

This article was originally published in the *Transactional Analysis Journal*, Volume 27, Number 4 (October 1997), p. 300-304. Copyright © 1997, [The International Transactional Analysis Association](#). Reprinted with the permission of the ITAA and Tony White.

# Symbiosis and Attachment Hunger

Tony White

## Abstract

In this article, the concept of symbiosis is described in terms of two parts: the transactional symbiosis and the attachment. This permits us to understand the concept in a new way and demonstrates why symbiosis can be so resistant to change. The suggestion is made that any change in this area requires both behavior change and a change in how one senses one's boundaries.



This article examines the notion of symbiosis as it was originally presented (Schiff & Schiff, 1971). It is suggested that there has been a largely unstated assumption as to what symbiosis actually is: that is, it has referred to the notion of attachment. Recognizing this assumption allows for a more accurate definition of symbiosis. In addition, it brings into question the notion of stimulus hunger and what is subsumed under that term. The concept of attachment hunger is devised to complement the idea of stimulation hunger and to provide a sounder basis for the definition of symbiosis.

## Definition

Schiff and Schiff (1971) originally presented the concept of symbiosis in their article on passivity. They stated that symbiosis "is experienced by both the mother and the child as a merging or sharing of their needs" (p. 71). They added that the structure of a symbiosis involves two individuals using only those ego states so that together they combine to form one total personality.

Subsequently Schiff et al. (1975) clarified this definition by stating, "A symbiosis occurs when two or more individuals behave as though between them they form a whole personality. This relationship is characterized structurally by neither individual cathecting a full complement of ego states" (p. 5). This has come to be diagrammed as shown in Figure 1.

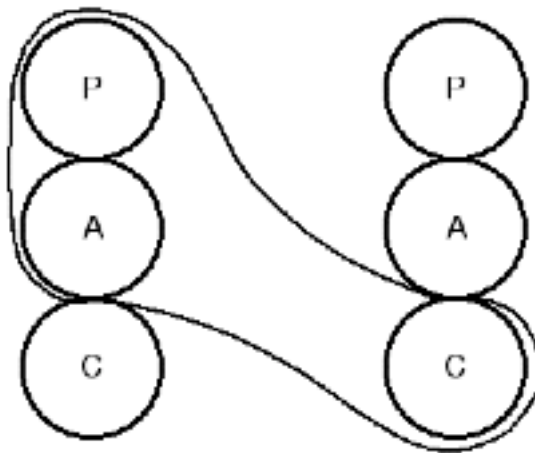


Figure 1  
Transactional Symbiosis

---

Examples of such symbioses include one person giving up the use of an ego state(s) for the other to take over, and the same occurring with the other person. As Schiff et al. (1975) noted with regard to sex role scripting, the man is told to stay out of the kitchen and the woman is told to stay out of the workshop. This leads in some marital relationships to the man adopting the Parent and Adult ego states and the woman using only the Child ego state. She has the feelings and wants, and he makes the decisions from his Adult and Parent.

This explanation of ego states uses the original Berne (1964) idea that ego states are systems of thinking and feeling accompanied by a related set of behavior patterns. This results in the functional ego state displays of Nurturing Parent, Critical Parent, Adult, Adapted Child, and Free Child. This article uses the model of ego states currently called the three ego states model (Novey, Porter-Steele, Gobes, & Massey, 1993), which is consistent with the original explanation of symbiosis.

### **Attachment and Symbiosis**

Taken literally, the view of symbiosis just described amounts to a division of labor as is shown in the husband and wife example. However, as any psychotherapist knows, a symbiosis is much more than that. If it was only a division of labor it would be much easier to treat and end. There is another factor involved: the human trait of bonding or attachment.

Many authors have discussed this over the years, some of the most notable being Bowlby (1971) and Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975). Mahler, in particular, used the same term that Schiff did--symbiosis--but with a different meaning or, more accurately, with emphasis on a different part of the same concept. Mahler (1967) wrote, "The term symbiosis is borrowed from biology, where it is used to refer to a close functional association of two organisms to

their mutual advantage" (p. 7 10). Later she also stated that the term symbiosis is a metaphor "chosen to describe that state of undifferentiation, of fusion with mother, in which the 'I' is not yet differentiated from the 'not-I,' and in which inside and outside are only gradually coming to be sensed as different" (p. 711). Mahler and Furer (1963) suggested that in the symbiotic phase, for the child, "there does not appear to be a clear awareness of the body-self boundaries as separate from the mother" (p. 2).

