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Introducing Co-creative TA

What is Co-creative TA?

Transactional Analysis (TA) is a way of understanding what happens within and between people. Since its conception in the 1950s by Eric Berne it has evolved well-established applications in the fields of psychotherapy, education and organisational development.

Co-creative TA is a contemporary interpretation of TA that integrates recent developments in philosophy and psychology. Our original article (Summers & Tudor, 2000) is re-published in *From Transactions to Relations* (Cornell & Hargaden, 2005), an edited volume that plots the development of a new relational paradigm in TA psychotherapy. In this paper we outline a “user friendly” summary of our approach written for anyone interested in understanding and improving their personal and/or working relationships. It will also be of interest to practitioners in the fields of educational and organisational development seeking a generic, coherent and accessible theoretical framework for learning and change.

Co-creative TA updates the four core concepts of TA theory (ego states, transactions, games and scripts) to provide models of:

- **Personality** – a way of understanding yourself and others.
- **Relationship** – ways of initiating or maintaining creative contact with other people.
- **Confirmation** - understanding and influencing repeating patterns of positive or negative interactions and their predictable outcomes.
- **Identity** – ways of understanding yourself in the context of your past and present culture and shaping the "stories" you construct about yourself, others and life.

These four models interact to give a clear and consistent framework for understanding what happens within and between people. Each model describes healthy and dysfunctional patterns

and can be used to generate effective strategies to support personal and professional development.

We now explore each model in turn...

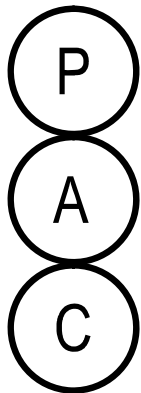
Model 1. Ego States (Co-creative Personality)

Personality can be thought of as our “sense of self” created through movement within and between ego states.

Ego States

An ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours. It is a “possible state of self” - a potential way of being or relating that is co-created through our interactions with others.

Three Types of Ego States



- **Introjected Parent:** a set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours copied from past parent or authority figures.
- **Integrating Adult:** a set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours that are present-centred, integrating but not controlled by past influences and experiences.
- **Archaic Child:** a set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours that are replayed from your own past experience.

The Development of Ego States

In the course of healthy human development we integrate experience throughout life. From infancy onwards we are naturally proactive and, with adequate support, will get what we need and reject what we don't need or negotiate “good enough” compromises. We are innately motivated to be curious and seek attachment, competence and mutual recognition. Much of this can be achieved through the vitality of healthy inter-dependent relationships which help to regulate our feelings and needs. Healthy interactions include “rough and tumble” and recovery from difficult or traumatic experiences. With repetition, these interactions become generalised and encoded in emotional memory. These emotional memories support us to use and create sets of feelings,

attitudes and behaviours that are effective in dealing with the challenges and opportunities that life presents. These are Integrating Adult ego states.

However, most of us will have had situations in which we were not helped to manage particular feelings and needs. When our experience becomes unmanageable we can split our “sense of self”, creating two sets of feelings, attitudes and behaviours that are disconnected from our usual sense of who we are. This is an attempt to manage the mismatch between our need for support and the lack of appropriate response from a significant other. We simultaneously create a Parent and Child ego state. The Child ego state is like a “snapshot” of ourselves attempting to cope with more than we could manage. The Parent ego state is a set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours “copied” from the parent figure or other person we were relating to at the time.

Ego States in Everyday Life

Parent, Adult and Child are not “people” inside us. They are possible (and probable) ways of being and relating which are influenced by our choices, our expectations based on past experience, and our present situation.

Consider a time when you dealt with a problem or challenging situation creatively. You probably accessed resources from within yourself as well as accessing resources around you. Even though you may have been profoundly challenged or emotionally distressed, you were responsive, resourceful and creative. What did you feel? What attitude did you have? What did you do? At such moments you are probably in Adult “flow” – in good contact with yourself and your environment.

Now consider a situation in which you got “stuck”. In hindsight you recognise that the set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours you brought to that situation were not useful. Perhaps at a different time you might have managed the situation much more effectively. The probability here is that you were approaching the situation from a Parent or Child ego state – a familiar but unhelpful set of feelings, attitudes and behaviours.

It is not surprising that people tend to “go into” Parent or Child at times of stress or anxiety since these are familiar ways of attempting to manage difficult experiences. These “regressive” ego states are often at the heart of problematic or unfulfilling relationships at home and work.

