A Compilation of Core Concepts

Claude Steiner, with Leonard Campos, Pearl Drego, Vann Joines, Susanna Ligabue, Gloria Noriega, Denton Roberts, and Emilio Said

Abstract
This set of transactional analysis core concepts was developed in 1999 by the members of the task force on transactional analysis core concepts, which later became an ITAA development committee task force. The group was chaired by Claude Steiner and included Leonard Campos (USA), Pearl Drego (India), Vann Joines (USA), Susanna Ligabue (Italy), Gloria Noriega (Mexico), Denton Roberts (USA), and Emilio Said (Mexico).

How the 1999 Core Concepts Were Assembled
The examination of the core concepts and competencies of transactional analysis began during Gloria Noriega's presidency in 1996-1997, and the process was continued by George Kohlrieser during his presidency from 1998-2000. He appointed me chair of the task force to define core transactional analysis concepts. At first, it was not clear what the difference between core concepts (a recently developed notion) had in common with the venerable notion of canon, which was advanced by Eric Berne in The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups. It quickly became clear, however, that it was not our task to define the canon, but rather to gather, in a crisp, brief, yet sophisticated statement—an understanding about what transactional analysis is as it existed in the hearts and minds of the ITAA membership at that time.

This implied that the core concepts would not include all of Berne's ideas, nor necessarily all the ideas that have been added to the body of knowledge that is transactional analysis today. It was to be a common denominator of ideas—that is, those ideas with which the majority of ITAA members appear to be comfortable. In short, it was to represent a consensus about transactional analysis with which most members of our organization could agree.

The purpose as we saw it was to collect in one place a list of concepts and a narrative that weaves them together in a manner that would make transactional analysis understandable to professionals, students, and lay people who are unfamiliar with it and have an interest in acquiring a clear conception of what it, in fact, currently is. We proceeded as follows:

1. Assembling the Task Force. I hand picked a group of knowledgeable, email-capable member veterans from five continents and approached them to join the task force. Eventually, I received agreement from a group of seven.

2. Collecting Candidates for Core Concepts. Starting with an open meeting in Hawaii in 1998, we collected lists of concepts that people considered core, including lists from each task force member and through the Internet.

3. Ranking and Choosing Core Concepts. Every concept of the more than 100 nominated, even if mentioned only once, was listed, and the task force members plus several outsiders were asked to rank the concepts on a scale of 1-5 as to their appropriateness as core concepts. The ratings fell into a binomial distribution so that 56 concepts received clear approval with only a few ambiguities to be resolved. In an ensuing discussion, the task force came to agreement as to what concepts to include in the final narrative.

4. Writing the Narrative. With the core concepts in hand, I proceeded to weave the narrative that related them to each other. This was done in three parts, each part being sent back to task force members and posted to an interested discussion group on the Internet. Every query, objection, and suggestion was read and considered and the large majority incorporated to some extent into the final product. Further
A Compilation of Core Concepts

Transactional analysis is: (1) an easily understandable yet sophisticated psychological theory about people's thinking, feelings, and behavior, and (2) a contemporary and effective system of psychotherapy, education, and organizational and sociocultural analysis and social psychiatry.

Ego States and Transactions

People's interactions are made up of transactions. Any one transaction has two parts: the stimulus and the response. Individual transactions are usually part of a larger set. These transactional sets or sequences can be direct, productive, and healthy, or they can be deviant, wasteful, and unhealthy.

When people interact they do so in one of three different ego states (Figure 1). An ego state is a specific way of thinking, feeling, and behaving, and each ego state has its origin in specific regions of the brain. People can behave from their Parent ego state, their Child ego state, or their Adult ego state. At any one time our actions come from one of these three ego states.

The Child

When we are in the Child ego state we act like the child we once were. We are not just putting on an act; we think, feel, see, hear, and react as a 3- or 5- or 8-year-old child. The ego states are fully experienced states of being, not just roles. When the Child is hateful, loving, impulsive, spontaneous, or playful it is called the Natural Child. When it is thoughtful, creative, or imaginative it is called the Little Professor. When it is fearful, guilty, or ashamed it is called the Adapted Child. The Child has all the feelings: fear, love, anger, joy, sadness, shame, and so on. The Child is often blamed for being the source of people's troubles because it is self-centered, emotional, powerful, and resists the suppression that comes with growing up.