It should be noted that more recently Matze (1988) wrote that recent research disputes the claim that infants have a period of self/other undifferentiation. This, he stated, does not occur at any point in infancy. Such a claim is certainly at odds with an extensive body of knowledge, current research, and thinking on this topic (see Beaty, 1994; González-Mena, 1993; González-Mena & Eyer, 1989; Kaplan, 1991). References such as these either state explicitly that there is an emotional tie and fusion of identities between mother and child, or at least it is implied. The model presented here rests on such research.

Bader and Pearson (1988), in their model of a developmental approach to couplehood, borrowed from Mahler and her concept of symbiosis. They began, "The first stage of couplehood, of 'being madly in love,' we liken to Mahler's second stage of infant growth--*symbiosis*. Here there is a merging of lives and personalities and intense bonding between two lovers. The purpose of this stage is attachment. To allow for the merger, similarities are magnified and differences are overlooked" (p. 9). White (1997) presented a diagrammatic representation of this attachment and bonding (see Figure 2).

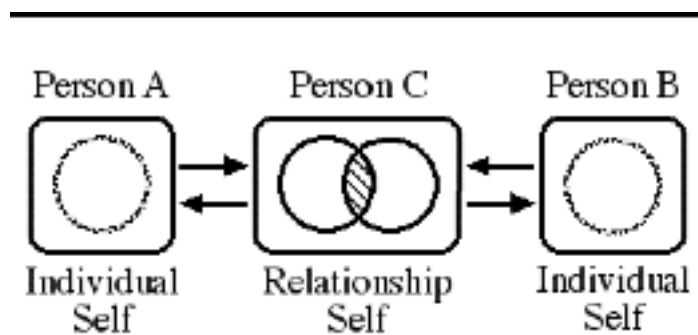


Figure 2  
Attachment

---

Just as the transactional symbiosis can be both healthy and unhealthy, so the attachment can be unhealthy in quantity and quality. There can be an overattachment, which leads to an excessive attachment to the other person. In couples, Bader and Pearson (1988) called this "symbiotic enmeshment" (p. 63). In individuals it manifests most dramatically in the dependent personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

In other cases, the quantity of the attachment might be OK, but the quality is not. Examples may include hostile dependent attachments (Bader & Pearson, 1988, p. 80); attachments in which there are threats of abandonment, as with the borderline personality; attachments that are

sadistic and punishing; and so on. All of these avoid healthy attachments in which people are not stuck together and in which they enjoy the intimacy that such attachments provide. Instead, the attachment is used to play games and vent anger at the other party.

In comparing Figures 1 and 2 we see two different conceptualizations of human relationships endeavoring to explain the same concept. Figure 1 represents Berne's attempt to explain human behavior. He devised a transactional model that allows us easily to observe communications between people. Hence we end up with symbiosis described in transactional terms, that is, there is an emphasis on Parent-Child and Adult-Child transactions in the couple's relating, described earlier in literal terms as a division of labor.

However, it is simplistic to understand the transactional analysis concept of symbiosis as merely a division of labor. Indeed, many authors have implied otherwise. For example, Evans (1994) equated symbiosis and confluence, Wagner (1994) presented symbiosis as codependency, Blackstone (1993) equated symbiosis with transference and dependence, and Haykin (1980) discussed Mahler's idea of attachment and the Schiff's ego state diagram of symbiosis.

Figure 2, which is based on Bowlby's and Mahler's ideas about attachment, suggests that the symbiotic behavior of couples also includes an attachment, a merging of boundaries, a loss of a sense of "I" and "not-I," and a movement from the individual selves to the relationship self.

Combining Figures 1 and 2 and their representations of symbiosis provides a more complete definition of symbiosis: the first offers a transactional definition and the second gives an attachment definition. Thus we arrive at a more complete definition:

A symbiosis occurs when two or more individuals behave as though between them they form a single personality. Such a relationship is characterized structurally by neither individual cathecting a full complement of ego states, as well as both persons having a significant attachment in the relationship self.