Using Ego States

1. Develop Awareness

Knowing “where you are coming from” is enormously useful. Sometimes this awareness alone is sufficient to help you interrupt a defensive Parent or Child response and approach a situation from Adult instead. There are four clues that you can use to help identify which ego state you (or others) may be using at any given point in time:

- **Behavioural** – are you behaving in a parental or child-like way e.g. “telling someone off” (Parent) or “sulking” (Child)?
- **Social** – are others around you behaving in a complementary fashion? If others are being child-like, this might indicate that you are operating from a Parent ego state.
- **Historical** – does your attitude or behaviour remind you of one of your parent figures, or yourself when you were younger?
- **Felt Sense** – do you “feel” as if you are one of your parent figures, or as if you are younger than you actually are?

Note that “in” Adult we may behave in a parent or child-like way because it is appropriate, effective, or just good fun. This is different from compulsively responding from Parent or Child which is usually ineffective, defensive and limiting. You can use the four questions above to help identify which ego state you (or others) are coming from. Notice the situations in which you are more likely to move into each of the three types of ego state.

2. Strengthen and Expand your Integrating Adult

Our greatest potential for personal and professional development lies in developing our strengths rather than improving our weaknesses. It is important to know and exercise your natural and cultivated strengths. In which situations do you thrive? What triggers your Adult ego state? In

what conditions do you enjoy and maintain Adult “flow”? Which sets of feelings, attitudes and behaviours do you use?

The answers to these questions will be very personal, reflecting your uniqueness as an individual. These are important questions because they help us focus on health, strength and vitality. It is also essential to draw on healthy Adult resources in order to manage our areas of weakness and our potential to use Parent or Child defences.

When in Adult “flow” we will naturally explore and expand our range of being and relating because we are curious about ourselves, others and life. We will invent and test new possibilities, expanding our relational, emotional, intellectual or technical capacities. At times this may involve managing and “working through” our Parent and Child defences against the fear and excitement this new learning might provoke.

3. Manage or “Work Through” Parent or Child Defences

It is important to stay respectful of yourself even when you notice that you compulsively move into Parent or Child ego states. Recognise that you created these ego states (out of awareness) as an attempt to manage what felt unmanageable at the time. You might still use these ego states in the present for the same reason. It may be that adopting this compassionate attitude towards yourself (and others) helps you move out of Parent and Child more quickly.

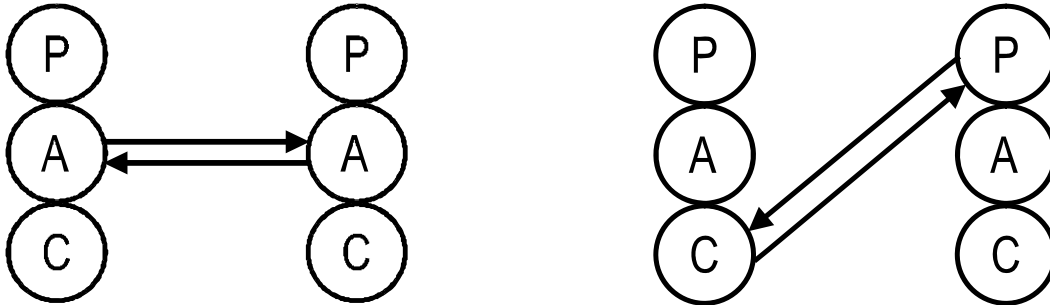
“Working through” means learning how to tolerate more of your experience with fresh support that was previously unavailable. Interestingly, learning to feel intense pleasure or excitement can be as challenging as feeling anger, fear and sadness. This healing process is one of expanding your Adult capacity to experience and manage previously repressed feelings, needs and desires so reducing the compulsion to use Parent and Child defences at times of difficulty or change.

Model 2. Transactions (Co-creative Relationship)

A transaction is an “exchange” between people that consists of a “stimulus” and a “response”. It is the building block of relationship.

There are three main types of transaction: parallel, crossed and ulterior. Each type of transaction leads to a corresponding rule of communication (Berne, 1966).

