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Transactional Analysis (TA) – An Introduction

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS TA, OR TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS?

The theory of TA was developed by Eric Berne, who wanted it to be accessible to everyone (unlike the traditional Freudian psychoanalysis). He chose to use simple words to describe very complex ideas and concepts.

The philosophical assumptions of TA are: -

- People are "OK";

- Everyone has the capacity to think,

- People decide their own destiny, and these decisions can be   changed.

What does this mean?

People are OK: Sometimes I might not accept what you do, but I always accept who you are. Your behaviour might be not OK at all, but it does not mean that you are not OK as a person.

Everyone has the capacity to think: all of us, unless we are severely brain damaged, can think. Therefore we can decide what we want from life. Then, we have to live with the consequences of what we decide.

People decide their own destiny: When we are very little, we decide upon certain strategies that we then follow in our life. We needed these strategies in order to survive in the world of "grown-ups", which sometimes seemed dangerous and hostile.

As we grow up, we still pursue the same strategies, even if the results we get are unproductive and painful. We do that just because it is familiar and

comfortable to do so.

It was our decision to adopt these strategies and it can be our decision to decide to abandon them now. We cannot be made to feel or behave in a certain way by other people: it is always our decision to do so. People can change, but first they have to make a decision to change.

TAKE THIS EXAMPLE: John comes to see a psychotherapist. If it was his decision to enter therapy, it means that he understands that his problems are not somebody else's fault, but come from within himself and he can solve them. If, instead, he is forced into therapy by his wife, school teacher, employer etc., therapy is not likely to produce any results. He will keep blaming everyone else for his misfortunes and continue to follow his old strategies.

CHAPTER 2

THE EGO-STATE MODEL

The most basic concept of TA is the **Ego-state model**. An ego-state is a set of related behaviours, thoughts and feelings. It is a way we manifest a part of our personality at a given time.

If I am behaving, thinking and feeling in response to what is going on around me here and now, using my resources as a grown-up person, I am said to be in my **Adult** Ego-state.

At times, I may behave, think and feel in ways which are a copy of one of my parents or parent figures. On this occasion, I am said to be in my **Parent** Ego-state.

Sometimes, I may return to ways of behaving, thinking and feeling which I used when I was a child. This indicates that I am in my **Child** Ego-state.

Let's see how all this works in real life.

EXAMPLES:

Kevin is at work. His boss comes up to him and asks: "Kevin, can you get this report done for me, please?" to which Kevin replies: "Yes, I can get it to you in half an hour", which he then does. Here Kevin is in his Adult Ego-state – he accessed the information available to him at the time and acted upon it.

Charlie is meeting a girl in a bar. He knows that the girl likes him, but as she is walking towards him across the bar, he suddenly remembers how his older sister used to say that he is stupid. He feels his heart racing, he mumbles and talks nonsense and the girl does indeed start to suspect that Charlie is not very smart. In this situation, Charlie was in his Child Ego-State.

Sarah's children are growing up and she is thinking about working part-time. A friend asks if Sarah would like to help her with her business. Sarah agrees and enjoys her work. But then suddenly she remembers her mother saying:"a woman's place is in the home". She then feels guilty at leaving her children with the childminder and decides to stop working. Here we could say that Sarah was in her Parent Ego-state.
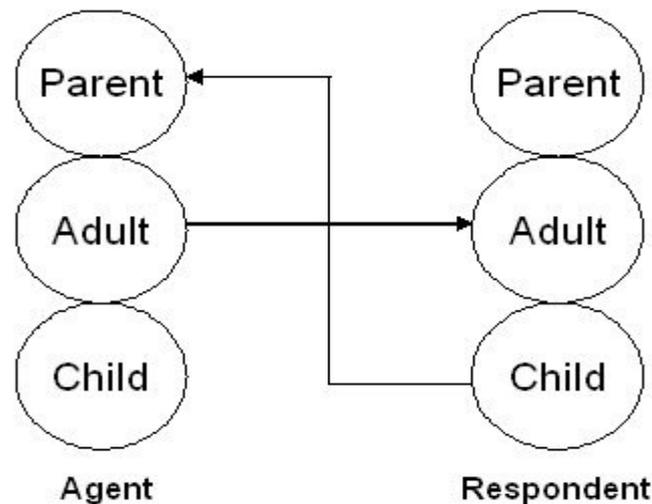
CHAPTER 3