## **Attachment Hunger**

Central to Berne's basic theories is his idea of stimulation hunger. Consistently he referred to the work of Spitz, stating that it "demonstrates that sensory deprivation in the infant may result not only in psychic changes, but also in organic deterioration" (Berne, 1961, p. 77). From this Berne concluded that we all experience stimulus hunger. Interestingly, Spitz (1945) himself concluded that it is specifically the mother-child relationship or the presence of a consistent love object that prevents an infant's psychic and organic deterioration, not a lack of stimulation.

Langmeier and Matejcek (1975) agreed with Spitz's (1945) conclusion when they noted that his study examined not stimulus deprivation per se but the children's loss of a basic relationship with mother (an object). Berne (1961) appeared to partially acknowledge this when he wrote, "Spitz speaks of 'emotional deprivation' rather than of 'sensory deprivation'" (p. 77). However, subsequent evaluation of Spitz's research supports Berne, in part. Although Spitz concluded that it was the absence of a mother that caused the infant's retardation, clearly there were other

factors involved, such as extreme sensory deprivation. Subsequent research (see Langmeier & Matajcek, 1975) concluded that stimulus deprivation is devastating to a young child, as is the absence of an attachment to mother.

So what is Spitz actually saying? His study is based on psychoanalytic theory, particularly in the area of object relations and object constancy. Thus he is referring to the idea of what is now known as bonding and attachment. Bowlby (1971), in particular, provides a theoretical bridge between object relations and the concept of attachment.

According to my research, Berne never referred to the work of Bowlby and Mahler, both of whom were consistently publishing in the 1950s and 1960s. Berne's theory does not lend itself well to the notion of attachment as defined by Bowlby and Mahler. Attachment does not have the observable clarity that the concepts of ego states and transactions have. Berne did not address the question of attachments. He inaccurately concluded from Spitz that it was a lack of stimulation that leads to human decline. Spitz concluded that it was the lack of attachment. However, subsequent research has shown that humans have a hunger for both stimulation and attachment.

Thus we have the notion of attachment hunger. That is, we all have a biological, psychological, and social hunger for an attachment to a caretaking figure. Without it in infancy there is a swift decline in our mental and physical health that eventually leads to a state of marasmus or "hospitalism" (Spitz, 1945, p. 53). This hunger persists throughout our lives. However, from adolescence onward, peer attachments allow the childhood need for a parental attachment to decrease. Thus there is more variety in the type of attachments in adolescence and adulthood.

However, without at least one firm and secure attachment in adulthood there is also mental and physical decline. This is primarily exhibited by withdrawal behavior and the various problems associated with it. Most notably the schizoid personality type demonstrates these difficulties. In addition, Schaffer (1978) noted that the psychopathic personality is also typified by the lack of social bonds.

Attachment hunger comes into play at about 5 to 7 months of age (Bee, 1978). Prior to that, there are indiscriminate attachments. The infant does not discriminate between various caretakers who feed, change, and/or hold him or her. Spitz (cited in Langmeier & Matejcek, 1975, p. 295) also concurred with calling this phase the stage of primary narcissism. He then said that at about 6 to 8 months the child develops specific attachments--the object period. The child will develop an attachment to one primary person, most often mother. At this time the child shows a fear of strangers and of being left by the primary object.

If the specific attachment phase proceeds well, after a few more months the child will show a broadening of attachments--first to one other person and then to several others. Bee (1978) noted that by 18 months most children have an attachment to several people, with some research showing that only 13 percent of 18-month-old children are still exclusively attached to one figure.

It should be noted that these two phases--attachment to one figure followed by broadening

attachments to various others--may be culture-specific. Schaffer (1978) wrote that in monomatric families there is a tendency for the child to initially form an exclusive attachment to one figure. However, in polymatric families, in which childcare is shared, this exclusive attachment is less observable. Regardless of cultural specifics, the child begins forming attachments around 5 to 8 months, and these broaden over time.

This is not meant to imply that the notion of stimulation hunger should be discarded. As mentioned before, work subsequent to Spitz's has clearly shown the human need for stimulation. Also, in many respects, stimulation and attachment are mutually necessary. For example, it seems impossible that two people could become attached without any stimulation, that is, without physical and/or nonphysical strokes occurring between them. Berne's notion of stimulation hunger is indeed a powerful and important one.