Parallel Transactions



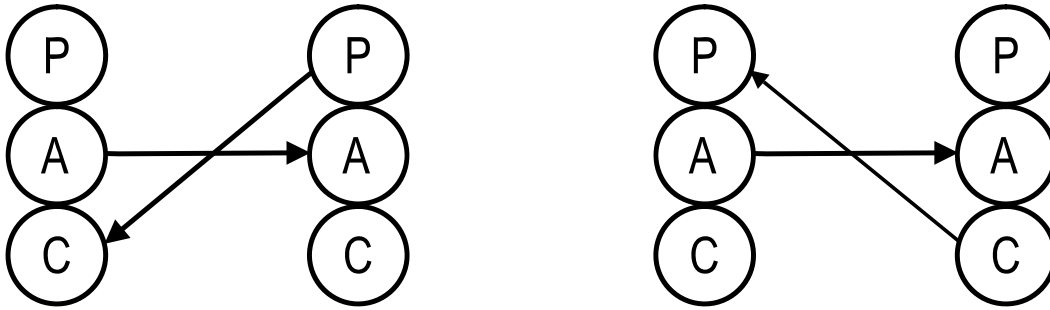
- The vectors are parallel
- The ego-state which is addressed is the one which responds

Healthy present-centred relating consists of Adult – Adult transactions. Problematic or unhealthy relating consists of transactions involving Parent and Child ego states. A common example being the Parent – Child transaction. Both these types of transactions are parallel yet each build very different kinds of relationship.

First Rule of Communication

‘...as long as the vectors are parallel, communication can proceed indefinitely’ (Berne, 1966, p. 223).

Crossed Transactions



- The vectors are no longer parallel
- The ego-state which is addressed is not the one which responds

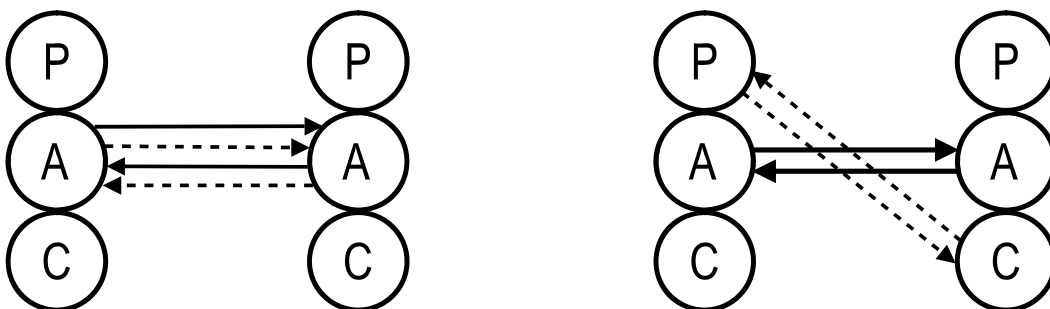
The crossed transaction is the “agent of change”. It is a way of switching from healthy to unhealthy relating or vice versa.

Second Rule of Communication

‘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’ (Stewart & Joines, 1987, p. 65).

Ulterior Transactions

Here we distinguish between "social" and "psychological" level messages to conceptualise the ulterior transaction.



The social level messages are explicit and represented by solid arrows.

The psychological level messages are implicit and represented by dashed arrows.

Third Rule of Communication

‘The behavioural outcome of an ulterior transaction is determined at the psychological and not at the social level’ (Berne, 1966, p. 227)

The non-verbal messages we give and receive often have the most impact. We can give and receive healthy (Adult) and unhealthy (Parent or Child) ulterior messages. Parent or Child psychological messages are often hidden by apparent Adult-Adult social level messages.

Recognition

Any transaction involves an exchange of recognition between people. This is significant because it is a powerful motivation for people to interact. Recognition may vary in intensity or significance and be verbal or non-verbal, positive or negative, and conditional or unconditional.

Using Transactions

1. Build Adult-Adult relationships

Discover and use Adult triggers. Enjoy Adult-Adult transactions. Use positive ulteries. Negotiate for what you want. Develop secure attachments.

2. Cross Problem Transactions

Use your own impulses to respond from Parent or Child as information about the other person. Reject invitations to respond from these ego states. Respond from an Adult ego state. Tolerate the discomfort of temporarily breaking communication. Allow the other person time to move to Adult. Validate old realities. Create and support new possibilities.

3. Use Positive and Useful Recognition

Catch yourself and others doing things right. Give, ask for and receive positive and useful feedback. Reject unhelpful feedback.

