

ARTICLE

The developmental/conceptual model of ego states: The developmental history of the Adult ego state

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ABSTRACT

The developmental history of the Adult ego state, has, and still remains until now, undefined. This article seeks to redress that omission, by discussing the Adult ego state's development. To do this it examines the model of ego states that Berne saw as the structural model but has subsequently been renamed the conceptual model.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines some theoretical inconsistencies in what has become known as the conceptual model of ego states. Erskine(1997) notes that the first model of ego states that Berne proposed, he and his co-author Rebecca Trautmann choose to call the conceptual model. This conceptual model seems to be what Berne called the structural model, [in Berne(1961)].

In Erskine(1997) when he refers to his article of 1981 - "Ego state analysis ; A comparative view" - there is no statement that I am aware of to the effect that the conceptual model veered away from the original structural model of Berne's. This departure included the assumption that the Parent and Child ego states only included pathologic introjects and fixations and not useful Parent and Child learnings. This change to ego state theory was later stated in their article of 1988 titled, "Ego structure, intrapsychic function and defense mechanisms: A commentary on Eric Berne's original theoretical concepts".

Despite this change to the original theory what they (Erskine & Trautmann), called the conceptual model is a mixed model. It mixes at least two paradigms - a conceptual paradigm, a developmental paradigm and to a lesser extent a functional paradigm. Erskine and Trautmann failed to see the developmental paradigm or at least the developmental implications of this model. It thus is more correctly named the developmental/conceptual model of ego states.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL/CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This model as defined by Berne(1961) is as such:

"A parental ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which resemble those of a parental figure... The Adult ego state is characterized by an autonomous set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are adapted to the current reality...A Child ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior

patterns which are relics of the individual's own childhood." (Pp 66 - 69). See diagram 1.

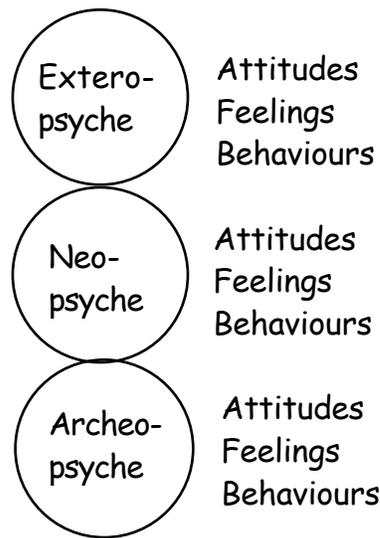


Diagram 1.
Developmental/Conceptual model

Erskine(1997) clarifies his understanding of this model with the following - "The purpose of diagramming this model in such a way is to elucidate the concept of the Parent as the attitudes, behaviors and feelings incorporated (introjected) from significant others in a persons life; the Adult as those thoughts, feelings and behaviors related to the here and now; and the Child as those thoughts, feelings and behaviors that are remnants from childhood, the fixations from the past". (P99)

When one examines this model in more detail one sees a variety of paradigms that were employed by Berne. For instance:
 A Parental ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which resemble those of a parental figure. This states where the Parental ego state comes from (Development - of structure - by imitation, introjection and incorporation of a parental figure), not what it does (Function).
 A Child ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are relics of the individual's own childhood. This notes where the Child ego state comes from (Development - of structure - by unresolved traumas, fixations and normally developing structures of an earlier stage in life), not what it does (Function).
 The Adult ego state is characterized by an autonomous set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are adapted to the current reality. This states what it does (Function - adapted to current reality), not where it comes from (Development - of Adult structures).

Throughout the entire comparative review of ego state models by

Erskine(1997), any mention of the development of ego states is very scant. He and his co-author only see a developmental component in what is called the Second-Order Structural model. See diagram 2.

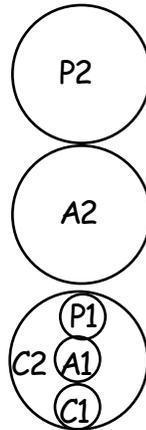


Diagram 2.
Second-order structural model

Erskine also indicates in a second-order structural model diagram by Woollams(1977), that the Adult ego state is formed by 12 years of age. In the statement by Woollams the only comment that he makes on the development of the Adult is as such; "As the child is growing a new kind of thinking develops that is increasingly logical and able to deal with abstractions."(P370) Again there is no statement about HOW it develops, but just a statement about the KIND of thinking that develops. Again a statement about function not development.

Others have of course contributed to the theory of the development of ego states. Woollams and Brown(1978) discuss ego states through time with a diagram of ego states on page 21. More theoretical rigor is applied by Novey and Gobes [in Novey et al(1993)] who discuss ego state development. They both provide differing developmental sequences in the "Three ego state" model and the "Integrated Adult" model.

In conclusion what Erskine(1997) calls the conceptual model is as much a statement about the development of personality as it is about the conceptual nature of personality. Hence the more correct naming of the model as the developmental/conceptual or D/C model of ego states.

SUBSEQUENT THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE D/C MODEL

Some theoreticians subsequent to Berne have not seen the developmental paradigm in Berne's original model and thus have in essence ended up postulating the same as Berne. Clarkson(1992) in her discussion of the theory of ego states uses the conceptual model as the basis for such theory development. She concludes that the Adult is the healthy or autonomous ego state. She states, "In terms of this

perspective on ego states, the psychotherapeutic goal would be the achievement of a fully integrated Adult ego state without complete or partial interference from archaic personal experiences or unintegrated 'psychic presences' of significant parent figures from the past"(P53).

She has to make such a conclusion as the Adult in the theory she employs has no developmental history. It has no chance to develop any pathology. It just seems to appear one day with no explanation of how that part of the personality develops and gets its nature.

