

CHAPTER FIVE

Dynamic ego states—the significance of nonconscious and unconscious patterns, as well as conscious patterns

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Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the significance of levels of consciousness with particular reference to ego state theory (Berne, 1961). In doing so I will also describe a dynamic ego state model developed specifically to account for nonconscious as well as unconscious, preconscious, and conscious patterns of experience.

Dynamic ego states

Inspired by the work of Daniel Stern (2004) and the Boston Change Process Study Group (BCPSG) (2010), the Dynamic Ego State Model is my attempt to account for some recent developments in developmental psychology, neuroscience, and positive psychology within a TA theoretical frame (Figure 2).

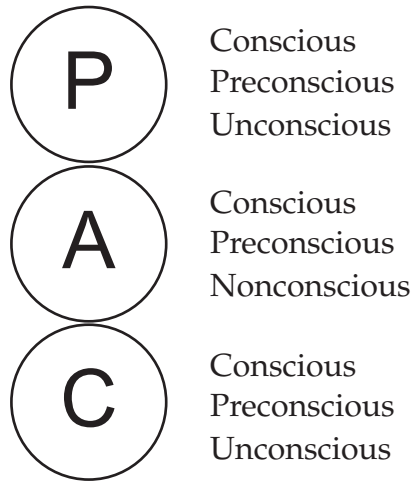


Figure 2. Dynamic ego states (Summers, 2008).

Note: In the colour version of this model the Adult circle is displayed in green (which denotes health) and the Parent and Child circles are displayed in red (which denotes defensive fixation).

The Dynamic Ego State Model builds upon the foundations of co-creative TA (Summers & Tudor, 2000) to propose that:

- Ego states are “patterns” of experience. They are relational possibilities and probabilities.
- Adult ego states represent our flexible, creative, and resourceful self or sense of self.
- Parent and Child ego states represent our rigid or compulsive psychological defensive patterns most often used in times of stress.
- Personal development is a process of expanding Adult relational capacity and reducing Parent and Child probabilities.

I have chosen the term “dynamic” for two reasons. Firstly, it echoes Freud’s (1913) use of this adjective to describe the unconscious when referring to active repression from conscious awareness and so accurately reflects its usage in relation to Child and Parent ego states within this model. Secondly, it helps the consideration of personality in terms of ongoing vitality (both within and between people) rather than reified personality structure and therefore reflects the phenomenological, field theoretical, and social constructivist basis of co-creative TA.

I do not use the term to denote affinity with Blackstone's idea of the "Dynamic Child" (1993) especially since my conceptualization of the Child ego state is radically different from her formulation.

Unconscious/nonconscious distinction

I was introduced to the distinction between nonconscious and unconscious through Daniel Stern's (2004) writing which helped both clarify and develop my thinking in relation to co-creative TA. I resonated with his suggestion that we consider aspects of implicit relationship that are *not conscious but also not defensive or pathological* as nonconscious while reserving the term unconscious for that which is dynamically and defensively repressed. This useful distinction helps account for nonverbal health, healing, and creativity which may or may not become verbalized by therapist or client. Stern's proposition is that interpersonal experiences may be transformative (in therapy or otherwise) without ever being named or made explicit.

Applying this to co-creative TA, I think of Parent and Child ego states as largely implicit unconscious processes in which the deepest unresolved transference dramas unfold within the therapeutic dyad. Through unconscious co-transference enactments the therapist becomes part of the problem with the client in order to become part of the solution. The heart of the transformational process, however, takes place within implicit nonconscious inter-relations through the co-creative (but not necessarily conscious, verbal, or explicit) Adult-Adult "moments of meeting" (Stern, 2004, p. 165) and new ways of being with another that develop in parallel with co-transference replays.

