

A Social-Cognitive Definition of Ego States to Implement TA Research

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Abstract

A distinctive model of ego states is presented according to the social-cognitive TA approach which draws from contemporary research on social-cognitive processes and schemas. This model of ego states represents a significant development of Berne's original ego state theory, useful both clinically and in research. This presentation highlights both the continuity and the departure from Berne's model of ego states, explaining how the social-cognitive model of ego states allows us to implement research work.

Introduction

The social cognitive model of ego states represents a significant development of Berne's model which allows implementation of research work. Berne's ingenious model of ego states is congruent with current research findings in the field of relational psychoanalysis and object relations, attachment theory and social cognitive schemas. However, this model is not suited to research methodology, which requires operationally clear definitions and explanations in order to use quantitative/qualitative procedures for prediction and control. An example of a psychodynamic concept, which was operationally defined in order to make research on and with it, is provided by the CORE Conflictual Relational Theme (CCRT). Luborsky & Crits-Christoph (1990) defined the transference as a scheme compound of three elements: Wishes, Responses of Other and Responses of Self. They created a prototypical list of each of these components which allows good convergence among the evaluation of both clinicians and researchers. An incredible amount of data was offered by their research, which is still one of the most accredited works in psychoanalysis. Having clear criteria which define a concept (which one can agree or disagree on) allows the validation or not of a theory through research and, as a consequence, the development of the TA model would be fostered through the dialogue among theory, research and practice.

As many might know, Pio Scilligo dedicated a great part of his life as clinician, professor and researcher to the creation of a model of Transactional Analysis - the Social-Cognitive Transactional Analysis - (Scilligo, 2009) suited to implement research work, drawing from research on social cognitive processes and schemas and integrating Lorna Benjamin's work and research on Structural Analysis of Social Behaviour (SASB). For those who are interested in the story and explanation of Scilligo's theory we suggest the article by De Luca & Tosi published by the Transactional Analysis Journal in 2011 (De Luca & Tosi, 2011).

Berne's Ego States Model

We think it useful to give a very brief overview of Berne's model of ego states in order to highlight the similarities and differences between Berne's and Scilligo's models of ego states.

According to Berne (1961), the Child, Adult, and Parent ego states represent a phenomenological advance over the Freudian id, ego, and superego. That is, ego states are descriptive of reportable states of mind that also correspond to observable behaviors. Berne's departure from the Freudian meta-psychology is represented by two main principles in transactional analysis theory: 1) the value given to the phenomenological level of analysis, and 2) a "dyadic" conception of the mind. By "dyadic" we are referring to the relational origins of psychic life, which we believe are well explained by Berne's theory of ego states.

Berne (1966) gives an elegant and simple definition of the ego state: "A consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behavior" (pg. 364). In an earlier definition, Berne offers a more comprehensive definition as, "An ego state may be described phenomenologically as a coherent system of feelings [and experiences] related to a given subject, and operationally as a set of coherent behavior patterns; or pragmatically, as a system of feelings which motivates a

related set of behavior patterns” (Berne, 1961, p. 17). As we will show later, this conception is remarkably congruent with the idea of “schemas” used by contemporary social-cognitive researchers.

Berne (1961) noted that there were three consistently observable manifestations of the ego states, which he termed Parent, Adult, and Child. He believed these ego states recurred because every grown-up individual was once a child, dependent on someone in a parental role, and later developed the capacity for adult reality-testing, assuming “sufficient functioning brain tissue” (p. 35). He further theorized that these recurring aspects of personality were the manifestations of three distinct and hypothetical psychobiological structures, which he termed the psychic organs. Berne affirmed that the psychic organs organized the phenomena (ego states) and the determinants, which he considered equivalent to the id, ego and super-ego (the concept of determinants was then abandoned by Berne). Each psychic organ gave rise, he surmised, to a distinctive ego state.

It is interesting to reread how Berne (1961, p. 75) described the properties of these hypothetical psychic organs or neurological structures. He thought they were characterized by: 1) Executive power (each psychic organ giving rise to its own idiosyncratic, organized behaviour); 2) Adaptability (adjusting and forming their responses to the social context); 3) Biological fluidity (responses change according to natural development and past experiences); and 4) Mentality (mediating experiential phenomena). He considered these four aspects or properties to be necessary for the complete diagnosis of an ego state.