TRANSACTIONS
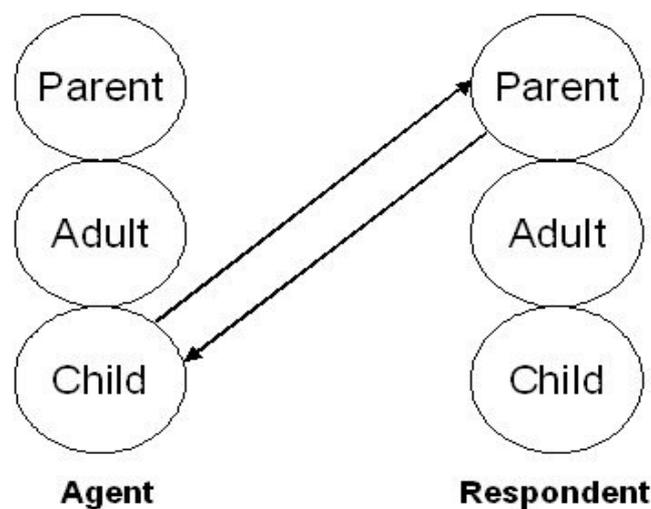
How does learning about Ego-states helps us in communicating with each other?

When I am interacting with you, I can choose to address you from any one of my three ego-states. You in turn can reply from any of your three ego-states. This unit of social interaction is called a **Transaction.**

There are different types of transactions.

A **Complementary Transaction** is one in which the transactional vectors are parallel and the ego-state addressed is the one which responds.

*For example: Rob elbows his friend and giggles, his friend elbows Rob back, also in a friendly way. Both of them are in their **Child** Ego-states.*
Or: Marianna tells her friend: "Sam never called me back. All men are the same!" Her friend replies: "Yes, all of them!" Both girls
*are in their **Parent** ego-states, as they replicate ideas and behaviours that were modelled to them by their mothers, and they generalise rather than look at the facts.*

A **Crossed Transaction** is one in which the transactional vectors are crossing and the Ego-state addressed is not the one which responds.

*For example: Kevin asks his mother: "What time is it?" To which she starts shouting at him: "How dare you! You were meant to be home at 9!" Kevin addressed his mother from his **Adult,** but got a reply from a **Parent** ego-state.*

*Or: Kim's boss comes up to him and says: "Kim, could you please prepare this report for me?" Kim rolls his eyes and says in a whining tone: "Why always me? Can't somebody else do it?" Here the boss addressed Kim from his **Adult,** but got a reply from Kim's **Child.***

CHAPTER 4

THREE RULES OF COMMUNICATION

Learning about Transactions helps us understand the **three rules of communication.**

Rule 1: So long as transactions remain complementary, communication can continue indefinitely.

For instance: Marianna and her friend continue talking about men.

Marianna: You can never trust a man! How stupid I was.
Friend: Yeah, they are all the same…
Marianna: Complete waste of time!
Friend: Yes, you can never rely on them to do anything. Take my husband…

Both friends are in their Parent Ego-state and the conversation can continue indefinitely.

Rule 2: When a transaction is crossed, a break in communication results and one or both individuals will need to shift ego-states in order for communication to be re-established.

