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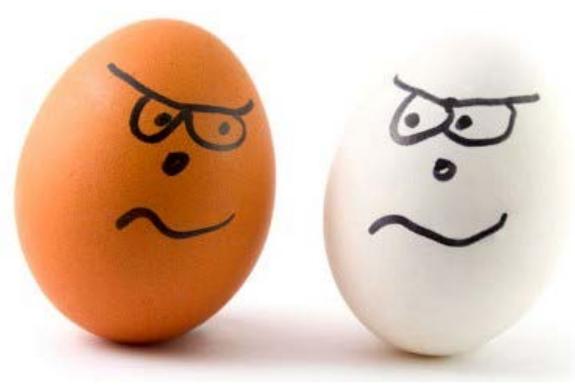
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Using Transactional Analysis in the Workplace

APRIL 25, 2014 by DR. JON WARNER in PSYCHOLOGY / PSYCHOLOGICAL TYPE with 0 COMMENTS



Dr Eric Berne, a Canadian born psychologist who lived most of his adult life in the US, designed Transactional Analysis, or TA as it is often known today, as a system that seeks to provide guidance on the interactions of people and to help improve the human social environment. His work was mainly focused on the operation of one-to-one relationships and was initially utilized as a direct therapeutic approach. However, Berne's body of work has been used extensively in the workplace over the past 35 years or so and in this brief article we will look at his overall theory and two particular aspects of it which seem to have high resonance in the working world.

TA needs to be considered carefully as a way of helping us to better understand people's learned behaviors. We should note that it assumes:

- ▷ People are OK?
- ▷ Everyone has the capacity to think
- ▷ People decide their own destiny (and these decisions can be changed)

All of the different parts of Berne's theory (and there are several) can be seen in this diagram below. This diagram holistically shows that each part of the TA theory relates to another part, building from the more covert "Ego States" theory at the base of the diagram to the more overt or visible behaviors such as the way we structure our time and engage in relationship games at the top.

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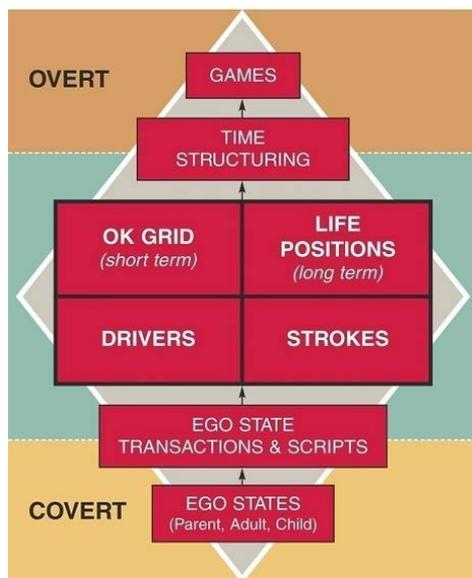
Jon Warner is an executive coach and management consultant and in the past has been a CEO in three very different companies. [Read more](#)

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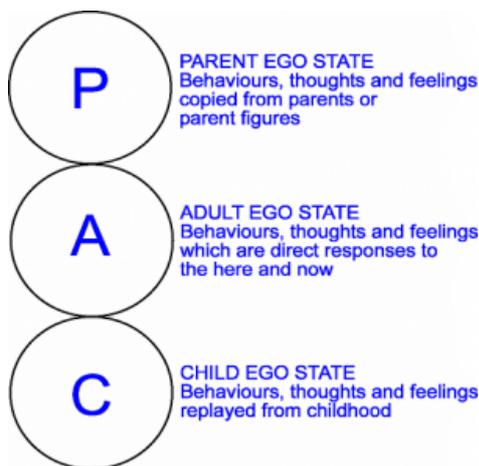
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Berne made complex interpersonal transactions understandable when he recognized that people can interact from one of three “Ego States” – Parent, Adult or Child – and that these interactions can occur at overt and covert levels. These are the base of the diamond shaped diagram here because they are not readily seen until you have trained yourself to start doing so. Although all of Berne’s theories relate to one another, the two major ones that have had most use in organizational terms are “Ego States” and the so-called “OK Corral”. Let’s therefore look at each of these one by one.

Ego States

According to Berne all individuals have three very discrete parts to their personality or what he terms the inner “Ego” (in the same way that Freud talked about our Ego). For Berne these aspects of our personality are filters through which we see the world (and all have been learned over time usually very early on in our childhood, for most people). Berne called these personality filters “states”. Every individual therefore communicates predominantly through one of the three “Ego States”, allowing us to analyze the different Ego State communication “transactions” or scripts that can occur. Berne drew these “PAC” states (as he called them for short) in diagrammatic form and this is shown below:



These three “Ego States” operate as follows:

PARENT EGO STATES (Taught)

This state contains the attitudes, feelings and behavior incorporated from external sources, primarily parents. In outward behavior it is divided into two parts:

- ▶ **nurturing parent: concerned with caring, loving, helping**
- ▶ **controlling parent: criticizing, censoring, punishing**

When a person is in his or her parent state, he/she responds automatically, almost as if the individual has a memory recording playing in his or her head. Everyone has Parent memory recordings – some are helpful – they enable us to carry out routine tasks automatically without having to think too much about them. Other memory

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recordings can create problems – if a Parent memory is triggered automatically in an inappropriate situation.