Stimulation hunger in part allows attachment hunger to be satisfied. For attachment to occur, there must be stimulation between the two parties. However, other conditions must be met as well. First, there must be consistency of terms of the person(s) doing the stimulating; the few primary parent figures need to be there consistently and stimulating consistently. Second, the stimulator(s) must be contributing something from his or her own Child ego state to the relationship. A parent who mechanically and disinterestedly gives physical strokes to a child will, of course, hamper the attachment. Attachment is a two-way process.

Schaffer (1978) agreed with this, noting that one of the most important conditions for attachment to occur is the "readiness with which an individual is prepared to respond to the infant's signals and his general willingness to engage in playful interaction" (p. 119). In transactional analysis terms, the parenting figure must be willing to invest his or her own Child ego state in the interactions with the infant. Both sides need to attach.

## **Conclusion**

Symbiosis develops in part from the need of attachment hunger, and it allows that hunger to be satisfied. As this hunger is so primal to humans we can see why symbioses are at times so hard to end. People resist giving up a symbiosis because it involves the breakdown of an attachment, not just realigning a division of labor.

*Tony White is a Teaching Member of the ITAA and the WPATA and a registered psychologist in private practice in Perth, Western Australia. He conducts a training program for both Level 1 and Level 2 trainees. Please send reprint requests to Tony White, 136 Loftus St, North Perth WA 6006, Australia. His e-mail address is:*



## **References**

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

- Bader, E., & Pearson, P. T. (1988). *In quest of the mythical mate: Developmental stages of couplehood*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Beaty, J. J. (1994). *Observing development of the young child* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Bee, H. (1978). *The developing child* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Berne, E. (1961). *Transactional analysis in psychotherapy: A systematic individual and social psychiatry*. New York: Ballantine.
- Berne, E. (1964). *Games people play: The psychology of human relationships*. New York: Grove Press.
- Blackstone, P. (1993). The dynamic child: Integration of second-order structure, object relations and self psychology. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 23, 216-234.
- Bowlby, J. (1971). *Attachment: Vol. 1 of Attachment and loss*. New York: Pelican. (Original work published 1969)
- Evans, K. R. (1994). Healing shame: A Gestalt perspective. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 24, 103-108.
- González-Mena, J. (1993). *Multicultural issues in child care*. London: Mayfield.
- González-Mena, J., & Eyer, D. W. (1989). *Infants, toddlers, and caregivers*. London: Mayfield.
- Haykin, M. D. (1980). Type casting: The influence of early childhood experience upon the structure of the child ego state. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 10, 354-364.
- Kaplan, P. S. (1991). *A child's odyssey: Child and adolescent development*. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing.
- Langmeier, J., & Matejcek, Z. (1975). *Psychological deprivation in childhood* (G. L. Mangan, Ed.). St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Mahler, M. S. (1967). On human symbiosis and the vicissitudes of individuation. *Journal of the Psychoanalytic Association*, 15, 710-762.
- Mahler, M. S., & Furer, M. (1963). Certain aspects of the separation-individuation phase. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 32, 1-14.
- Mahler, M. S., Pine, F., & Bergman, A. (1975). *The psychological birth of the human infant: Symbiosis and individuation*. New York: Basic Books.

Matze, M. G. (1988). Reciprocity in script formation: A revision of the concept of symbiosis. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 18, 304-308.

Novey, T. B., Porter-Steele, N., Gobes, L., & Massey, R. F. (1993). Ego states and the self-concept: A panel presentation and discussion. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 23, 123-138.

Schaffer, H. R. (1978). The development of interpersonal behaviour. In H. Tajfel & C. Fraser (Eds.), *Introducing social psychology* (pp. 105-125). New York: Penguin.

Schiff, A. W., & Schiff, J. L. (1971). Passivity. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 1(1), 71-78.

Schiff, J. L., in collaboration with Schiff, A. W., Mellor, K., Schiff, E., Schiff, S., Richman, D., Fishman, J. Wolz, L., Fishman, C., & Momb, D. (1975). *Cathexis reader: Transactional analysis treatment of psychosis*. New York: Harper & Row.

Spitz, R. A. (1945). Hospitalism: An inquiry into the genesis of psychiatric conditions in early childhood. In A. Freud et al. (Eds.), *Psychoanalytic study of the child* (Vol. 1, pp. 53-74). New York: International Universities Press.

Wagner, A. (1994). Blue ego states for effective communication. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 24, 281-284.

White, T. (1997). [Treatment of the I+U? and I-U? life positions](#). *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 27, 57-64.

---

[Tony White](#)