I draw on Little's (2006) use of "structuring" and "non-structuring" internalizations to distinguish between Child-Parent and Adult ego states respectively. In this formulation Child-Parent relational units that develop defensively in response to (inevitable) unbearable or unmanageable experience are differentiated from good-enough self-other interactions that are generalized and represented internally. I build upon this conceptual frame to locate the Child-Parent ego states and Adult ego states, each underpinned by RIGs ("Representations of Interactions that have been Generalized" (Stern, 1985 p. 97)), within implicit memory in the unconscious and nonconscious respectively. Using this theoretical base I consider "working in the relationship" to mean that therapist and client work together at the intimate edge of bearable/unbearable

experiences. Therapeutic work involves co-creating viable experiential alternatives to co-transferential defensive transactions to enable the client to be more fully present in relationship with himself/herself and with the therapist. These therapeutic experiences may or may not become explicit: "It is more likely that the majority of all we know about how to be with others resides in implicit knowing and will remain there" (Stern, 2004, p. 115).

I remember a moment in my own therapy when I talked about a painful experience in a somewhat stereotypical northern English, working class male, matter-of-fact way. In response, my therapist visibly softened, showing subtle signs of sadness in her face which, in turn, helped me soften. Although this interaction was not explicitly discussed, in hindsight I believe it helped me feel recognized at an emotional level, and yet the absence of explicitly discussing the experience simultaneously acknowledged my allegiance to my culture of origin. Such refined choices of interaction, assuming they are even available to consciousness, concur with Stern's caution that "an attempt to make this moment of meeting explicit, especially immediately after it occurred, could undo some of its effect" (2004, p. 191).

In *Change Process in Psychotherapy* (2010), BCPSPG write: "The task of therapy is to change implicit relational knowing" (p. 193). They see the development of the implicit relationship between therapist and client as the medium to "make more of the patient's world relationable" (p. 194) and to "create new relational possibilities" (p. 194).

As I have already noted this does not necessarily imply that previously repressed unconscious experiences were once conscious or that they become conscious in the therapeutic journey. I consider that repression has different meanings depending on whether we use Freud's (1913) or Fairbairn's (1952) conceptualization of the ego. Indeed, within a Freudian frame repression means repression from consciousness; however, within a Fairbairnian frame we can also understand repression as meaning repression from relationship. This latter conceptual frame helps distinguish between levels of unconsciously repressed experience that may be consciously recoverable and those that may be relationally recoverable through change in implicit relational knowing but still unavailable to explicit consciousness.

The additional significance of acknowledging a nonconscious implicit realm of experience and relating is that it supports the conceptualization of the expanded/expanding Adult ego state and further

differentiates from restricted notions that Adult ego state is merely to do with consciousness.

Tudor (2003) creatively builds upon the one ego state model of health pioneered by Erskine (1988) and adapted within co-creative TA. I agree with much of his chapter on the "Integrating Adult", especially his articulation of the implication (within this model) that we are "conceived Adult". He states that his reference to conception more accurately refers to the notion that the foetus "... adapting to its reality in utero may be thought of as having a neopsyche or Adult ego state" (p. 204), and admits that "this may be the point at which the Parent, Adult, Child metaphor breaks down and we need to present new metaphors by means of new nomenclature". (p. 207).

I do, however, think he creates some confusion when he subsequently describes integration as "the capacity to reflect upon and make sense of our worlds" (p. 216).

He further states, "It is this capacity to reflect on ourselves and others, to spit out those experiences or introjections that are no longer relevant, and to assimilate the past in service of the present, that defines the 'Integrating Adult'" (p. 218), and "In my view an essential quality of the 'Integrating Adult' is, precisely, a critical consciousness which is alert and does not accept what is assumed given or received" (p. 219).

All of this makes sense in relation to reasonably well-functioning, chronological adults but seems a tall order for a foetus! In the main, Tudor's descriptions of "integrating" lean heavily towards explicit consciousness and necessitate a level of developmental achievement way beyond that of a foetus or neonate.

This contrasts with the co-creative TA assertion that Stern's (1985) description of four senses of self "supports the possibility of working at nonverbal levels of self development within an Adult frame of reference" (Summers & Tudor, 2000, p. 31).

So while Tudor usefully builds on the co-creative ego state model, especially in terms of discussing the importance of Adult reflective and critical consciousness (in later human development), I think the non-verbal and implicit aspects of the original co-creative TA formulation of ego states need to be re-asserted.