If we transfer these properties to ego states, as Berne seems to do, we can say in summary that they: 1) give rise to distinct, organized behaviors; 2) are responsive to social situations; 3) are influenced by natural development and past experiences; and 4) mediate between social contexts and internal, phenomenological experiences.

When Berne (1961) observed and described the ego states from a functional point of view, he referred implicitly to **the affective and power dimensions** that would later be made explicit by Scilligo. For example, the adapted Child is “under the dominance of the Parental influence” (p. 77). In other words, the person takes away power from her/himself in relation to an important other, perhaps with a corresponding negative or positive emotion. The natural or free Child shows “autonomous forms of behavior such as rebelliousness or self-indulgence” (p. 78), which means that the person gives power or freedom to self in a hateful or loving way. On the other side of this relational dynamic, the prejudicial Parent can manifest itself behaviourally “as a set of seemingly arbitrary non-rational attitudes with attitudes or parameters, usually prohibitive in nature” (p. 76), which is to say, controlling of the other in a relatively hateful or loving manner. The more nurturing Parent, on the other hand, is “often manifested as *sympathy* for another individual” (p. 76), again with a corresponding negative or positive emotion. We will

elaborate these affective and power dimensions and their significance later in this paper.

To understand the ego states fully, however, these behavioural and relational aspects must also be considered in light of their origin or history and the learning processes of the individual. So though we can describe ego states as processes according to precise dimensions, we cannot change them with only behavioural techniques. We must also take into account **the developmental, intrapsychic and psychodynamic aspects** that are relevant for the individual. In that sense, the richness of transactional analysis as a psychodynamic model is essential when we want to reorganize the ego-state configuration for our clients.

Novey (1993, 1998) contends that in transactional analysis there are **two distinct ego states models**—the “three ego states model” and the “integrated Adult model”. The former argues that personality is made up of the Parent, Adult, and Child ego states, each of which can change throughout life, can be in contact with reality, and can be used in the “here and now”. Each ego state has memories and knowledge that can inspire both constructive and destructive behaviors. The integrated model, on the other hand, claims that only the Adult ego state is in contact with the “here and now” enough to promote constructive behaviour. The Parent and Child are outcomes of defensive processes, namely introjection and fixation, so are associated with internal experiences and behaviors that are not congruent with present reality. Tudor’s theory of the Integrating Adult (Tudor, 2003) further develops this perspective. According to Novey (1993, 1998), Berne shows some ambivalence about the nature of Child and Parent ego states, while consistently presenting the Adult ego state as the more developmentally-advanced schema.

In our explication of Scilligo’s theory—which is actually closer to the earlier “three ego states model”—we will show three major changes:

- The dichotomy between structure and function is resolved by defining ego states as active processes.
- The affective and power dimensions are made explicit: the affective dimensions of ego states as a continuum between hate and love, and the power dimensions as a continuum between freedom and control.
- The level of description and the level of explanation are clarified. That is, Scilligo described the ego states according to the basic affective and power dimensions implicit in Berne. But he explained them according to attachment and cognitive schema theories. We will also show how a developmental dimension is integrated into Scilligo’s definitions.

Scilligo’s Ego States model

We will now briefly explain the basics of Scilligo’s theory. According to Scilligo, “ego states are schemas and working models made of constraint networks,

typically correlated, that define each specific ego state type. For example there are three types of constraints that involve creativity, normativity and reality analysis and description. In transactional analysis, those correlated networks have been called Child, Parent and Adult.” (Scilligo, 2009, p.62).

