The Ego State Timeline Model

Editor's Note

Abstract

The author presents another way to think about personality adaptations and the communication process based on a framework drawn from neurolinguistic programming about how we characterise chronological time in the space around us. It presents a model in which ego states might be diagnosed and worked with in terms of whether they are considered as in the past, the current or the future.

Keywords

Introduction

Transactional analysis (TA) is a theoretical approach that is relatively consistent and transparent. The simple language and the division of theory into specific areas means that it can be used both to work on change and to describe other theoretical approaches in order to better understand them. It also happens that within TA there are borrowings from other theoretical areas. One example of such an approach is the concept of personality adaptation, initiated by Paul Ware (1983). This concept presents six dominant personality disorders described in DSM III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), which can be described in a model way on a continuum: activity-passivity, community- disconnection, haste-patience in action (Joines and Stewart, 2002). Ware also points out that each person has a dominant

tendency to invest energy in a specific behaviour, thinking or feeling, which is something that opens us to contact so we willingly enter into communication if our open door is used. Another important consideration is our target door and trap door; where we need to move to and the way in which we might become trapped.

The concept of personality adaptation can be considered in terms of neuro linguistic programming (NLP), such that the doors can be compared to the preferred sensory representation systems of auditory, visual, and feeling. The doors can also be linked to the dominant ego state in that thinking in terms of knowledge and cognitive judgments might be Parent, behaviour as specific actions or practice might be Adult, and feelings or experiencing emotions might be Child.

The concept of personality adaptation is intended to help in working with the client: "by knowing a person's personality adaptation, we also get a hint on how best to establish and maintain contact with them. To do this, we make a methodical choice in what order to address a person's three contact fields – thinking, feeling, or behaviour" (Stewart and Joines, 2016, p. 215). Here another problem arises, because we introduce a whole range of new concepts, not necessarily the same as the terminology of TA, which may limit the declared effectiveness of the concept. The starting point of the concept of personality adaptation (in DSM III) were analytically understood types of disorders of obsessive-compulsive, paranoid, schizoid, passive-aggressive, histrionic and antisocial. Getting to know personality adaptations in practice means that you need to quickly diagnose the person you are working with. If we fail to do so, we can only rely on intuition or trial and error. One can also ask why six and not more adaptations (White, 2004).

This study is an attempt to present a different version of personality adaptation using the classical TA language. Assuming that it is not always possible to quickly diagnose the person we work with, a work model based on the analysis of the current situation

would be useful, which would also allow us to plan our work and systematically invite change. What we can use for analysis is the construction of a message, which should reflect the structure of a person's personality and way of functioning. It is an attempt at an integrative approach, combining different points of view and different theories from the point of view of TA theory. Various ways of working with clients will be used as examples. To sum up, the area of analysis will be the way of building change from the perspective of conscious action towards oneself or other people in the communication process.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of interpersonal communication; it is the basis of social life, socialisation and the functioning of society. In TA, the communication component is strongly exposed in transaction analysis or time structuring. It remains an open question whether communication is a factor that constantly and actively constructs reality, and to what extent it is already formed by people. Jessie Delia's research (as described by Griffin, 2003) shows that people with cognitive complexity achieve better career outcomes; similar descriptions can be found in Basil Bernstein's (2000) description of linguistic codes. We cannot omit the research on communication of Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas and Jackson (1967), who, together with co-researchers, created an interactive concept of communication that explained the emergence of mental disorders as a result of disorders in the communication process. These concepts allow us to look at the process of communication not only as an exchange of information, but as a process of creating a specific social reality. Communication in this area will be related to the process of change, and it will be indicated how modifying the communication process can contribute to change and personal development. By changing, we change the way we communicate, and by changing the way we communicate, we change internally. This topic will be expanded on later in the text.

