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Ego States: Theory and Application

by Elana Leigh



Elana has trained and supervised nationally and internationally across a range of cultures for the past 26 years. Her specialty is long term training where the task is to take trainees through the rigorous journey of becoming an ethical professional. Having been trained as an integrative psychotherapist, her passion lies in integration and diversity in both theory and application. Elana is actively involved both nationally and internationally on bodies which maintain and advance training standards in the field of psychotherapy. She currently works as a psychotherapist in private practice, supervisor and trainer in Sydney.

Elana opened the evening with the question “Who is familiar with Ego States?”, many attendees responded positively.

The founder of Transactional Analysis (TA) is Eric Berne. He challenged the concept of power issues in relationships, including therapeutic relationship, such as in psychoanalysis, from which TA was developed.

Berne posits that a client’s Ego states (Child, Parent and Adult), which often change during client-therapist interaction, need to be slowly and consciously addressed in the therapy room, making the client aware of the position from which he/she responds or reacts to the therapist, as he/she is likely to respond in a similar manner to others in his/her life. On the other hand, the therapist searches for congruence in him/herself, related to philosophy, theory and practice, ie. elements that inform our practice. In the process, the therapist uses a part of the Self (awareness of the Ego state) to communicate congruently with the client’s own Ego state.

The most important thing is to have the knowledge to be able to diagnose in which Ego state the client is at a given time, and using therapist’s self-awareness of his/her own Ego state at that time that is responding to the client. In Elana’s skilful use, these factors would help to understand what is going on in the consulting room and facilitate a change (conscious and unconscious processes) through the engagement with the other. The centrality of relationship embraces the experience with two sets of subjectivity (client’s and therapist’s). At the same time it is important to be in the position of uncertainty and curiosity, which means being “intuitively open”.

Clients want to go away from a therapy session with something from the therapeutic relationship, and understanding the client’s Ego states can help to understand the client’s critical moments. Ego states is a coherent system of thinking, feeling and behaving. Hence, the therapist would often check with the client about their interaction, such as “How do you feel standing in front of me?”

Parent Ego State behaviour relates to the past, introduced to us by our parents as beliefs and values. Adult Ego state relates to here and now who we are. Child Ego state can show insecurity and lack of confidence.

As we all shift from one Ego state to another in different situations, relationships and emotional states, it is important for the therapist to be aware Who is in the room at any given moment and to connect with the client on their level to facilitate the change. How do we diagnose the Ego states? There are several main aspects to be examined:

- a/ Behavioural aspects, as observed become an open hypothesis;
- b/ Social aspects, to be explored by bringing client's attention to his/her feelings;
- c/ Historical aspects, by exploring the client's awareness of beliefs and values;
- d/ Phenomenological aspects, as special to an individual.

During Elana's presentation we were prompted to explore our own philosophy, beliefs and values while engaging in several experimental exercises. Firstly, we explored in dyads which beliefs and values could influence our relationship with clients. Then we were invited to discuss, again in dyads, a client with whom we were stuck. A conscious diagnosis of the client's Ego state and our own Ego state with which we interact with the client, would be helpful in understanding the impact we may have in the 'stuckness'. In fact, it is also helpful to understand the impact the client's Ego state has on us and what triggers the way we respond (from our Ego state).

Elana's presentation offered us another tool in understanding aspects that contribute to development of various Ego states. This means that diagnosing both the client's and our own Ego state in a given moment of our interaction can assist us in having a more connected therapeutic relationship.

(There were no slides or handouts or references, as above comes from Elana's therapeutic knowledge).