Defining the ego states as “schemas and working models”, Scilligo is actually connecting to Berne’s definition (Berne, 1966) and enriching that concept according to:

- The cognitive theories on “schemas” (see for example the *person schema* concept in Horowitz (1991) and the *internal working model* in Bowlby (1980).
- The Parallel Distributed Processes theory (Rumelhart, McClelland & the PDP Research Group, 1986). This theory strongly influences the ego states model, insofar as we can affirm that nothing is “stored” in memory, there is not a library of ready-made schemas, “rather what is stored are the connection strengths between units that allow these patterns to be recreated” (Rumelhart et al, 1986, p.31). In this sense, the traditional distinction between structure (what is stable or “fixated”) and function (what varies) becomes obsolete because everything varies and is continually re-created in the dynamic interaction between the individual and her (internal/external) environment. So, ego states are not “things” but processes which continuously evolve during life (Tosi, 2010).
- Dimensional definitions of ego states: the names of Child, Parent and Adult are given to those correlated networks that have specific features linked to three genetic givens:
- existence - the capacity to approach pleasurable situations and to avoid painful ones is an initial natural affective competency which may represent the Genetic Child (C)
- adaptation - the capacity to respond actively or passively to stimuli of the internal or external environment that may be dangerous for the child’s adaptation may be related to the Genetic Adult (A)
- survival - the capacity to relate to people and influence them, to exert power on them or to limit their influencing power may be called Genetic Parent (P).

A fourth dimension, the developmental dimension, takes into account the processes of biological and psychological growth from the birth to the death of an individual.

Child, Adult, Parent are the names given to prototypical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking with reference to the affiliation, interdependence and developmental dimensions, which can be manifested at interpersonal and intrapsychic levels. All three ego states are always present and each of them may be more prominent in different stages or contexts in life.

As we have underlined, Berne was defining functional ego states implicitly giving them affective and power

dimensions. Scilligo further develops this perspective and adopts Benjamin’s Structural Analysis of Social Behaviour (SASB), (Benjamin, 1974, 1996, 2003) to observe and describe ego states according to **specific criteria** which allow us to do empirical research and make direct clinical interventions. Benjamin describes interpersonal and intrapsychic behaviour by three dimensions:

- *Focus* can be interpersonal or intrapsychic (in Scilligo’s the interpersonal behaviour is represented on the surfaces called *Initiator* and *Responder*, the intrapsychic behaviour is on the surface called *Self*)
- *Affiliation* describes the affectivity of the action on a continuum from hate to love
- *Interdependence* describes power in the action on a continuum from giving power to taking power away in the relationship with other and self.

Crossing the two dimensions of Affiliation and Interdependence, we distinguish four categories (or quadrants) of relationships and four types of ego states on interpersonal and intrapsychic levels: Free, Protective, Critical, and Rebellious ego states. In each category Parent, Adult, and Child are also distinguished and represent the developmental dimension, as it will be explained.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate how Scilligo represents ego states on the basis of the mentioned theories and scientific choices.

Figures 1 and 2 represent the two surfaces related to the roles of Initiator and Responder: the Initiator undertakes *transitive* actions (for example: the mother helps the child to do his homework in a friendly way) while the Responder undertakes *intransitive* actions (the child learns to write feeling competent). It is also possible to note that the four quadrants can give rise to complementary behaviours.

Figure 3 shows the Self ego states: this represents the person in all her potential manifestations which represent internalizations of meaningful conscious and unconscious relational processes (the child is confident at school).

Let’s consider a simple example and analyze it using a decision tree.

Michael says to Georgia: “You are so good the way you are!” - Georgia gets closer to Michael and smiles.

In this example, we can easily recognize an unconditional stroke given by M. to G., a complementary response by G. and an intimate exchange between two free Child ego states, provided that the transaction does not present an ulterior incongruent level.

The same transaction, analyzed with the social-cognitive ego states model through the decision tree in Figure 4, shows something slightly different.

M. as Initiator of a transitive action is considered as one who gives or takes out power from G. in a loving or hateful way. In this case he does give power to G. in a

Figure 1: The Initiator Surface
(Scilligo, 2006, pg. 168)

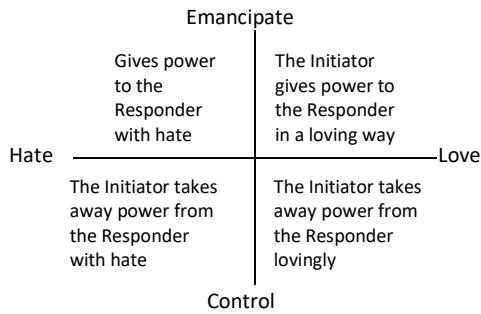


Figure 2: The Responder Surface
(Scilligo, 2006, pg. 168)

