Ego State Theory

Objectives

- To understand and critically evaluate the structural model of ego states.
- To understand and critically evaluate the functional model of ego states.
- To relate the ego state model of TA to assessment and diagnosis.
- To critically evaluate the theoretical concept of ego states in clinical practice.

Article List

- McNeel, J. (1979) A Rebuttal to the Pig Parent, Transactional Analysis Journal, 9:1
Ego States

- The three part ego state model of personality is at the heart of TA theory. It is demonstrated as three stacked circles. There is an imaginary outer skin that encloses the three circles which indicates how they all function as a unit to form one personality.

- Definitions

  ‘A consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behaviour. Berne 1966

Jacqui Schiff - ego states are neural networks of associated responses. The networks form an ego state structure that operates part conscious and part unconscious. Conscious is observed as a distinct ego state, unconscious is thought of as a relational unit operating behind the scenes.
3 Pragmatic Absolutes & Corresponding Hypotheses (Berne 1961)

1. Every grown up individual was once a child
   1. Relics of childhood survive into later life as complete ego states
2. Every human being with sufficient functioning brain tissue is potentially capable of adequate reality testing
   2. Reality testing is a function of discrete ego states and not an isolated ‘capacity’.
3. Every individual who survives into adult life has had either functioning parents or someone in loco parentis
   3. The executive may be taken over by the complete ego state of an outside individual as perceived.
The structural model of ego states shows the content of the ego state system. The three ego states all consist of a set of related behaviour patterns and feelings. Organises internal and external stimuli. Transference

**Parent Ego State.**
Behaviours, thoughts & feelings copied from parent figures.

**Adult Ego State**
Behaviour, thoughts & feelings which are direct responses to the here and now.

**Child Ego State**
Behaviours, thoughts & feelings replayed from childhood.
Development of Ego States

- Babies occupy some sort of pre-organised life phase, experienced as bodily affective states that include being contacted by the environment which is represented as Po (object).

- With language this develops into P1/A1/C1

- Housed within the P2 are the internalised representations of the care giver
**Development of Ego States**

- **P₁** = aged 3 & 6 based on magical thinking and operates with intuition and feeling (magical parent) can use fantasy / fear to force an adaptation i.e. if adequate external structure isn’t supplied how fantasy can be used to create.

- **A₁** develops between 18 months and 3 years, operates on intuition and feeling that is ingenious and creative (little professor)

- **C₁** = exists from conception, it is the original part of the personality between birth and 6 months. An innate structure the child is born with & referred to as Po, Ao, Co. C₁ operates with instinct.

- **P₂** (&A₂, C₂)- The complete parent ego (P₂) is formed between the ages of 5 – 20 years as a result of even more external stimuli from their authority of caretaker figures.
3rd Order Structure from a Relational Perspective

P0 – Infants internalised experience of mother (object)
A0 – Cohesive and healthy sense of self develops in response to attuned interplay between infants potential and parents responses
C0 – Innate sense of yearning. Affected by the environment. The felt sense of being contacted and affected by the environment (object). C0 forms the ‘foundation’ of relational needs that form the core self.

Neglect, unmet / ignored needs are not integrated into the A0. Infant splits off the unmanageable affects (i.e. distress)
A0 – incomplete and unintegrated despite having a limited sense of self. Split off experiences are walled inside C0 or form P1 (internalised representation of the other)

Good enough primary relationships lead to resolution of C0 yearnings and transforms them into ordinary here and now relationship needs which can be integrated into the Adult ego state
With language ‘0’s develop into P1/A1/C1.

**P1** Childs attempt at making sense of what is going on inside her in response to contact with the environment.
- **P1-** Contains introjects and denied / rejected parts of the self – i.e. unmet anxiety becomes a part of the self but splits off (i.e. unintegrated in A1 and pushed into P1) infant can then manage feelings that would be otherwise seen as threatening. Can manifest as self hatred.
- **P1+** self constructed idealized other, i.e. parts of adored parent figure

**A1** Childs attempts to make sense of the world, self & others based on his C1 experiences / relationships.
- **A1+** ok if pleasing as learnt through adaptation, offers a stable sense of OKness
- **A1-** sense made when fallen from grace and experience of negative injunctions

**C1** Somatic experience
- Sense of self. The greater the deficit in parenting the more excluded C1 will be.
Parent Ego State P2

A collection of attitudes, thoughts and behaviours introjected or copied from external parental figures - Seeks to enforce borrowed set of rules / standards

When P2 is activated in later life, the person will be acting in ways authority figures modelled.