In transactional analysis (TA), the Child is seen as the source of creativity, recreation, and procreation: the only source of renewal in life. The Child can be observed in children for extended periods of time but also in grown-ups in situations in which people have permission to let the Child out, such as at sporting events or parties. The Child will appear for short periods of time in other situations, such as board meetings, classrooms, or certain serious discussions in which it may not be desired at all. In its most undesirable form it completely dominates a person's life, as in the case of persons who are severely emotionally disturbed and whose confused, depressed, crazy, or addicted Child will drive them to virtual self-destruction with out-of-control behavior. The Child may also appear for long periods of time in the form of depression or grief, as in the case of people who have incurred a great loss.

The Parent

The Parent is like a tape recorder. It is a collection of prerecorded, prejudiced, prejudiced...
People will also object: "I am an adult and I have emotions!" and they are right. Being a mature human being or grown-up is not the same as being in the Adult ego state. Little children can be in their Adult, and we can also see where parents are in their Child or Adult and is therefore 25 years behind the times. The Adult computer will produce incorrect answers if the facts are incorrect. This is known as contamination. When a contamination comes from the Parent it is called a prejudice. For instance, when someone assumes that women prefer to follow a man's lead instead of making their own decisions, this is data that comes to the Adult from the Parent; it is a contamination because it is accepted as fact without checking it against reality.

The same unchecked acceptance of information can occur with information fed by the Child, which is referred to as a "delusion." A delusion is usually based on a Child fear or hope that is accepted as reality by the Adult. For instance, when a person is convinced that he or she is being poisoned by the government, this is probably based on his or her Child's fears, which the Adult accepts, rather than on fact. An extremely important process in transactional analysis is decontamination of the Adult.

**Voices in the Head**

As you will recall, the Parent ego state is like a tape recorder full of prejudged, prejudiced, and preprogrammed statements. These "taped" statements can become activated while we are in our Adult or Child and then we can actually hear them as "voices in our heads." The
Parental tapes can feel good or bad depending on which Parent makes them. In other personality theories, the harmful Critical Parent voices are known as the harsh superego, negative self-talk, cognitive traps, low self-esteem, punitive protector, or catastrophic expectations.

The Critical Parent can make put-down statements such as, "You're bad, stupid, ugly, crazy and sick; in short, you're doomed, not OK." The Nurturing Parent loves the Child unconditionally and says things such as, "I love you," "You're a winner," "You're smart," "You're a princess," or "You're beautiful."

The Critical Parent sometimes controls the Child by preventing it from feeling good about itself. If the Child wants to be loved, the Critical Parent says, "You don't deserve it." If the Child wants to give love, the Critical Parent may say, "It isn't wanted." If the Child is angry at an unrewarding job, the Critical Parent may say, "This is the best you can do because you are lazy." If the Child comes up with a new idea that goes against old points of view, the Critical Parent may respond, "You must be crazy to think like that." The Critical Parent can make people feel not OK and force them to do things they do not want to do. To counteract this kind of a Critical Parent, people can learn to develop their Nurturing Parent, Adult, or Natural Child.

By means of an egogram we can show the relative strength of a person's ego states at any one time. This is useful in diagramming the way people change over time, especially how they reduce their Critical Parent and increase their Nurturing Parent, Adult, or Child.

**Transactions: Complementary, Crossed, and Covert**

Transactions occur when any person relates to any other person. Each transaction is made up of a stimulus and a response, and transactions can proceed from the Parent, Adult, or Child of one person to the Parent, Adult, or Child of another person.

**Complementary and Crossed Transactions.**

A complementary transaction involves one ego state in each person. In a crossed transaction (Figure 2) the transactional response is addressed to an ego state different from the one that started the stimulus.

Communication can continue between two people as long as transactions are complementary. Crossed transactions are important because they disrupt communication. This is useful to know because it helps transactional analysts understand how and why communication is disrupted. The rule is: "Whenever a disruption of communication occurs, a crossed transaction caused it." One important kind of crossed transaction is the discount transaction. In it a person, in his or her response, completely disregards the contents of a transactional stimulus. Discounts are not always obvious but are always disruptive to the person receiving them and if repeated can severely disturb the recipient.

Covert transactions occur when people say one thing and mean another. Covert transactions are the basis of games and are especially interesting because they are deceptive. They have a social (overt) and a psychological (covert) level.