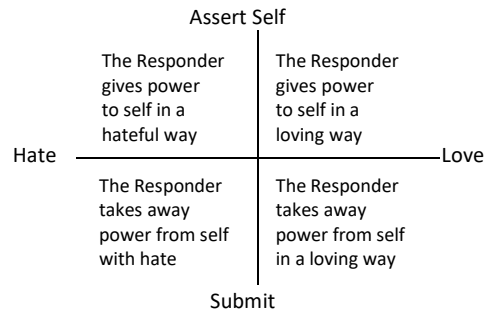


Figure 3: The Self Surface (Scilligo, 2006, pg. 180)

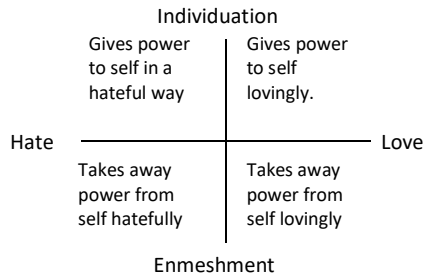
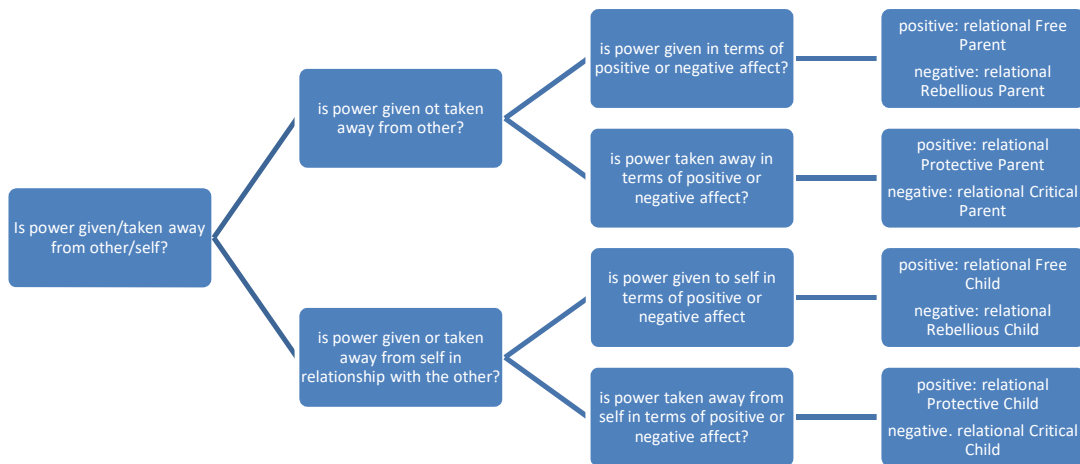


Figure 4 A decision tree to identify the Relational Ego States on the surfaces and within the quadrants



loving way and so, from a *process* and *relational* point of view, he “represents” a prototypical Parent who is acceptant and warm. G.’s response is complementary insofar as Respondent she gives power to herself in a loving way and manifests herself in a joyful approach. G. is behaving as a prototypical Child. On a more analytic

level M. and G are both in their Child ego states because their behaviour, characterized by pure friendly affectivity, is developmentally typical of a child. Also, we can observe that they are creating a safe attachment – which is shown on the developmental ego states diagram, as we will explain later. Normally the persons

continuously change the role of Initiator and Responder very quickly and activate a broad range of ego states. However, *some* people are typically more Initiators or Responders and people differ much in the specific ego states profiles activated. From a clinical point of view the observations of the therapist-client dyad interpersonal behaviour can be very subtle and orient the interventions.

