hero" role. What I am saying is that if someone does not have to be nice and considerate of others, they probably will not be.

I think that humans basically tend to be either I+U? or I-U--. Those who develop to the position of I+U+ or I++U+ only stay there because they must to keep others around and to lead a normal life. If one is given or attains power, money, fame, or attractiveness, then there is an ever-present pull to begin disregarding the needs, wants, and importance of others. Wise individuals somehow avoid this pull, but the pull remains.

## **Conclusion**

The seven life positions as proposed in this article are:

1. "I'm OK, You're Irrelevant" (I+U?)
2. "I'm not-OK, You're Irrelevant" (I-U?)
3. "I'm not-OK, You're not-OK" (I-U-)
4. "I'm not-OK, But You're Worse" (I-U--)
5. "I'm a Bit More OK Than You Are" (I++U+)
6. "I'm OK, You're OK" (I+U+)
7. "I'm not-OK, You're OK" (I-U+)

Some of the more obvious features of the various life positions are summarized as follows:

**I+U?:** Position at birth; no sense of boundaries between self and others; animistic thinking; narcissistic personality; ideas of reference; symbiotic-psychotic syndrome; autism; dependent personality; normal stage of development.

**I-U?:** Similar to the I+U? position in terms of lack of boundaries, animistic thinking, and ideas of reference. In this case, however, the person decides he or she is not-OK. Borderline

personality; schizophrenia; formed prior to six months of age; those antisocial personalities for whom the inability to empathize with their victims is a prominent feature may fall into this group.

This position develops from the I+U? position (i.e., the birth position) as soon as the young child is confronted with parenting that is sufficiently adverse to cause the child to decide that he or she is not-OK. Logically, as soon as one develops a sense of others' OKness, then the positions of I+U? and I-U? can no longer be maintained.

**I-U-:** Similar to prior descriptions in that it is a "Get-nowhere-with" position. Such individuals, however, have a sense of self and of their boundaries. As a result, this group does not include those abnormal states in which there are boundary problems. This position develops from the I-U? position when the child is allowed to form a sense of self. Often the schizoid personality falls into this life position.

**I-U--:** This position was previously referred to as the I+U- life position. Although at the behavioral level I+U- seems to be the correct description for such individuals, it fails to indicate that they have their own feelings of not-OKness and view others as being less OK to convince themselves that they are OK. Therapeutically it is more effective to diagnose such a person as I-U-- because this designation confronts the denial strategy used by him or her.

**I++U+:** The winner or autonomy position, previously described as the I+U+ position. In normal development this position naturally follows from the previous I+U? position, roughly around the age of four (depending on the theory of child development to which one subscribes).

**I+U+:** This position does not define the individuals who will cope best or most effectively in life. Rather, people in this position will tend to be too accommodating to others' needs, thus manifesting qualities similar to those found in the I-U+ position. However, the I+U+ individual is not a self-hater as is the I-U+ person.

**I-U+:** Similar to previous ideas about this position. The depressive position of "Get-away-from."

The risk in writing an article such as this is that one may end up with a more complicated theory while practically speaking being no better off. However, I believe that the clinical gains obtained from the new material described here are sufficient enough to justify its presentation. It is hoped that readers will come to their own conclusions and then respond accordingly.

*Tony White is a registered psychologist in private practice in Perth, Western Australia. He also runs a training program for both Certified and Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analysts. Please send reprint requests to Tony White, 136 Loftus St, North Perth WA 6006, Australia.*

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