ADULT EGO STATES (Thought)

A person's Adult Ego State is his or her thoughts, feelings and behavior in the here and now that is calmly appropriate to the external stimulus being experienced at any one time. The state has nothing to do with the person's age. It contains those behaviors concerned with collecting information, organizing and analyzing. It operates dispassionately and without emotion.

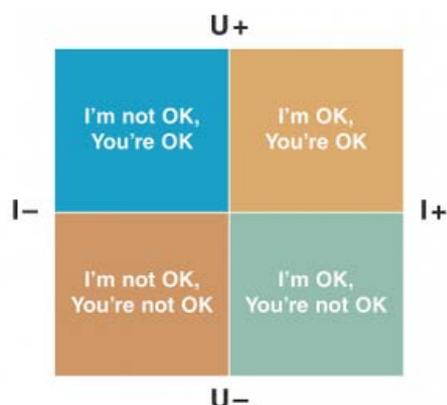
CHILD EGO STATES (Felt)

This state contains all the impulses that come naturally to an infant. But just as the Parent has different aspects or characteristics which relate to this state, so does the Child state. The Child develops into two parts – the Natural or Free Child and the Adapted Child

- ▷ **The Natural/Free Child:** Is spontaneous, energetic, curious, loving and uninhibited, the part of you that feels free and loves pleasure. Many adults repress their natural child and exaggerate the parent.
- ▷ **The Adapted Child:** Your Adapted Child developed when you learned to change (adapt) your feelings and behavior in response to the world around you. Learned feelings of guilt, fear, depression, anxiety, envy and pride are all characteristic of the Adapted Child. The Adapted Child can become the most troublesome part of our personality.

Each one of the Ego States is a system of communication with its own language and function; the Parent's is a language of values, the Adult's is a language of logic and rationality and the Child's is a language of emotions. According to Berne, effective functioning in the world depends on the availability of all three intact Ego States (although the Adult State is ideally the "access door" to the other two.

One of the manifestations of the Ego State transactions that we receive as individuals (and the Games that we engage in) is that in the long term we become "driven" in certain ways and consequently seek particular kinds of what Berne called "strokes" from other people. In combination, this leads us to one of four "Life Positions" or types of behavior that can be plotted on what Berne called the "OK Corral" or Grid as can be seen below:



In infancy, and often pre-verbally, Berne suggested that an individual will eventually (often in his or her late teens) make a decision on how they will generally relate to others and themselves. Berne called this their Existential Life Position and once decided upon, the Life Position influences how the person thinks, feels and behaves (although through greater awareness it can change over time). Relating this back to Ego States, the I'm OK, You're not OK quadrant is the domination of the Parental Ego State and the "I'm not OK, You're OK" quadrant is the domination of the Child Ego State. This leaves the "I'm OK and You're OK" quadrant which is the domination of the healthy Adult Ego State. Clearly the bottom left quadrant ("I'm not OK, You're not OK") is a problem for everyone. According to Berne 99.9% of people fall into the three quadrants other than the one at the bottom left. Most of us do not consistently act from a single life position and our positions can change from situation to situation. However, we may adopt a single life position with a particular person every time that we meet them until such time as the parties deliberately decide to change the relationship.

Application to Workplace life

Although other theories in Berne's work have been used, his "Ego States" and "OK



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Corral" theory have been used more in organizations of all sizes and types than any other. Ego states theory has been used extensively to help better understand communication between individuals with different Ego states (where we want to avoid Parental and Child state conversations in particular, where it is inappropriate). And the OK corral theory has been applied in the areas of customer service and more extensively in the realm of leadership development. In the latter, the aim is to get individuals to operate as much as possible from an "I'm OK, you're OK" stand-point when leading individuals and teams. This allows them to avoid over-doing the parental role (which many leaders natural slip into) and the child ego state, where the leader over-does the peer friend role and fails to stand back from the team enough in order to give firm direction and lead strong when necessary to do so.

In summary, Eric Berne's psychological theory provides some interesting ideas on how adults relate to one another which have plenty of applicability to workplace situations. "Ego States" and "OK corral" theory have been used extensively but should be researched more thoroughly before being applied widely. This applies to other related theories developed by Berne, which are not often easily accessible but have several interesting insights to offer.

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- ✔ [Introduction to Transactional Analysis Theory \(PDF Downloadable\)](#)
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Dr. Jon Warner is a prolific author, management consultant and executive coach with over 25 years experience. He has an MBA and a PhD in Organizational Psychology. Jon is Editor-in-chief of ReadyToManage, Inc. and can be reached at Jon@OD-center.org

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