It is important to know the difference between the social and covert levels because to understand and predict what people are going to do, the covert level will provide more information than the overt level.
One important reason we say one thing and mean another is that we are generally ashamed of our Child's or Parent's desires and feelings. Nevertheless, we act on these desires and express those feelings while we pretend to be doing otherwise. For instance, we may use smiling sarcasm instead of a direct expression of our anger, or when scared we may counter-attack instead of admitting our fears.

When we want attention or love we often feign indifference, and we have trouble giving or accepting them. In fact, because our lives are so immersed in half-truth and deception, it can happen that we no longer know what it is our Child really wants. We also do not expect people to be completely honest, so we never really know whether we can trust what they say. Transactional analysts encourage people to be honest with one another and with themselves about their wants and feelings rather than to be "crooked" and covert about them. In this manner people can find out what they want, how to ask for it, and, if possible, how to get it.

Strokes

Stroking is the recognition that one person gives to another. Strokes are essential to a person's life. Without them, Berne said, the "spinal cord will shrivel up." It has been shown that a very young child needs actual physical strokes to remain alive. Adults can get by on fewer physical strokes as they learn to exchange verbal strokes: positive strokes, such as praise or expressions of appreciation, or negative strokes, such as negative judgments or put-downs. Therefore, the exchange of strokes is one of the most important things that people do in their daily lives.

Games

The essential aspect of games is that they are crooked or covert exchanges of strokes. A game is a recurring series of covert transactions with a beginning, middle, end, and payoff. The payoff is a hidden advantage that motivates the players to participate.

Transactional analysis became a nationwide fad in the 1960s due to the best-selling success of Eric Berne's (1964) book Games People Play. In this book he assigned engaging names (e.g., "Now I've Got You," "Kick Me," "I'm Only Trying to Help") to different games. For instance, when Jane plays "Why Don't You, Yes But," she asks advice from another but rejects every suggestion so that everyone ends up exasperated. It is the type of conversation that occurs over and over, especially in therapy groups. It is devious and covert: On the social level, it appears to be a conversation between a person in the Adult ego state asking a question from one or more people who are also in their Adult ego states. What makes it a game is that none of the suggestions are really accepted. The reason is that, at the psychological and much more meaningful level, what is really going on is that while Jane may need advice, she needs strokes even more. Because these strokes are being given in a roundabout way, they are not as satisfying as direct strokes would be. This is why the game ends on a note of depressed frustration.

Payoffs

There are a number of payoffs of this game; every game pays off at three different levels.

1. The biological payoff of a game is strokes. Even though games end badly, all the players get a considerable number of strokes—both positive and negative—out of playing them.
2. The social payoff of a game is time structuring. People are able to fill time that otherwise might have been dull and depressing with an exciting activity.
3. The existential payoff of a game is the way in which the game confirms the existential position of each player.

The Existential Position

In the process of developing an identity, people define for themselves, early in life, what the meaning of their life or existence is. Some people decide they are OK and are going to have a good life; but many others decide they are not OK and will fail in some way. That expectation based on a decision of how life will be is their existential position. People can feel OK or not OK about themselves and others so that there are four main existential positions: "I'm OK, You're OK," "I'm Not OK, You're OK," "I'm Not OK, You're Not OK," and finally, "I'm Not OK, You're Not OK."
For instance in the game of “Why Don’t You. Yes But,” Jane’s existential position is that “nothing ever works out” so that every time the game is played, it reinforces that position and justifies further depression.

Games are always played with responsibility and interest by everyone involved in them. To maintain her existential position, Jane will find people who will play the game with her. All the players’ parts in the game are equally important, and they all derive a payoff from it as well. When they participate in the game, they too believe it will end in failure. They want strokes as well but are not surprised when Jane rejects all advice and everyone is depressed or angry as a consequence. This proves that you cannot really help people or that people do not want to be helped and thus justifies their bad feelings as a consequence.