On the one hand, personal change is an element of socialisation and something that is natural and simple for a person, but on the other hand, it is a huge problem when we reach the limit of our abilities, e.g. not being able to lose excess weight or eliminate a dysfunctional habit. It is difficult to determine which model of work will be the most effective then, and in a wide range of theoretical approaches it is difficult to determine the only right one. It seems that a reasonable decision, like in other areas of life, is that each of us will need slightly different stimuli to act. It is also a good idea to combine different approaches, of course in an eclectic rather than chaotic way. TA provides a theoretical language that allows such a process to be carried out efficiently.

In TA, the human being is seen as a system striving for internal autonomy, consisting of a specific structure, spread over time and actively reacting with the environment. This is due to the key elements of the theory and the basic philosophy, which is based on the assumption that: people are OK, able to think, decide about their destiny and can change it, which takes place in the process of communication and making specific decisions. The key elements of TA discussed in this study are the ones that define the process of assigning meanings and determine the effectiveness of certain modes of action, and I will discuss them briefly.

Personality structure – in TA, it is assumed that we have three more or less dependent states of self, the so-called PAC model: I-Parent, I-Adult and I-Child. This means that in the process of change, each of our states of self requires separate signals, a separate language, and that these ego states communicating with each other can support or block a particular change. On the one hand, this opens the way to personalisation of the operation and increases the effectiveness, but it also complicates the theoretical description. The dynamics of the 'I' states make us strive for balance and autonomy, and, at some point in our lives, one of the ego states becomes our inner leader and sets the tone for our actions. Currently, in most TA literature it is shown that the correct direction of development is the development of the Adult state. Adult autonomy requires awareness, spontaneity, and the ability to be intimate and is realised, among other things, in the process of intrapsychic communication of individual ego states. The problem can be both excessive connectivity between the states i.e. contamination, and the lack of contact, i.e. too rigid a boundary between the states. An analogy can be made here with the structure of systems and boundaries in the system, as their flexibility determines the functionality of the whole (Ludewig, 1995).

Transactions, strokes and time structuring. The PAC model leads to the breakdown of interpersonal relationships at the level of different ego states. In addition to communicating with ourselves, we communicate with the environment, but always from the level of one of the ego states. In the process of change, this is particularly important, as it is necessary to adapt the language and methods of action to the state with which we communicate. The natural tendency of people is to self-define; the eternal question is "Who am I and where am I going?". We hunger for signals that are conducive to this self-definition, i.e. signs of recognition or strokes. We see ourselves in a certain social mirror and define ourselves based on the reflection in others. Hunger for stimuli sometimes leads to a situation

where we prefer negative signs of recognition to their absence; the child prefers to be punished rather than ignored, and this of course also applies to adults. In the process of change, this means that it is often necessary to modify one's self-definitions, especially those that are destructive to our functioning. This is a pretty big threat to our internal cohesion, and not everyone is ready to face it. In order for a new self to come into being, something has to happen to the old. Kazimierz Dąbrowski's (1996; Limont, 2011) theory of positive disintegration describes this process quite well. The choice of certain signs of recognition as a habit leads to a certain structuring of time; we enter into certain habitual cycles of communication which, according to our experience, will provide us with what we need. In the case of intimacy, it will be something developmental, and in the case of, for example, psychological games, something that reinforces the dysfunction. The result of the dominant structuring of time is the adoption of a specific attitude to life, which is perceived as between the feeling of OK and the feeling of being not OK, of oneself and of others. This is another element that requires attention in the change process.

A life script is a specific life scenario that we adopt in childhood based on behaviours of our parents. A child, who is not yet an autonomous being, accepts as facts the messages they receive in the course of their upbringing. Sometimes parents do not realise that they are programming their child and do not care too much about what they say in front of them, and sometimes they consciously communicate their expectations. Regardless of the motives, we are presented with a certain life script that has an introduction, development and end that is not always happy. We usually reinforce the received script according to the principle of a self-fulfilling prophecy, so we unconsciously choose actions that confirm our role in life. Awareness of the script gives us the ability to change, whereas lack of awareness explains the recurrent problems of life and the inability to make a change. Role and place in the script introduces a new variable, which is location in time. It can be defined as the contamination between the present and the past or future. This topic is better developed in the theoretical area of NLP (O'Connor and Seymour, 2013). From the point of view of change, we have to deal with both the situation when we are not able to distinguish, for example, the past from the present, and the situation when we are blocked at a certain time. The assumption of the existence of a life script allows for the introduction of a new variable to the description of personality, i.e. location in time. Seeing yourself in the perspective of time allows you to realistically plan your actions, including internal change.