The Developmental Dimension in the Social Cognitive Model of Ego States

We will now focus on how a developmental dimension is adopted by Scilligo to complete the definition of ego states and to explain their development in time. Mahler (1968) following the observation of the psychological development of children, has created eight developmental categories or stages. Benjamin (1979) has used them in the SASB model as developmental standards to order behaviours within the four quadrants in relation to psychological development. Starting from the lowest level of development and progressing towards higher levels, Benjamin has listed the eight stages as follows (in brackets you read the name chosen to indicate the stage):

1. approach – avoidance (exploration)
2. need fulfilment (orientation)
3. attachment (attachment)
4. logic, communication (symbolization)
5. attention to self-development (reflection)
6. balance in relationship (empathy)
7. intimacy-distance (interdependence)
8. identity (identity)

Using factor analysis, Scilligo (2009) correlated the first three of Mahler’s developmental stages to the Child ego state, or Developmental Child: 1) Approach - Avoidance (also described as exploration); 2) Need Fulfilment (which Scilligo spoke of in terms of orientation); and 3) Attachment. The next three stages were correlated with the Developmental Adult: Logic, Communication (the process of symbolization); 5) Attention to Self-Development (which includes reflection); and 6) Balance in Relationship (most saliently characterized by empathy). The last two stages were correlated with the Developmental Parent: 7) Intimacy-Distance (which can be thought of as interdependence); and 8) Identity.

So, in each quadrant we have three developmental ego states described according to the mentioned stages. With these twelve Developmental Ego States, we are now in a position to show a more complete representation of the Self surface, which might be called the Integrated Self, as shown in Figure 5.

The twelve Developmental Ego States are emotional, cognitive and behavioural schemas that correlate with the psychological growth of the structural and functional phenomena that transactional analysis calls the Parent, Adult, and Child. As such, these twelve schemas can be mapped onto the three stacked circles of the traditional ego states diagram (see Figure 6), in which each of the traditional ego states manifests itself according to one

of four prototypical schemas: rebellious, free, protective, or critical.

Figure 5: The 12 Developmental Ego States of the Integrated Self

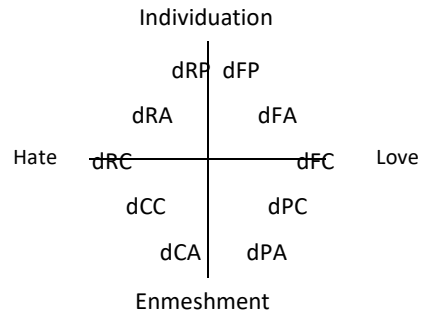
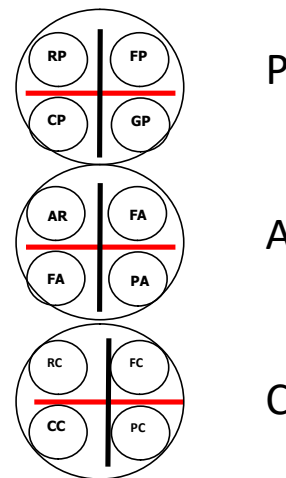


Figure 6: The three ego states



The child is born possessing potential prototypical ego states which, as time goes by and interpersonal experiences increase, are enriched by the developmental ego states, which are the potential foundation of all ego state expressions in dealing with self and the relational situations.

If ego states are looked at in this way then the ego states are the result of the interaction between genetic potentialities, socio-cultural programming along the course of life and self-programming of the person using abstractive competencies of higher order. Much programming during the first years of life is tacit, not accessible to consciousness, and much conscious programming becomes automatic and outside of awareness through its repeated activation (Scilligo, 2009, 2011). If we go back and read what Berne (1961) wrote about the properties of the ego states/psychic organs maybe we are not so far from him.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the basics of the social cognitive model of ego states elaborated by Scilligo and his co-workers in the Laboratory for the Research on the Self and the Identity (LARSi), highlighting its theoretical foundations and its features which make it suitable for research work.

Berne's descriptive definitions of ego states (the Parent acts like a parent, the Child like a child, the Adult like an adult) are simple and intuitive but imprecise for research work. Scilligo's definitions are more precise and less flexible but allow research work and the creation of standards (for example ego states profiles). Moreover the theories which explain the model offer the chance to dialogue with other theoretical models and the precise criteria used to define the ego states allow more congruence among different observers. Scilligo's model is also useful in the clinical work for different reasons: it can be used for a single case research and it gives a quick understanding of the main relational processes activated by the person.

The contributions of this model include the overcoming of the structure/function frame of reference, the contextual ways in which ego states are defined having the prototypes as reference, the new way of considering the Adult which, as the Child and the Parent is characterized by different nuances of affectivity and activity is the central place given to the developing human relationships for the shaping of the personality.

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