The Stroke Economy

One of the harmful aspects of the Critical Parent is that it has a set of rules that govern the giving and receiving of strokes (e.g., don’t give, ask for, accept, or give yourself strokes). The effect of these rules, called the stroke economy, is that people are prevented from freely stroking each other and taking care of their stroke needs. As a consequence, most human beings live in a state of stroke hunger in which they survive on a deficient diet of strokes—in a manner similar to persons who are starved for food—and spend a great deal of time and effort trying to satisfy their hunger. Positive strokes, sometimes called “warm fuzzles,” such as holding hands or saying “I love you,” give the person receiving them a feeling of being OK. There are also negative strokes, which are painful forms of recognition, such as sarcasm, put-downs, a slap, an insult, or saying “I hate you.” Negative strokes make the person receiving them feel not OK. Still, even though unpleasant, negative strokes are a form of recognition and prevent the “spinal cord from shriveling up.” For this reason, people prefer a situation of negative strokes to a situation without strokes at all. This explains why some people seem to hurt themselves intentionally in their relationships with others. It is not because “they enjoy hurting themselves,” but because they cannot get positive recognition; they then choose painful negative strokes over having no strokes.

People can learn to exchange strokes freely, to open their hearts and give and ask for strokes without shame or embarrassment. Different strokes appeal to different people, and everyone has their special, secret wishes. There are many kinds of positive strokes, including physical strokes and verbal strokes. Physical strokes can be hugs, kisses, holding, caresses, strong or light, sexy or sensual or just friendly, nurturing or slightly teasing, and so on. Verbal strokes can be about a person’s looks, such as his or her face, body, posture, or movements, or about a person’s personality, such as his or her intelligence, loving nature, sensitivity, or courage. In any case, people need and deserve strokes, and if they ask for them, they will usually find someone who has just the strokes they want and who is willing to give them.

Rituals, Pastimes, Games, Intimacy, and Work

There are five ways people can structure their time to get strokes: (1) A ritual is a preset exchange of recognition strokes. (2) A pastime is a preset conversation around a certain subject. Pastimes are most evident at cocktail parties and family get-togethers. Some common pastimes are: weather (hot enough for you?), PTA (pot luck or catered?), sports (how about those Yankees?), drugs (should marijuana be legalized?), or who’s divorcing whom? (musical beds). (3) Games are a repetitive, devious series of transactions intended to elicit strokes. Unfortunately, the strokes obtained in games are mostly negative. A game is a failed method of getting wanted strokes. (4) Intimacy is a direct and powerful exchange of strokes that people crave but seldom attain because the Child is frightened away from it by hurtful experiences. Intimacy is not the same as sex, although it often occurs in sex. Sex, however, can also be a ritual, a pastime, a game, or work. (5) Work is an activity that has a product as its result. Good work results in the exchange of strokes as a side effect.

Intimacy and work are the most satisfying ways of obtaining strokes. Unfortunately, lasting
intimacy is difficult to achieve because people are often emotionally illiterate, and work is often unsatisfying when people work in isolation and do not get praise for their accomplishments. Therefore, people must resort to rituals, games, and pastimes, which are safer, although far less satisfying ways of obtaining strokes. For example, a marriage can be an endless and boring series of rituals, pastimes, and games. Frequently, this is because both partners live on the basis of stroke-depriving life scripts that prevent men from being emotional and intimate and women from being able to ask for and get the love they want.

Degrees
Games can be played in a range of degrees. For instance, the just-cited example of the game “Why Don’t You, Yes But” is the softest (first-degree) version of the game because it is relatively harmless. The hard (third-degree) version of this game might be played by an alcoholic who “Yes, But” every suggestion of the Rescuer until his dying moment. Third-degree games involve tissue damage.

Roles
Different people play different roles in the games they play. When a person is willing to play one of the roles of a game, he or she will often find himself or herself playing the other roles in the game. There are a variety of roles, but the three basic game roles are Persecutor, Rescuer, and Victim. Whole family’s marriages, workplaces, schools, and friendships are often based on these roles. The three roles can be arranged in a triangle to illustrate what happens.

The Drama Triangle
The drama triangle can be illustrated with the addiction game. In the addiction game, the addict playing the role of the Victim of addiction, humiliation, prejudice, medical neglect, and even police brutality seeks and finds a Rescuer. The Rescuer plays the role of trying generously and selflessly to help the addict without making sure that the addict is involved in the process of giving up drug abuse. After a certain amount of frustrating failure, the Rescuer gets angry and switches into the Persecuting role by accusing, insulting, neglecting, or punishing the addict. At this point the addict switches from Victim to Persecutor by counterattacking, insulting, becoming violent, and creating mid­night emergencies. The erstwhile Rescuer is now the Victim in the game. This process of switching goes on endlessly around the drama triangle merry-go-round.