To sum up, when facing the challenge of change or working with a client, we should take into account the map of the internal structure of the personality, the level of permeability of boundaries between the ego states, the degree of development of individual states and which ego state is introductory and which dominates during the usual activities (structuring of time). It seems necessary to define the contamination and barriers between the states, both within the structure of the self and in the time perspective. The formula should be applied depending on the social structure in which we function. There may also be barriers to communication or symbiotic relationships with broken boundaries in our relationships with others. This allows us to create certain communication models that are useful in building change at both the intrapsychic and interpersonal levels.

I will present here only selected descriptions of the communicative process in the following cases: stiffening of boundaries in the areas of personality, relationships and time, as well as contamination in the areas of personality, relationships and time. A well-functioning person is in touch with his or her past, anticipates the future, has access to his or her states, which he or she can smoothly switch. We can illustrate such an arrangement as a diagram – Figure 1. The dotted line here is meant to signify the fluid boundaries between the states, which allows information to flow between states and easily move from the one state to another. If we have problems with acting, making changes, we can assume that our person does not have a fully correct structure. Some ego states may be separated from others, some may overlap (lack of boundaries, contamination). Examples of irregularities can be seen in Figure 2.

A functional personality communicates correctly both at the intra- and interpersonal stages. Therapeutic experiences allow us to assume that change can begin at the stage of the person and manifest itself in the process of communication, and vice versa. When we change the process of communication, we change internally. This phenomenon is presented in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, (Sapir, 1978) of how the language used influences the way of thinking. It is both about the way of speaking within one language and the phenomenon of differences in personality disorders in multilingual individuals. The concept was revised by Nairan Ramirez-Esparza (Ramirez-Esparza and Garcia-Sierra, 2006; Ramirez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martinez, Potter and Pennebaker, 2014; Garcia-Sierra, Ramirez-Esparza, Silva-Pereyra, Siard and Champlin, 2012) when bilingual students were asked to complete personality tests twice in two languages.

Past	Present	Future
P	**P**	**P**
A	**A**	**A**
C	**C**	**C**

Figure 1. The functional self, the flexible boundaries between the ego states, the awareness of self, the awareness of the location in time.

Past	Present	Future
P - separated	**P** - contaminated	**P**- barrier present/future
A	**A**	**A**
C - blocked	**C** – contaminated present/future	

Figure 2. Examples of selected dysfunctions

The results of the test performed in English showed the subjects as more extroverted, agreeable and open-minded than when they used Spanish. A similar experiment was conducted by Boaz Keysar (Hayakawa, Tannenbaum, Costa, Corey and Keysar, 2017; Liberman, Woodward, Kaysar and Kinzler, 2016) when subjects were asked to make a hypothetical decision about sacrificing someone else's life in an emergency. The problem was presented to different groups in the mother tongue and in the learned language. It turned out that people considering a problem in a foreign language were more likely to make a decision that meant the death of another person. If we assume that language not only diagnoses our personality, but can change it through appropriate use, let us see how TA can be useful in this regard.

According to Bernstein (2000), a properly communicating person communicates at different levels of abstraction, uses subtle verbal distinctions, is convinced of their own views and grants others the right to their point of view, easily uses abstract material, captures events from a distant perspective, and is able to postpone gratification. According to Delia (Griffin, 2003), a properly communicating person has cognitive complexity, i.e. they are able to perceive many different aspects of reality and realize knowledge at the same time as different purposes in the communication process. According to Watzlawick et al (1967), proper communication is logically coherent, devoid of paradoxes. By creating communicative axioms, they emphasize that we cannot avoid communication, we should be aware of the content and relational aspect, be aware that assigning meanings is a rather random process, separate symmetrical roles from complementary ones, and be aware of the non-verbal aspects of our communication. All the presented approaches draw attention to the awareness of the spread of reality in time and show the importance of many different perspectives and ways of seeing reality.