*Ed's boss comes up to him and starts shouting: "I asked you to bring that report to me two days ago! What is going on? How many times do I have to ask?" He is in his **Parent** ego-state and is inviting Ed*
*To get into his **Child Ego-State** and start apologising. Instead, Ed sits up straight, looks confidently at his boss and calmly replies: "I will get it to you in half an hour", which he then does. Here Ed has chosen to access his **Adult** ego-state and crossed the transaction. Communication stops.*

To understand the **third rule of communication,** we first need to learn about **Ulterior Transactions.**

In an **ulterior transaction,** two messages are conveyed at the same time. One of these is an overt social level message. The other is a covert psychological level message.

*James comes home late. His mother greets him at the door: "Do you know what time it is?" Overtly, it is a question from an **Adult** position. But covertly, his mother has hooked James's **Child.** So he starts apologising: "I lost my watch, I did not know what the time it is…".*

Rule 3: The behavioural outcome of an ulterior transaction is determined at the psychological and not at the social level.

CHAPTER 5

OTHER IMPORTANT TA CONCEPTS

STROKES

When you and I transact, I signal recognition of you and you return that recognition. In TA language, a unit of recognition is called a **Stroke.**
People need strokes to maintain their physical and psychological wellbeing.

There are different kinds of strokes: positive or negative, conditional or unconditional.

For example: The Boss is praising Kevin for a job well done. This is a ***positive conditional stroke.***

*Marianna tells Ed:"Ed, I love you!" This is a **positive unconditional stroke.***

*Marianna's friend, Zoe, tells her: "You look fat in that dress".
This is **a negative conditional stroke.***

*Fred's sister tells him: "I hate you!" This is a **negative unconditional stroke.***

Receiving negative strokes is better than not getting any strokes at all. We need recognition in order to survive. That is why children often misbehave in order to be shouted at – at least this way they are certain that their parents have noticed them! If we did not get enough positive strokes as children, we might have worked out ways of getting negative strokes instead. As adults, we might repeat this strategy by unconsciously seeking out negative strokes.

*For instance, Kevin picks a fight every time he goes to the pub. He does not consciously decide to do it, but in his **Child Ego-State,** he just wants to be noticed.*

RACKETS

As young children, we notice that in our family, certain feelings are encouraged, whilst others are prohibited. *For instance, in Kevin's family, it was OK to get angry, shout or fight, but it was not OK to cry or express sadness in any other way.*

To get our strokes, we might decide to feel only these permitted feelings. This decision is made without conscious awareness. In grown up life, we keep substituting real feelings with the one feeling that was OK to experience as a young child. These substitute feelings are known as **Racket feelings.**

For example: Jake is dumped by a girl. She tells him that she does not want to see him anymore. Jake is really sad about being abandoned. But sadness was a forbidden feeling in Jake's family, so he feels angry instead. He shouts abuse and starts a fight with his girlfriend.

You can find out what your own **racket feeling** is**,** by doing the following exercise: Imagine, you are in a supermarket. It is the last day before a public holiday and the shop is going to close in an hour. You need to buy groceries to last you for the three days of the holiday period. Five minutes before closing time, you come up to the till with the trolley full of groceries. You are about to pay, when you discover you wallet is missing. What are you feeling?

STAMPS

Every time we experience a **Racket feeling** we are said to be saving a **Stamp.**

We can "cash it in" straightaway, by, for example, having a fight or bursting into tears. Or we can store it, in which case we are "saving a stamp".

For example: Gary's boss criticises him. Gary feels angry, but does not show it. Gary's mother asks him to drive her across the city after work to do some shopping. Gary feels angry, but is afraid to say "no". Gary is driving home and another car overtakes him, forcing Gary to brake sharply. The car is gone before Gary could express his anger.
Gary is having a drink after work. Somebody elbows him, pushing past him to the bar. Gary gets really angry and starts a fight. He ends up in a hospital. Gary has "cashed in" his stamps.

GAMES

In order to experience our **Racket Feeling** we sometimes set up **Games.**
A game is a repetitive sequence of transactions in which both parties end up experiencing **Racket Feelings.**
We play **games** to confirm our view of the world and ignore the aspects of reality that do not fit in.
There is an infinite variety of **games** that people set up. If you are interested in this concept, I would recommend you to read "Games People Play" by Eric Berne.