Model 3. Games (Co-creative Confirmation)

A game is a pattern of transactions that is used to confirm positive or negative feelings and beliefs about self or others. It is ‘an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well defined predictable outcome’ (Berne, 1968, p. 44)

Structure of Games

The structure of a positive or negative game can be described using the game plan.

The Game Plan (James, 1973)

1. What keeps happening to me over and over again?
2. How does it start?
3. What happens next?
4. (Mystery question)
5. And then?
6. (Mystery question)
7. How does it end?
- 8a. How do I feel?
- 8b. How do I think the other person feels?

The feelings and attitudes created at the end of a game are described as the game “payoff”.

Positive Games

Consider a relationship with someone you know that is consistently satisfying. Now use the above gameplan to map out the sequence of the pattern you manage to co-create with this person “over and over again”. Finally consider the mystery questions:

4. What is my secret message to the other person?
6. What is the other person's secret message to me?

Typical responses to this approach are that such patterns start with a sense of anticipation, welcoming and re-connection. The middle phase often involves sharing, exploring, honesty and creative co-operation. Such patterns often end with satisfaction, confirmation, and well being.

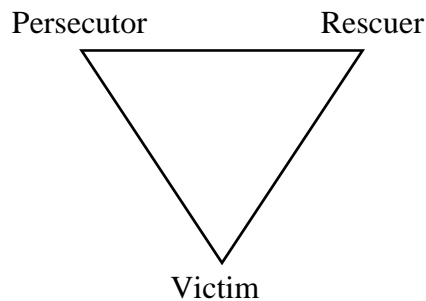
Common ulterioriors include “I like you”, “I trust you” and “I respect you”. In satisfying relationships such patterns create a framework for intimate and productive contact.

Negative Games

Now use the above game plan to consider a repetitive negative pattern that occurs “over and over” with another person. Here you are describing the structure of a game where the “payoff” is to end up with familiar negative feelings and attitudes towards yourself and/or others.

The Drama Triangle

The structure of a negative game can also be described using the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968).



All three game roles are inauthentic and are played from Parent or Child ego states. Negative games often involve a “switch” in game roles as the game is played out.

Examples of Negative Games

“**Now I’ve got you**” - exploiting other people’s mistakes or weakness for psychological gain.

“**Kick me**” - doing things wrong until eventually people feel obliged to put you down.

“**Why don’t you??**” - offering unsolicited advice which often leads to....

“**Yes, but...**” - acting as if you needed help and then refusing every suggestion.

“**After all I’ve done for you**”- doing too much and then feeling resentful.

Characteristics of negative games

Negative games are repetitive, involve negative ulteriorior transactions, often include a moment of surprise or confusion and end with the players experiencing familiar bad feelings and attitudes. They can be played at different degrees of intensity.

Advantages of Games

People play positive and negative games to regulate feelings, structure time, confirm beliefs about self and others, get recognition, and maintain connected to other people.

Using Game Theory

1. Develop and Savour Positive Games

Pay attention to relationships that work well. Understand your explicit and implicit contribution to positive outcomes. Savour satisfaction and ask “how can I repeat this in other areas of my life?”.

2. Change Negative Games

Celebrate awareness as you use hindsight, hindsight, insight, and foresight to become aware of and name negative games. Dis-invest in the negative payoff. Use the “winners triangle” (Choy, 1990) to respond from Adult instead of Parent or Child, that is, be assertive instead of persecutory, responsive instead of rescuing, and proactively vulnerable instead of being a victim. Adjust or reaffirm goals, agreements and positive aspects of relationship. Learn from the game. Create alternative forms of structure, stimulation and recognition.

Model 4. Scripts (Co-creative Identity)

Our script is the set of beliefs we make about ourselves, others and life and the decisions we make based on these beliefs. It is a way of understanding how we define ourselves within the context of past and present cultural influence. ‘Life script is the ongoing process of a self-defining and sometimes self-limiting psychological construction of reality.’ (Cornell, 1988, p.281)

Script Messages

Our “psychological construction” influences and is influenced by messages we receive from others and the culture and sub-cultures within which we live. These messages may be positive or negative in intent or impact and can be classified in five main ways:

Attributions e.g. “You are...” - Characteristics ascribed to you by others e.g. shy, clever, stupid, likeable.

Injunctions e.g. “Don’t ...” - Prohibitive messages (often non-verbal).

Permissions e.g. “You can...” - Messages which encourage/support options.