Limitations in time, perspective or number of points of view, in turn, translate into less effectiveness in action and less autonomy. Going back to Figure 1, we can imagine our consciousness as a queen on a chessboard that can move to any square in any way. For example, the bishop has a limited ability due to the nature of the move, and the pawn moves only in one direction, square by square. The specificity of communication can be easily seen in the following example describing constructivist cognitive complexity (Griffin, 2003). Three different ways of reacting to a violation of the norm of behaviour between a boss and an employee:

- *Expressive communication:* "You're the most disgusting guy I've ever had the misfortune to meet. You have sticky paws and sticky thoughts. How did you even think I could have an affair with you? It makes me sick just thinking about it..."

- *Conventional communication:* "Please absolutely do not count on any affair with me. And if you thought of firing me. I will certainly not remain silent about what happened here. This behaviour in the workplace is not right. And what's more, you are still married. Give me peace of mind... "

- *Cognitively complex (rhetorical) approach*: "So far, our cooperation has been excellent and I would like to see it continue to be so. That's why we should talk. You are a smart and sensible guy. I would like to see you not only as a boss, but also as a friend. You have probably had too many stressful responsibilities lately. Otherwise, it would be difficult for me to understand why you told me what I have just heard. I know what it means to work under pressure. You can go crazy from all of this. I think it would probably be good for you to take a short vacation..." (141-143) (bullets added).

We can see that expressive communication takes place from the position of the Child ego state, there is indignation at mistreatment, the emotional reaction takes place here and now, regardless of the moral side of the issue, it does not really solve the problem.

In the statement, it can be seen that there is no reference to the past, a blockade against the future. Conventional communication takes place from the position of the Parent ego state. We have a reference to the norms of behaviours, there is a threat of using legal aid, so the response refers to possible future behaviour.

In the case of rhetorical communication, there are more elements. We see a reference to the past and a wish for the future and a plan of action (conversation). We can see an analysis from the Adult state, which concerns the explanation of the behaviour of the other person (an attempt to understand), we see an exploration of the states of Parent and Child manifested in relation to two social roles, the boss (norm) and the friend (emotions). The reaction is more empathetic than defensive, but despite this, there is an assertive defence of one's boundaries. On the basis of the diagrams presented above, you can try to create graphics representing individual reactions, as shown in Figure 3.

Unlike in personality adaptations, there are a number of combinations of the pattern of communication. Without the need for additional nomenclature, we can attempt to determine from which ego state the communication is initiated, and which ego state is touched during the communication. Similarly, to the description of the partnership style of communication, Lidia Grzesiuk (1994) referred to the determination of the extent to which communication begins, maintains and ends together (in partnership, taking into account the perspective of both parties). It is worth noting that the language of change requires what Delia calls sophisticated communication (cognitively complex, allowing you to achieve multiple goals at the same time). In TA terminology, the language of change will be a process in which we explore different ego states, similar to the development and integration of personality.

An example of such an approach is Marshall B. Rosenberg's (2016) Nonviolent Communication (NVC). In this model, communication is broken down into four stages: perception (as objective as possible); feelings (important to distinguish between feelings and judgments); needs (which result from feelings); and requests (to the other person to do something to satisfy our need). This model quite schematically allows us to explore the ego states in each of the stages of communication. The same applies to motivational dialogue. Recommended open-ended questions in William Miller's (Miller and Rollnick, 2014) study are: "How does the problem affect your daily life? How different a life you would like to lead in five years' time? Where do you think the path you are now taking is going? What do you think are the five most valuable things in your life?" (p.97). The TA theory allows us to explain quite precisely the mechanism of operation styles of communication appearing in other concepts.