Usually, we unconsciously look for people, who would be willing to play our particular type of **game. A game** always includes a *Switch* – a moment, when players experience that something unexpected and uncomfortable has happened. People play **games** outside awareness.

For example: Marianna's and her friend Paula's favourite game is "Why don't you? Yes, but…"

Marianna is complaining about her job. Her friend, Paula, wants to be helpful.
Paula: Why don't you look for a better paid job?
Marianna: I could, but I need to improve my computer skills to find something worth applying for.

Paula: Why don't you enroll on a course at work?

Marianna: I guess, I could, but I am always so busy!

Paula: Well, before you find time to do that, why don't you start looking anyway?

Marianna: Yes, but now, with the recession, it is not really a good time to look for a job.

In the end, Paula starts feeling irritated and gets angry at Marianna for rejecting her offers to help. Marianna, in turn, experiences her **Racket Feeling** of being misunderstood.

CHAPTER 6

LIFE SCRIPT

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT FOR US TO MAINTAIN OUR VIEW OF THE WORLD AND WHY IT IS SO DIFFICULT TO CHANGE IT?

Each of us, in childhood, writes our own life-story. This story has a beginning, a middle and an end. We write the basic plot before we are even able to talk and then add more details to the story later in childhood. Most of the story is complete by the age of 7.

As adults, we are usually no longer aware of our life-story. Yet, unconsciously, we follow it meticulously. We set up our lives in a way that allows us to move towards the final scene we decided upon as infants.

This life-story is known in TA as our **Life-script.**

When we are doing *script-analysis,* we use the concept of **Life-Script** to understand how people may be unaware that they set up problems for themselves and how they could go about solving these problems.

For example, Kevin might come to therapy, complaining about relationship problems. We would then explore a possible life-script, that Kevin might have written for himself. If we find out that Kevin has decided very early on in life, that he was unlovable and stupid, and in what circumstances this decision was made, we will then be able to work together with Kevin on changing these early decisions.

DISCOUNTING

A child makes up a life-script because it is the best survival strategy at the time. In our **Child Ego-state,** we believe that any threat to our infant picture of the world is a threat to the satisfaction of our needs or even to our survival. In order to avoid that, we tend to distort reality to fit our script. When we do so, we are **redefining.**

To make sure that reality fits our script, we often ignore the information available to us. We unconsciously "don't notice" the aspects of reality that contradict our script. This process is called **discounting.**

People discount at different levels: **existence of a problem, significance of a problem, possibilities for change and personal abilities.**

For example: Luke's friend asks him: "Why don't you have a girlfriend?" To which Luke would reply: "What girlfriend? What do you mean?" Here Luke would be **discounting the existense of a problem.**
Luke could also have said: "Yes, I know, but I don't really care!" Then he would be **discounting the significance of a problem.**
If, instead, he would reply: "Yes, I am not happy about it myself. But it is hard to find a nice girl nowadays". Here Luke would be **discounting the possible solutions to the problem.**
Or, if Luke had responded: "Yes, I would like to meet someone. But I am just not the type that girls like". Then Luke would be **discounting his own abilities to solve a problem.**

SYMBIOSIS

As a part of maintainting our "present **Script",** we might sometimes replay our early relationships in the here and now. We do this in order to resolve the very early conflicts and dilemmas that we encountered in life. But, more often than not, instead of resolving the conflict, we just repeat our familiar patterns and experience familiar feelings.

When we do that, we are said to be engaging in a **Symbiotic relationship.** We do this without being aware of it. One of the partners in a relationship

plays the part of **Parent and Adult,** whilst the other is being a **Child.** Between them, they function as though they have only three instead of six **Ego-states** available.

It is quite normal for a mother and a baby to be in **Symbiosis,** but not for two grown up individuals.