Every individual will however have a different parent ego state and will act in their own unique way.

The Parent ego is often expressed towards others in prejudicial, critical and nurturing behaviour.

Inwardly it is experienced as old Parental messages which continue to influence the inner Child.

P3 – Parent in the Parent. Set of slogans/commands. Generational message. We tend to have conscious awareness of the messages. Echo’s of another person.

A3 - Collection of statements about reality heard from parental figures / reason given –

C3 – Covert message – Child’s perception of the implication held by the Parental figures Child ego state.
**2nd Order Structural Model – Classical School Perspective**

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A2 – Reality Testing. Evaluates content of Parent & Child, Evidence seen as a child with our own Adult as to why we should/shouldn’t comply with the message. Our own thinking about the message becomes part of our A2 content. Evaluates the contents of Parent & Child.

P1 – Learn the rules that need to be followed & engage in Magical thinking. Fantasy about what will happen if we disobey the P3 message, We might not always want to follow the rules so we find a way to seduce or scare self into obedience. **P1 MESSAGES ARE MORE POTENT THAN P2 MESSAGES BECAUSE THEY RELATE TO LIFE / DEATH**

A1 – The early decision about what we will do in response to the fantasy – we work out the best way to deal with the situation. The decision we make in response to the message. Contains the whole collection of strategies the child has available for problem solving.

C1 – Stored memories and associated feelings in response to our fantasy

Internalised experience of mother/contact
A Mandala Model of the Adult Ego States

- Berne summarized his view of ego states by saying the structure of the personality is regarded as comprising 3 organs, using the ego state model to illustrate this.
- Holloway suggested reserving the circles for the ego states and using a triangle divided into 3 equal parts for the psychic organs.
- Thomas Ohlsson in keeping with Holloway refers to an ego state as a ‘container’.

The smiling 😊 Parent ego state may be a person’s stored representation of mother smiling and manifest in adulthood as smiling ‘when giving a gift’ whereas the Child ego state may be his own experience of crying for not getting the gift he wanted.
Jung (1974) found that people everywhere create mandalas in their dreams and visions. He viewed the mandala as a symbolic expression of the unknown core of the human psyche, a core of balance and meaning, the innermost Self.

As long as a person expresses "an autonomous set of feelings, attitudes, and behaviour patterns which are adapted to current reality" (Berne, 1961, p. 67) and thus is in an Adult ego state, this ego state can be located anywhere between the four poles of the mandala. A kind, nurturing person does not necessarily take over feelings, thoughts, and behaviour from an external parent figure, and is thus not necessarily in a Parent ego state. Rather, such a person might still be in an Adult ego state, but one that is close to the NURTURING PARENT pole.
The functional model, divides the ego-states to show us how we use them, when considering the functional model we observe how people express their ego-states, their observable behaviour.
**The Functional Model of Ego States**

- **Controlling Parent (CP)**
  - + Protective, promotes well-being
  - - Prejudice, controlling, put downs
  Behaviours promoting observation of rules, should and musts. Fault finding

- **Nurturing Parent (NP)**
  - + Caring with genuine regard for others
  - - Smothering / interfering, help given from a place which discounts others ability

- **Adapted Child**
  Social relating, learns how to socially adapt to the world, conforms.
  Overly concerned with others, fitting in with their expectations, timid, anxious. *The adapted child is an aspect of the Child which has moulded itself to the parent*

- **Natural Child (Free Child – FC)**
  - + Express emotion in a safe way
  - - Uncensored child emotions
  There were times in my childhood when I behaved in ways that were independent of parental pressures. At these times, I was simply acting as I myself wanted to. When I am behaving in these uncensored childhood ways, I am said to be in Free Child.
# Ego State Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clues from</th>
<th>Controlling Parent</th>
<th>Nurturing Parent</th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Free Child</th>
<th>Adapted Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Words</strong></td>
<td>Should, must, don’t, good, bad</td>
<td>Don’t worry, let me help you, there there</td>
<td>How, when, where, I understand</td>
<td>I wish, wow, love hate</td>
<td>Please, sorry, I can’t, try</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tones</strong></td>
<td>Harsh, abrupt, authoritative</td>
<td>Soothing, consoling, loving</td>
<td>Calm, clear, even</td>
<td>Joyful, noisy, energetic</td>
<td>complaining, surely, monotone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gestures / mannerisms</strong></td>
<td>Finger pointing, arms crossed</td>
<td>Pat on arm, nodding encouragingly</td>
<td>Level eye contact, absence of fidgeting</td>
<td>Exaggerated movements, uninhibited</td>
<td>Head tilted to one side, fidgeting, slouching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facial expressions</strong></td>
<td>Rolling eyes, furrowed brow, scowling</td>
<td>Smiling, proud eyes</td>
<td>Open, thoughtful</td>
<td>Bright-eyes, smiling freely</td>
<td>Pouting, downcast, not engaged</td>
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Options

- **Stephen Karpman**

Locked transactions. Aim is to recognise options available to us, i.e. we can respond to a given transaction from any one of our 5 ego states.