My interpretation of integrating incorporates much less developmentally sophisticated processes. I think in terms of biological notions of organism-environment co-regulation which is more of a Gestalt formulation: "We cannot do anything to take into our bodies those

necessary things we require, whether it is affection, knowledge, or air without interacting with the environment" (Wallen, 1970, p. 10). From this perspective, I think the foetus example holds true and that human co-regulation then takes on more sophisticated forms from birth onwards.

On further reflection, however, I am less inclined to use the prefix integrated or integrating in relation to Adult. I think it is important to account for experiences, relational or otherwise, that we hold as somewhat unintegrated fragments but are not defensively organized. In the ongoing process of lifelong learning we hold many fragments of experience (ideas, feelings, images) at different levels (conscious/pre-conscious/nonconscious) that we may or not be able to integrate, but we are nonetheless able to tolerate the fragmentation, not-knowing, and uncertainty. In contrast, I think that certainty is often an expression of a Parent ego state used to defend against the experience of the unknown.

In everyday learning we often need to dis-integrate our familiar ways of meaning-making to create an "open space". Such familiar ways may be habitual preferences of thought, feeling, or behaviour that we need to deconstruct in order to learn something new. Incorporating the concept of nonconscious processes within the Adult, I therefore propose that dynamic Adult ego states can be considered to have integrating, dis-integrating, and non-integrating capacities that play a pivotal role in healing, learning, and living, in and out of awareness.

Conscious/pre-conscious distinction

The conscious/pre-conscious distinction, like the dynamic unconscious, also dates back to Freud's dynamic model of the psyche. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913) Freud saw the pre-conscious as a screen lying between the unconscious and conscious systems. He proposed that the unconscious can only reach consciousness via the pre-conscious system and is therefore the main domain of psychotherapeutic work. The pre-conscious is often used to refer to experiences, thoughts, or memories that, while not in present consciousness, are readily accessible through an introspective search and then available for conscious attention.

Tudor suggests that "the neopsyche is the seat of consciousness" (2003, p. 218). Whilst I think this is true in terms of deeper reflective consciousness, I also think that a person can be conscious in a more limited way when using Parent or Child ego states. For example, I may

well be conscious that I am being critically condemning of another person. However, I may not be conscious of the way in which I am unthinkingly copying the attitudes of an authority figure or that I am adopting this attitude as a psychological defence. I could also scan my pre-conscious experiences whilst using a Parent or Child ego state to gather evidence in support of my defensive position.

I recall an executive coaching client whose direct reports were telling him (via a 360° feedback process) that “he wasn’t there much and when he was there he was critical”. This feedback was not surprising to him—he was already conscious that he related in this way. What he realized through our coaching work was that he was re-enacting a relational pattern he had experienced many times with his own father. Not only was this a useful cognitive insight, it was also painful for him to remember this aspect of his childhood and to recognize that his archaic experience of his father was now strongly echoed by the people who presently work for him.

As illustrated in the above example, the conscious/pre-conscious distinction is particularly relevant to the TA concept of contamination (Berne, 1961). Contamination occurs when an individual mistakes their Parent or Child for Adult. Decontamination involves the process by which Parent and Child patterns of experience become consciously differentiated from Adult and therefore available for reflective consideration. At this point, Eusden (2011, and in this volume) suggests a person can develop the capacity to have “one foot in and one foot out” and to “mind the gap” between deeply felt co-existing psychological realities.

Eusden and Summers (2008) proposed the notion of “Vital Rhythms”. Here we related Panksepp’s (1998) classification of emotional systems to ego states and hypothesized that each system can be regulated within Adult or within the archaic Child-Parent relational units, the former being more functional. Glynn Hudson-Allez (2008) also refers to Panksepp as she links the capacity to use secure attachment (which I consider an Adult capacity) to the effective co-regulation of panic states. As the client’s unconscious/pre-conscious archaic strategies for managing emotions become apparent within the unfolding co-transference, opportunities emerge to co-regulate these affect states within the developing Adult-Adult attachment of the therapeutic relationship.

