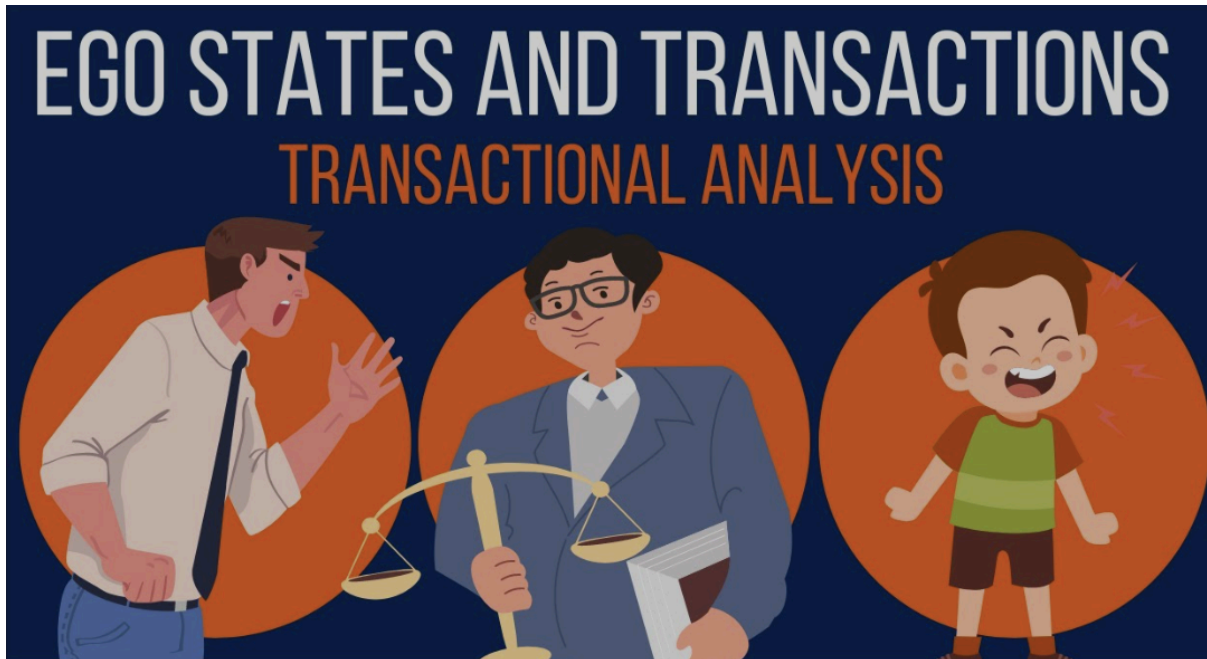


Know Thyself: Understanding Ego States

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[image credit](#)

When we have positive, productive encounters with people, it feels great. Things get done, and people feel good about their work and their life.

Sometimes, especially when there is disruptive change involved – or just a perception of ‘disruption’ – those interpersonal exchanges don’t quite go as we would like, even if we set out with the best of intentions.

Think of situations where you’ve been attempting to bring about change – have you ever felt like you’re speaking to a petulant child rather than an adult? Or perhaps you feel like an adult trying to get a teenager to clean their bedroom – that dynamic where although you care, they don’t, and you both know it!

Maybe there’s someone you always seem to clash with, or encounter resistance from, someone who knows just how to push your buttons? These encounters can leave one or both parties angry, frustrated and drained.

Wouldn't it be good to be able to break such negative patterns of engagement? It's possible, but it begins with being aware of what is going on during such exchanges.

One way of looking at this is [Transactional Analysis](#) (TA):

Transactional Analysis (TA) is a theoretical framework used in therapy and counselling, which suggests that one of overriding factors in the perpetuation of these situations is not other person's behaviour but our own state of mind.

Transactional Analysis is based on the '[ego-state](#)' or PAC (Parent-Adult-Child) Model which suggests we shift between three distinct 'ego states' (metaphorical groupings of thoughts, emotions and behaviours), and this is influenced by what is going on around us, who we are interacting with and what ego state they are in.

Parent – a state where we think, feel and behave how our parents or other authority figures acted

Adult – a state where we think, feel, behave in a state of presence, responding to what is around us and not any previous 'programming' (a goal of Transactional Analysis is to strengthen the Adult state)

Child – a state where we think, feel and behave as we did in our childhood
Image credit

This [clip](#) from Theramin Trees offers some insights into the dynamics of transactions that occur between ego states, and triggers that send people into different ego states which result in conflict.

Take a look at Jim Carrey's character in this [excerpt from the 1990s TV series 'In Living Color'](#) – the comedy is in the exaggeration of the character's commitment to his environmental crusades, but the clip resonates because there are many all-too-familiar 'they're not listening!' exchanges, and reactions from both sides that create a downward spiral of conflict.

See if you can spot where 'Parent' and 'Child' states are in play in Carrey's skit, and how the various characters shift between states – and how some are entirely unconscious of their states.

This doesn't mean that the Parent and Child states are 'bad', as each has both positive as well as negative aspects, but they do have more limited awareness than the Adult state.