- Example of locked transaction, which can proceed indefinitely (Complimentary)
- Parent to Child – You treat me like a skivvy! (Harsh)

- Child to Parent No I don’t! (Dismissive intolerant attitude)

- Transactions between the two unless crossed would remain locked and everything was a variation of a Child statement. The others person's responses, no matter how "reasonable" sounding, were all variations of Parent statements.
Diagnosis of ego states

- Berne suggests four ways to identify from which ego state a person is transacting.
  - Behavioural
  - Social
  - Historical
  - Phenomenological
Observing the demeanour, gestures, body posture, voice tone, vocabulary and facial expression provides us with the clues to which ego state a persons in.
Our reaction to the person being diagnosed gives us the social diagnosis. Our response will generally be indicative of the ego state that is presented. A response to a controlling Parent would be to feel scared and childlike.
Historical diagnosis

- How things actually were – asking – “Were your parents actually like that?”

- Checking the origins of the observed behaviour, feelings and thinking with the individual.

- Explore memories and past experiences. The diagnosis will be clearer if verified by the person. e.g. i.e. Does your behaviour, thinking and feeling remind you of anyone in your childhood. Yes, I remind myself of my dad’ (historical diagnosis as Parent).

- To make a historical diagnosis, we look for process and content.

- When someone displays a certain behaviour in words, tone, gesture, posture and facial expressions, usually a combination of all 5 we could ask how they perceive the behaviour they are displaying i.e. are they replaying behaviours from childhood or copied behaviours from their parent.
Phenomenological diagnosis

- Re-experiencing somatically earlier events – the person experiences themselves as a young child or parent.
- The subjective experience of reliving the original event.
- Re-experiencing the whole ego state, in its full intensity.

- Eric Berne wrote '
  - ...phenomenological validation only occurs....if the individual can re-experience the whole ego state in full intensity with little weathering.' this is completely re-experiencing the past instead of just remembering it. Along with the memory comes the emotions, thoughts and behaviour which can be discussed and observed in order to establish a diagnosis
Functional fluency (Susannah Temple 1999)

- Functional fluency is proposed as a term to describe the behavioural manifestations of the integrating Adult ego state.

- Functional fluency means increasing awareness and choice about avoiding negative, Parent or Child contaminated behaviours and instead, responding with positive options more likely to invite similarly positive responses, it describes the manifestations of the integrated Adult ego state.

- Susannah temple believed that the integrated Adult refers to an ideal. She reminds us of Berne’s acceptance of humanity and we all have frailties and susceptibilities so will never reach this ideal totally. She uses the more appropriate and realistic term “integrating Adult”. This highlights the fact that Adult decontamination and integration is an ongoing, dynamic process.
Bernes Energy Theory

- Like Freud, Berne theorised that we have a psychic energy or cathexis. Berne said that we have a certain amount of energy held within our bound red ego-states and that it is possible for the energy to move from one ego-state to another.

- He named 3 types of energy.

  - **Bound energy** – Unused potential energy resident in an ego-state.

  - **Unbound energy** – Energy moving within an ego-state however involuntarily, unknowingly or without wanting to, it could be said to be 'out of control'.

  - **Free energy** – As its name suggests, free energy is the wilful flow of energy from one ego-state to another.
Executive & Real Self

- Executive
  - 'Berne hypothesized that an ego-state will take over executive power when it is the one in which the sum of unbound plus free cathexis (i.e. active cathexis) is greatest at a given moment.' (taken from TA Today)

- Real Self
  - 'The ego-state experienced as real Self will be the one which at a particular moment has the greatest amount of free cathexis' (taken from TA Today)

- In summary, free energy or cathexis can move freely from one ego-state to another as and when desired in addition each ego-state holds its own amount of unused, potential, bound energy or cathexis. When that bound energy comes into use it is converted into unbound energy or cathexis.

- By way of some clarification on energy theory, Charles Darwin said 'The purpose of emotion is to effect movement to bring about homoeostasis.'

- (Definition of cathexis - the concentration of a great deal of psychological and emotional energy on one particular person, thing, or idea)