In Clarkson's(1992) discussion of the Adult there is no statement of where it comes from, there is only a statement of what it does. For instance, "The Adult draws on resources, memories and information from the Child and the Parent ego state reservoirs. Respectively, their content can act to enhance or support healthy functioning. On the other hand, such 'ego state programming', if it is based on pathological introjects or archaic fixations, will diminish appropriate Adult functioning in the here-and-now."(P48). In her discussion of the Child and Parent ego states she clearly states where they come from as is indicated in the quote above.

Erskine(1997) presents a similar explanation in his discussion of the states of the ego. When discussing the Adult he states, "Berne(1961) stated, 'The Adult ego state is characterized by an autonomous set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are adapted to the current reality,(P76). In this description Berne's use of the term "autonomous" refers to the neopsychic states of the ego functioning without intrapsychic control by an introjected or archaic ego."(P110). At no point can I find a statement of where the Adult state of the ego comes from, yet in his descriptions of the Child and Parent ego states this is clearly done.

In his description of the conceptual model a statement of the developmental history of the Adult is never given. There can not be such an explanation because there was never one originally given by Berne. He mixed a conceptual paradigm with a developmental paradigm.

DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY OF THE ADULT

The D/C model does not state where the Adult comes from. Obviously any part of the personality must come from somewhere. It must have a developmental history. So where does the Adult come from?

Berne(1961) at least partly answers this. He states that the Adult "...is best characterized in clinical practice as the residual state left after the segregation of all the detectable Parent and Child elements".(P68) Berne's original conceptualization of ego states defines the Adult as a 'left over bit'. It is defined by what it is not, instead of what it is.

Later however he provides more clues as to where the Adult may come from. "...the Adult is noted to be organized, adaptable, and intelligent, and is experienced as an objective relationship with the external environment based on autonomous

reality testing. In each individual case, due allowances must be made for past learning opportunities. The Adult of a very young person or of a peasant may make very different judgements from that of a professionally trained worker"(P68)

Thus we have our first insight into the developmental history of the Adult. It is based on 'past learning opportunities'. How we think, feel and behave in the here-and-now is based on past learning. Who are the teachers? Teachers differ from culture to culture, era to era, person to person and community to community. Which teacher is right? All have different views on what is good and bad quality data processing. So if one uses the data processing from one culture or era in a different culture or era, then that would be seen as pathological because it would not be considered appropriate functioning for here-and-now reality. Thus we now have one type of pathology in the Adult. If a client has a particular way of data processing that differs from a therapist's then the therapist will define the client as functioning in a pathological way in the here-and-now. Would such a therapist see that as pathology in the Adult, or would they allocate it to the Parent or Child?

To answer this question one must ask, how does this learning occur? Berne says that the Adult is based on past learning opportunities - so how does one learn. There are two ways. One either copies what one is taught such as the alphabet or basic mathematics, or one makes creative, intuitive decisions by themselves. Copying is how the Parent develops and creative, intuitive decisions is how the Child develops.

For example, we can have theologically based knowledge and scientific method based knowledge. Some children are taught that you deal with the world based on what is taught in the Scriptures. That is, how one has effective, here-and-now relating or information processing - Adult. Other children are taught that you deal with the world based on the scientific model that comes out of universities. That is how one has effective, here-and-now relating and information processing - Adult. In another 100 years time children are going to be taught something different whether that come from universities, theologians or something completely new. However they will look back on us now and think how could we have been so naive to believe what we believe now is good here-and-now data processing. In the year 2100 they will have a different Adult functioning.

Finally more insight into where the Adult comes from is provided by an understanding of the concept of scripting. The script matrix is a diagrammatic representation of human development. The process of scripting is explained in detail by Berne(1972) in his statement on the script apparatus.

He talks about the parental pattern. This is how the Adult ego state gets its content or its substance. Berne quite clearly stated that the Adult gets its instructions by imitation [the 'here's how'], usually from the parent of the same sex. The similarities to the Parent are obvious. Much subsequent theory supports

this, as is noted by Erskine(1997). For example - Steiner(1971), English(1972), Goulding(1974) and Schiff(1975).

In conclusion we find that the integrated Adult as defined previously by Clarkson(1992) is a much more flexible or idiosyncratic entity than tends to be presented in the literature. It is based on past learning, [like the Parent]. Of course it is, it has to be. No part of the personality can just appear one day out of no where. It must have a developmental history and be subjected to all the healthy parenting, traumas, defensive reactions and so on that occur in normal human development. In addition whilst most ego state development is completed by age 12, it seems clear that ego states can be added to or changed any time in life.

As a result a consistent developmental/conceptual model should read as: "A parental ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which resemble those of a parental figure... The Adult ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which resemble imitations of parent figures and other teachers...A Child ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are relics of the individual's own childhood."

CONCLUSION

This paper examines what has been called the conceptual model of ego states. This model is found to be a mixture of at least two paradigms - a developmental and conceptual paradigm. It does also seem to make some statement about Adult function.

The Parent and Child ego states are explained developmentally and the Adult is explained functionally. This then has lead to the conclusion that the Parent and Child are pathological states and that the Adult is the state which deals with the environment in a healthy and natural way.

If one looks at the developmental history of the Adult then it is found to be just as subject to dysfunctional parental programming as the other two ego states. Thus it also is a receptacle of erroneous or pathological feelings, attitudes and behaviors.

In addition healthy relating in the here-and-now by the Adult depends on what one defines as that. For example, what is effective information processing varies from culture to culture, community to community, person to person. So what is seen as effective Adult here-and-now processing for one individual may be defined as pathological by the next.

Finally it is proposed that the conceptual model is more correctly titled the developmental/conceptual model and a consistent definition of the ego states in that model is suggested.

Appreciation is expressed to Ted Novey for his assistance and comments on the final compilation of this paper.

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