Note that one of the strengths of Berne’s (1961) PAC model is accessibility. I have witnessed many people make important insights about their own patterns as they use this deceptively simple model to

recognize how problematic patterns in the present have meaningful roots in earlier experiences. Such insights can provide the basis for immediate changes and/or serve as a prompt to further personal development. Equally, the move from pre-conscious to conscious awareness may be the consequence of deeper emotional work:

“It is noteworthy that in the field of psychotherapy, the focus of therapeutic action has begun to shift from models favoring cognition to models that emphasize the primacy of interpersonal factors and bodily-rooted affect. These models suggest that insight is the result not the agent of change. This gives a new meaning to Berne’s recommendation first to change then to analyze” Allen (2010, p. 44). In this case, cognitive insight, and the conscious Adult re-working of personal narratives can serve to reinforce personal transformation that has already been made at deeper experiential levels.

The conscious/pre-conscious distinction within Adult has particular significance in relation to the recent explosive emergence of positive psychology (Seligman, 2003). Here we move our focus away from problematic experiences (that may require healing or transformation in order to unlock creative potential) towards patterns which are already functional and creative. Within the terms of this chapter, the emphasis here is on bringing pre-conscious competence into awareness.

Fredrickson (2009) found that when people experience positive affect (e.g., joy, interest, happiness, anticipation), their peripheral vision expands. She linked this, and other empirical findings to the “broaden and build” strategy which suggests that positive emotions encourage exploratory thought and behaviours that in turn build new skills and resources. The notion of building is a pro-active, skill-based process that is prompted by and reinforcing of positive affect. Fredrickson also reports that positive affect is generally experienced with significantly less intensity than negative affect (e.g., anger and fear). Whilst I do not necessarily regard anger and fear as negative, this does remind us, as practitioners and clients, to also attend to the flow of possibly less intense yet positively experienced emotions that can support personal development.

Numerous strengths inventories have been developed in recent years with the intention of helping people discover and clarify what is right with them rather than what is wrong with them. Again, the intention here is to invite pre-conscious health into consciousness.

Within my coaching practice, solutions focused inquiry (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) often proves useful. A female senior manager wanted to raise the profile of herself and her department. She identified that

she needed to make more connections with key people operating at the executive level above her but felt repulsed at the idea of politically motivated “schmoozing”. I asked about the good relationships she already had with some of her seniors and how they had come about. She realized that they had all developed through collaborative cross-functional projects, where together they had made genuine contributions to the work of the organization. Following on from this insight she was able to develop a viable strategy for profile raising that felt congruent with her values and natural ways of being.

Positive psychology has many overlaps with TA (see for example Napper, 2009), both in the affirmation of human well-being and encouragement to act and not just think or feel. From a psycho-educational perspective there is congruence here with Susannah Temple’s (1999, 2004) work on functional fluency, a term she uses to describe “the behavioural manifestations of the integrating Adult ego state” (1999, p. 164). Temple has devised research based classifications for identifying a range of social behaviours. This approach offers a methodology for expanding Adult flexibility at a conscious behavioural level.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which people heal, learn, and develop within which “The explicit and implicit intermingle at many points” (Stern, 2004, p. 187). As I consider this in relation to ego states my main proposition is that while Parent and Child ego states are relational possibilities experienced, expressed, and maintained largely through unconscious implicit interactions, it is nonconscious implicit processes that form the ongoing experiential basis for Adult ego states. My secondary proposition is that pre-conscious searching for meaningful connections can be made with respect to our healthy functioning as well as our troubles.

Damasio (2010) states: “Mind is a most natural result of evolution, and it is mostly nonconscious, internal, and unrevealed. It comes to be known through the narrow window of consciousness ... which is an internal and imperfectly constructed informer rather than an external, reliable observer” (2010, p. 117).

With this thought in mind I conclude, as ever, with great respect for the unknown that lies within and between us despite our earnest attempts to understand and make use of the aspects of our experience that we are able to perceive.