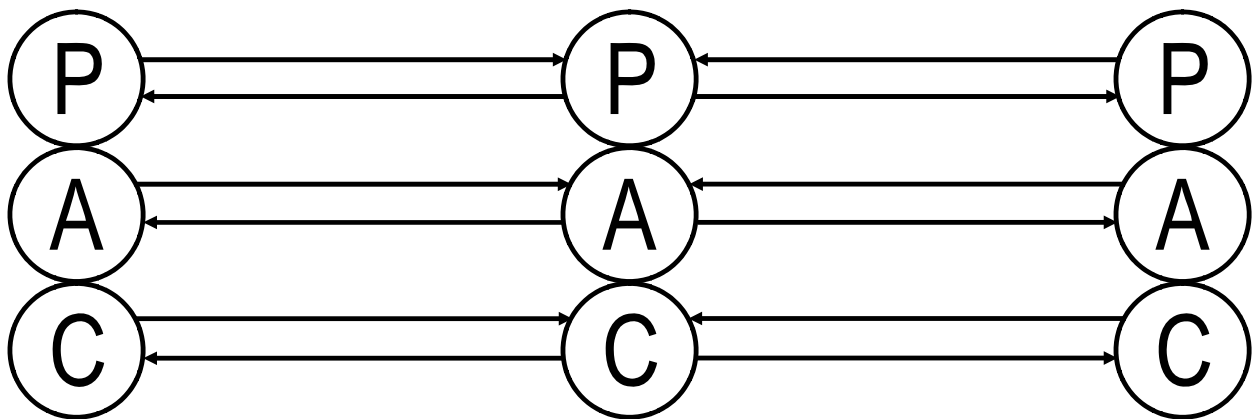
Counter-injunctions e.g. “You should...” - Prescriptive messages, usually given directly:

“...work hard”, “...be good”, “...do your best”, etc.

Modelling e.g. “Here’s how to...” - Modelling by others showing how to fulfil other script messages.

Co-creative Script Matrix

The matrix below helps map script messages to and from significant others. This can be used to reflect on formative influences earlier in life or to reflect on current relationships.



This matrix can also be used to map influences in terms of any social construct important to you e.g. regarding gender, class, race, age, etc. What messages do people give to you? What messages do you give others?

Script Responses

The messages we receive from different people, and sometimes the same person, may be contradictory. In addition, we are not passive recipients and will therefore respond to messages we receive with our own creative and adaptive capacities. This means that even in difficult circumstances we have scope for forming our own conclusions and making personal decisions. Sometimes these beliefs and decisions are not cognitive or even conscious but can be characterised as emotional, instinctive or intuitive responses to our opportunities and limitations in a given situation. As you reflect on your experience, consider what beliefs and decisions have you made (in or out of awareness) in response to script messages? Are there any you have already changed or want to change? Also, script formation is a two way process...so what influence do you want to have on others or your culture?

Using Script Theory

1. Identify Script Messages and Responses

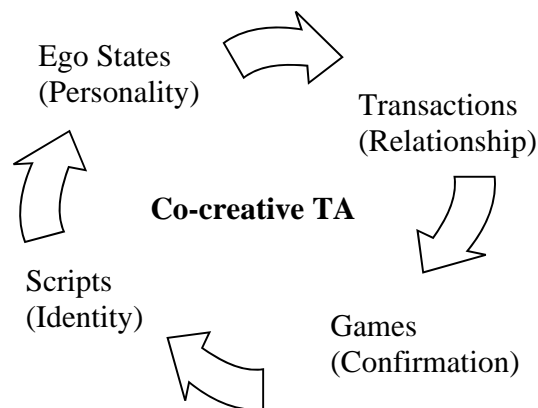
Identify past and present script messages i.e. attributions, injunctions, permissions, counter-injunctions and modelling. Use the script matrix to map these out in terms of significant relationships and broader cultural patterns. Identify and infer the beliefs and decisions you have made in the context of these influences.

2. Update Script Messages, Beliefs and Decisions

Experiment with alternative beliefs and decisions about you and your life. Take into account your natural strengths, interests and your social identity. Notice what happens when you define yourself differently. Seek and use messages and relationships that support the beliefs and decisions that feel right for you. See the bigger picture – understand that your personal change may be emotional, cognitive, and behavioural as well as being part of broader social, political and spiritual processes.

Co-creative TA – A Summary Diagram

In summary, co-creative TA comprises four inter-related models, each of which can be used to generate effective strategies for personal and professional development.



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