In Transactional Analysis, 'transactions' are the flow of communication, and include not only the spoken, but the unspoken and nonverbal communication – for example, pleasant words being used in an unpleasant tone, or a negative gesture or body language being used in conjunction with positive words.

Recognition, attention or responsiveness to behaviours are characterised as 'strokes', which can be positive ('warm fuzzies') or negative ('cold pricklies'). People crave recognition, and will seek strokes of any kind, including negative in the absence of any positive reaction.

There are three kinds of transactions – reciprocal, or complementary; crossed, and ulterior.

- **reciprocal** transactions occur when each person is addressing the ego state the other is in at that moment. This can be Adult to Adult, Child to Child, Parent to Parent, but also Parent to Child and Child to Parent:
- **crossed** transactions are when people address someone as if they are in an ego state they are not currently in, and are an unstable form of transaction. This is a common cause of communication failure and conflict.
- **ulterior** transactions are those where a verbal conversation occurs in parallel with an unspoken psychological transaction.

Eckhart Tolle's book [A New Earth](#) includes sections on the role of the ego (particularly chapters 3, 4 and 5) that are worth reading for better mastery over our own ego states, and understanding those of others:

There is nothing that strengthens the ego more than being right. Being right is identification with a mental position – a perspective, an opinion, a judgment, a story. For you to be right, of course, you need someone else to be wrong...you need to make others wrong in order to get a stronger sense of who you are...being right places you in a position of imagined moral superiority...it is that sense of superiority the ego craves and through which it enhances itself.

(Thinking and emotion) turn into ego only when you identify with them and they take you over completely...the ego is not only the unobserved mind, the voice in the head which pretends to be you, but also the unobserved emotions that are the reaction to what the voice in the head is saying.

The ego is always on guard against any perceived diminishment. Automatic ego-repair mechanisms come into effect to restore the mental form of 'me'...whether the other person is right or wrong is irrelevant to the ego. It is much more interested in self-preservation than the truth.

Think about how you feel when someone you don't know directs abuse at you on the road for some real or imagined transgression. It can't possibly be a personal attack, because the other person doesn't know you, yet for most of us, the ego immediately goes into self-repair mode – you get defensive, feel angry and may want to react to that person in the same way they acted towards you. Next time this, or any other situation in which you feel yourself becoming defensive occurs, practice 'becoming the witness' to your thoughts and emotions – it might give you pause for long enough so that you can act differently.

There is a lot more to this area of inquiry, including how ego states and transactions relate to our 'life script', games/payoffs and rackets:

- people begin 'writing' their life scripts at a young age, as sense is being made of the world and their place in it (such as 'I must do everything perfectly' or 'people I love always abandon me') – as we move into adulthood, we lose awareness of it, but it is still within our subconscious.

- a game has a payoff for those playing it, which could be the seeking of sympathy, satisfaction, vindication, or an emotion that reinforces the life script; the way to stop the game is to discover how to deprive the player of the payoff.
- a racket is a set of behaviours originating in the childhood script in which people will create situations that generate outcomes to match their 'script', and to experience and feel justified in 'racket' feelings, rather actually solve the problem.

The author of [The Celestine Prophecy](#), James Redfield, acknowledged that Transactional Analysis was an influence on his book, which presents nine spiritual insights in a novel form.

The Celestine Prophecy outlines what Redfield calls 'Control Dramas', or roles people play when they feel they lack power or energy.

Control Dramas take the form of both aggressive and passive types of manipulation:

Intimidator (aggressive) – the bullies, those who get power from others by scaring or threatening them; 'Intimidators' aren't necessarily people in positions of authority, and their tactics may be overt or subtle

Interrogator (aggressive) – question their target relentlessly, with the goal of cornering them into a position they can't get out of; 'Interrogators' are often critical, nitpicking and undermining of others

Aloof (passive) – indifferent, unresponsive and unavailable, 'Aloofs' frustrate and stymie others, and make them work hard for the outcome they want

Poor Me (passive) – the victim who seeks attention through eliciting sympathy, and who guilts others into doing what they want; 'Poor Me's makes others feel responsible for their situation

Control dramas are not only in play with people whose behaviour we are trying to shift – they can also be in play in the change-maker.

Jim Carrey's character is engaging in three of these four control dramas in his attempts to get people to change their behaviour!

If you're encountering resistance, defensiveness and reaction from people in your change work, chances are there are 'ego state' dynamics in play. How to address them depends on who the 'players' are and the specific context, but being aware of ego states and types of transactions between them offers a deeper interpretation of these situations than what seems to be going on at the surface.

If an exchange or interpersonal connection is failing, take a step back and consider not only the other person's ego state or control drama, but also your own. Becoming aware of your own control drama brings it into conscious thought and stops it operating unconsciously – similarly, 'naming' the control drama another person is engaging in, and making it the topic of conversation, brings the dynamic into the foreground where it can be addressed. Different approaches to this may be needed depending on what type of drama is in play and who the other person is in relation to you.

A conscious understanding of what is really going on in any kind of exchange can help you to be observant of your own ego state, as well as being aware of others' states, and find ways to create virtuous rather than vicious circles of interpersonal interaction.