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Abstract

This article clarifies some of the ideas presented in an earlier article about life positions (White 1994), particularly in relation to the "I'm OK, You're OK" (I+U+) position.

Definition

My article, "Life Positions" (White 1994), demonstrated that in the transactional analysis (TA) literature there are a number of different definitions of OKness. The one used here is similar to the one used by Stewart and Joines (1987): OKness relates to the "essential *value* [the individual] perceives in himself and others. This means more than simply having an opinion about his own and other people's behavior" (p. 117). Berne himself (1966, 1972) appears to have been consistent in his portrayal of life positions as "convictions" (p. 84), which have been defined as "strong belief[s] or opinion[s]" (Sinclair 1990, p. 311).

These definitions suggest that life positions have both cognitive and experiential aspects. One can think about and feel the conviction or value one has for self and others. Many TA writings also indicate that behavior can be used to diagnose which position a person has selected; that is, a person's behavior usually reflects the life position he or she feels and believes. However, this is not always the case. Some of us want to believe that we value others as much as ourselves, but our behavior shows this not to be the case.

From the point of view of this definition, there are three aspects to a life position: thinking, feeling, and doing. A life position is what an individual thinks about the value of self and others, what he or she feels or experiences about the value of self and others, and the consistent behavior the person demonstrates with regard to the value of self and others. To illustrate, consider the following example. When I see pictures of starving millions on TV, I *feel* despair and I *think*, "What can I do to help. I could donate money, I could go over there." However, I *do* not go. I donate some money, but nothing like a year's wages. So, I rate 2 out of 3. I have a friend and colleague who joined Australian Volunteers Abroad and is going to help, so she rates 3 out of 3. This *must* reflect a difference in my valuing of self and others and her valuing of self and others.

At issue is the role of behavior in the definition of life position. In most of the literature, this relationship is not obviously stated. Rather, life positions are viewed as thoughts and feelings about self and others, and after this has been established the behavioral descriptions of the life positions are outlined. Thus, in the definition used here, the importance of behavior is elevated, or at least clarified.

The "I'm OK, You're OK" (I+U+) Life Position and Behavior

In the I+U+ position we value ourselves as much as we value others, but how can this be demonstrated in behavior? One way is to expect that if someone needed help, we would expend the same amount of time, energy, and money on assisting him or her as we would on ourselves if we needed help.

As anyone in the helping professions will attest, people will go to extraordinary lengths to save their own lives or to stop physical and psychological pain. By doing so, people demonstrate that they value themselves. If one spends the same amount of time, energy, and money assisting another, then it could be seen as valuing the other person as much as one values oneself. That is I+U+.

In my previous article (White 1994). I proposed that because the majority of us in industrialized societies have very affluent lives compared to poor and starving people in many third-world countries, this means we are adopting an I++U+ ("I'm a Bit More OK Than You Are") life position. It has been estimated that a child dies every two seconds in some poor countries from disease and starvation (World Vision of Australia, 1994). If we can enjoy, or even just have the convenience of, our cars, hot and cold running water, TVs, stereos, VCRs, soft beds, and so on, then we cannot say that we are putting the same amount of time, energy, and money into saving those children as we would if we ourselves became poor or ill. For example, the average Australian donates \$75.00 per year charity. This is a pittance, almost a disgusting pittance, and it reflects an I++U+ life position.

In my previous article I concluded that this meant only a few people adopt the I+U+ life position--those who live meager lives because they can not reconcile having such riches while others starve. To quote, "The I+U+ person is a giver/social activist in the true sense of the word" (White 1994, p. 274). However, after more discussion, this appears not to be the whole case.

Most people do not expend equal time and effort on others who are distant from them and on those who are emotionally close to them. For instance, I willingly spend as much time and effort assisting my child and my wife as I do assisting myself, and this is probably the norm. However, I do not do the same for the person in the next street. In parenting, therefore, one is communicating an I+U+ ideology to one's child, even though in relation to individuals who are not as emotionally important, we still operate from an I++U+ position. In my earlier article (White 1994) I suggested that I++U+ was the healthy position. After further deliberation I propose that health is having an I+U+ position in relation to those one is close to emotionally and an I++U+ for those outside one's immediate circle.

Further Examples

For most people, the number of individuals to whom one is emotionally close is relatively small, probably less than six. Consider the following: In consumer-based societies, money can be a good gauge of value. For example, most people would sell their house and possessions to

pay for a life-saving operation. Most people would prefer to be alive and poor rather than rich and dead. The question is, whom would you be willing to do this for besides yourself? Your children and spouse? Probably. Your neighbor, client or the man down the street? Probably not. And very few would do it for those children who die every two seconds in other parts of the world. The issue is, where do you draw the line? Once it has been drawn, then you know whom you see from the I+U+ position and whom you view from I++U+.

To further illustrate, consider the issue of time and effort. One's relationship with one's children takes time and effort, which means that if one has relationships outside the family, they take time and energy away from the family. This is a dilemma most psychotherapists know well. indeed, it is considered unhealthy, even a manifestation of negative countertransference, if one puts more time and energy into a client than into one's own children, spouse, or oneself. Thus we again have a few primary relationships that we view from I+U+ and more outside relationships that are less valued in terms of time and energy. Those outside the immediate circle become more I++U+ the farther away they are.

A third example is provided to clarify that in the I+U+ position others are valued in a positive fashion. This life position does not imply a ruthless survival of the fittest in which others' needs are considered only secondarily to our own. A good example of this is described in Frankl's (1962/1984) book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. He tells about his experiences as an inmate in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. It shows him as a deeply compassionate person who valued the feelings and worth of his fellow inmates. At the same time, he recounts honestly how he used his position as a doctor and psychotherapist to gain favor and special treatment from his captors. This included such things as more nutritious food (if it could be called that) and being allowed in the front rows of work details, which led to other advantages. Frankl's actions meant that others did not get these advantages, so it can be deduced that his behavior showed that he valued his own existence above that of others, even while continuing to feel compassion for them.

Summary

My previous article (White 1994) suggested that children are born in the I+U? ("I'm OK, You're Irrelevant") position and then move to the position of I++U+ if they receive adequate parenting. It is now argued that the healthy life position in adulthood is I+U+ for those one is emotionally close to and I++U+ for those outside of one's immediate circle. In addition, this article clarifies the role of behavior in defining life positions. That is, behavior is ultimately the way one reveals what life position one is operating from. It is probably safe to say that most of us would like to see ourselves as having the life position of I+U+. This seems to have an intrinsic "goodness" about it. However, if one looks objectively at one's behavior over time, I contend that most of us reveal that we do not value those outside our immediate circle as much as we value ourselves.

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