*For example: Mark is in a **Symbiotic relationship** with his mother. Mark's mother earns a living, looks after the house, decides where Mark is going on holiday and which girlfriend he should go out with. Mark usually complies with his mother's decisions, although sometimes he sulks or rebells against his mother, just like a 3 or 4 year old would do. Mark is **discounting** his abilities to make his own decisions. Mark's mother sometimes complains about her son's attitude and wishes he would "grow up", but does nothing to change the situation. She **discounts** her own need to be looked after and to have fun.*

AUTONOMY

So is there life after **Script?** What is the ultimate goal of **Transactional Analysis Psychotherapy?**

To realise our full potential as adults, we need to update the strategies for dealing with life which we decided upon as infants. If these strategies are no longer working for us, we should replace them with new ones, that work. Our aim is to move out of **Script** and into **Autonomy.**

Autonomy implies the ability to solve problems using our full resources as adults.

Autonomy comprises **Awareness, Spontaneity and Intimacy.**

Awareness is the capacity to see, hear, feel, taste and smell things as they really are, without filtering or interpreting them. It means being in contact with our own body and its sensations, as well as with external stimuli.

*For example, Alex is at work. He is feeling unwell and suspects he might have flu. His body tells him to stop and go home. But the **Parent** in his head*

*urges him to continue working and ignore his illness. In his **Child** Alex is scared that his boss will not be pleased if he takes a day off. But Alex makes his choice, gets up and goes home. Here Alex has displayed his capacity for **Awareness.***

Spontaneity means the capacity to choose from a full range of options and respond directly to the world, without discounting, interpreting or re-defining reality.

*For example, Ned is at a bar. A nice looking girl comes up to him and smiles. Ned would like to offer to buy her a drink, but the **Parent** in his head immediately reminds him, that girls don't fancy him. Ned's **Child** is scared of a rejection. But Ned decides to take the situation as it is and buys the girl a drink. Here, Ned has chosen to act spontaneously.*

Intimacy means an open sharing of feelings and wants between you and another person. The feelings expressed are authentic, so **Intimacy** excludes the possibility of **racketeering or game-playing.**

*For example, John would like to tell his new girlfiriend that he loves her. Usually he would play the game of being cool and indifferent, waiting for the girl to make the first step. It was a safe strategy, whereas now he is risking being rejected. So John decides to be brave and to share his feelings with Helena. To his surprise, Helena tells him she loves him too. **Intimacy** means taking a greater risk, but it also brings the greatest rewards.*

CHAPTER 7

A HELPFUL TOOL, THAT YOU CAN USE AT WORK, AT HOME OR ANYTIME YOU ARE NOT SURE WHAT IS GOING ON…

EGO-STATE DIAGNOSIS

I have already explained the concept of the three distinctive **Ego-states: Parent, Adult and Child.** But how can we detect, that someone has moved into a certain **Ego-state?**

Berne listed four ways of identifying **Ego-states:**

Behavioural diagnosis, Social diagnosis, Historical diagnosis and Phenomenological diagnosis.

Behavioural diagnosis is the most important and most easily accessible. Certain behavours are characteristic of certain **Ego-states.**
For example: If Miles is behaving in a childish way, it suggests that he is in his **Child.** *Rational and practical behaviour usually indicates* **Adult,** *whilst when Miles starts behaving exactly how his dad would in the situation, he might be in his* **Parent Ego-State.**

Social diagnosis looks at the responses we get from others.
For example, if at work everyone tells Maddy what to do, she might often be in her **Child ego-state.**

Historical diagnosis asks about a client's history. *For example, if Rob reports being scared of his boss, we might inquire if there was a figure in the past that Rob was equally afraid of.*

Phenomenological diagnosis asks: What does it feel like to be in this state? Can you remember feeling exactly the same? *For example, if James is feeling shy with girls, we might ask him, what exactly is he feeling? Fear? Could he remember if he felt a similar feeling in a different situation?*

SO WHY DON'T WE STOP PLAYING GAMES AND START COMMUNICATING?