Adopting the model of personality adaptations requires a lot of experience when making the first diagnosis, although the model allows, at least in theory, to improve work with the client. A small mistake can cause us to go the wrong way. On the other hand, the lack of diagnosis makes it practically impossible to apply this concept of work. The communication model, presented in a nutshell, allows you to build the area of work and the direction of change on an ongoing basis. The starting point is to identify which ego states in the client's statements dominates at the beginning of the utterance, and into which the next state passes or in which it has become stuck. Indicators can be, as in the concept of personality adaptation, statements related to the statements of what we think, feel, do, plan, remember, etc. The direction of the statement seems to be important. A different path is followed by someone who first feels something and then plans to act about it. The initiating state is then the Child, and then the Adult comes to the fore. This is where the action for the future will come in. If we hear that the client is going to do something (Adult) because he felt somehow (Child), we guess that the course of action was initiated in the past and there is no certainty that it will turn into practical actions.

Expressive communication   *Conventional communication*   *Rhetorical communication*

Figure 3: Examples of reaction diagrams

If we hear that the client is going to do something (Adult) because he felt somehow (Child), we guess that the course of action was initiated in the past and there is no cer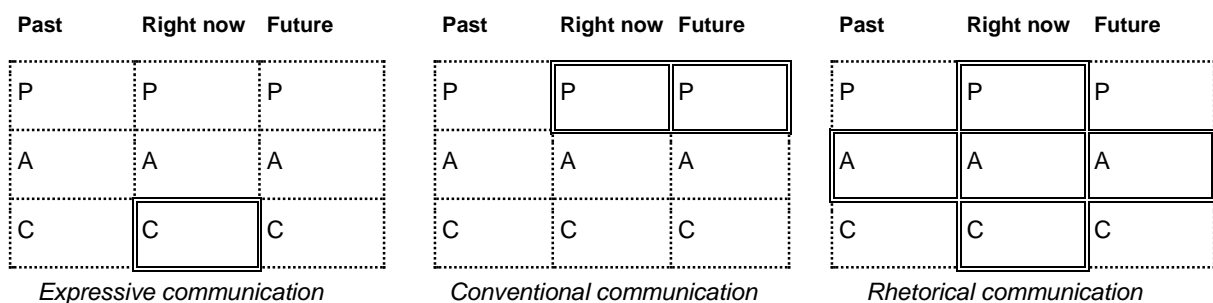tainty that it will turn into practical actions. A similar pattern occurs in the case of ineffective work on the diet. I'm going to go on a diet (future) because I've neglected myself too much (past). This direction, as practice shows, is not very effective, there is no transition to the future, there is no link in the present, which looks like we are not doing anything about the diet for now. Finding indicators of such a location in time in the statement leads us to fill the gap and ask what the customer is doing now, today. This can fill the empty space and allow for greater efficiency in operation. After all, all ineffective diets start 'from tomorrow', where tomorrow is usually a permanent state. For example, if the statements refer only to the here and now, e.g. to emotions, it is difficult to expect action and change. We can initiate the transition to the Adult state with a question such as "What are you going to do with this?" and into the future, "What are you going to do with it next?" If only the future tense appears in the statement, e.g. "I'll show him, he'll remember me!" we expect impulsive action or inaction, a statement suspended in the future may never go beyond constant shifting. Questions we can ask include "How do you feel about it now? What can you do about it now?" or anchor the client in the past with questions such as "What do you think is the cause of this situation? Where did it come from? How is it developing?". We can imagine our behaviour as a chessboard (Figures 1 and 2) on which we move to fill in the missing squares. If it is difficult to write down the client's initial statement, we can always 'fill in the fields' quite mechanically, asking about thoughts, actions and feelings, past, present and future. Sooner or later, the client will indicate in their behaviour a tendency to stick to a certain field, which will allow them to make an initial diagnosis and determine the direction of work.

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