To avoid the drama triangle in psychotherapy, transactional analysts insist on establishing a contract in which the person specifically states what he or she wants to be cured of. This protects both client and therapist: The therapist knows exactly what the person wants, and the person knows what the therapist is going to work on and when therapy is to be completed. In any case, the best way to avoid the drama triangle is to avoid the roles of Rescuer, Per­secutor, or Victim by staying in the Adult ego state.

Scripts
Transactional analysis believe that most people are basically OK and in difficulty only because their parents or other grown-ups and influential young people have exposed them to powerful injunctions and attributions with long­term harmful effects.

Early in their lives, people come to the conclusion that their lives will unfold in a predictable way: short, long, healthy, unhealthy, happy, unhappy, depressed or angry, successful or failed, active or passive. When the conclusion is that life will be bad or self­damaging, this is seen as a life script.

The script matrix is a diagram used to clarify people’s scripts (Figure 3). In it we see two parents and their offspring, and we can diagram the transactional messages—Injunctions and attributions—that caused the young person to abandon his or her original OK position and replace it with a self­damaging not­OK position.

When life is guided by a script, there are always periods in which the person appears to be evading his or her unhappy fate. This seemingly normal period of the script is called the counterscript. The counterscript is active when the person’s unhappy life plan gives way to a happier period. This is, however, only
temporary and invariably collapses, giving way to the original scripting. For an alcoholic, this may be a period of sobriety; for a depressed person with a suicide script, it may be a brief period of happiness that inevitably ends when the script's injunctions take over.

In the script matrix of Joseph, a drug addict, we see that the script injunction "Don't Think, Drink Instead" goes to Joseph's Child from his father's Child. This powerful message influences Joseph's life dramatically as he follows his father's injunction with drugs instead of alcohol. This causes him repeated drug abuse episodes throughout his young life and adulthood. The counterscript message "You should not drink; think instead" motivates him to make repeated but ineffectual efforts to cut down on drug abuse; it goes to Joseph's Parent from his mother and father's Parent.

The script message, "Don't Think, Drink Instead" delivered from Child-to-Child is more influential than the Parent-to-Parent counterscript message to abuse moderately. That is why script messages will usually prevail unless the person changes his or her script. When scripts are not changed, they are passed down the generations, like "hot potatoes," from grown-ups to children in an uninterrupted chain of maladaptive, toxic behavior patterns.

Decisions

In a healthy home environment, parents will give unconditional protection to their children regardless of what they may do. When parents make their protection conditional on children's submission to their injunctions and attributions, children are likely to develop a script. Script decisions are often consciously made in order
to go along with parental injunctions, even though they go against the child’s best interests. At this point the young person trades autonomy for parental protection to avoid punishment and criticism. The decision involved is a switch from an “I’m OK” position to an “I’m not OK” position. It also often involves a decision about whether other people are OK. When people make such decisions, they may need the help of a therapist to discard the script and begin to pursue an autonomous life course—or, as Berne put it, “Close down the show and put a new one on the road.”

As individuals are helped to go back to the early experiences that caused them to make decisions that were necessary for their physical or psychological survival then but that are getting in their way in the present, they can make re-decisions to behave differently in order to have a more fulfilling life in the present.

It is possible to observe a person’s script in brief sequences of behavior called miniscrits, which constantly mimic and reinforce the script. The fact is that everything that goes on in people’s mental and emotional life is reflected in their behavior. That is how by studying people’s transactions, transactional analysts are able to understand the ways of and reasons for people’s behavior and to help them stop playing games, change their scripts, and get the most out of life.

Tragic and Banal Scripts

Some scripts are tragic and some scripts are banal. Tragic scripts are highly dramatic, such as drug addiction, suicide, or “mental illness.” Banal or garden-variety scripts are less dramatic but more common. They are the melodramas of everyday life. They usually affect large subgroups of people, such as men, women, racial groups, or teenagers. People in these subgroups are scripted to live their lives in certain set ways. In the past women were supposed to be emotional, loving homemakers and to have no permission to be logical, strong, or independent; men were to be logical, strong breadwinners, with no permission to be childlike, scared, needy, nurturing, or openly loving. The life course of a banal script may involve, for example, going from bad to worse, never having fun, always being in debt, or taking care of others and neglecting oneself.

Members of certain nationalities or races are supposed to be smart or stupid or honest or devious or good athletes or reckless or cold and so on. Some cultures script their children to be competitive so that they have trouble cooperating and living with each other. Other cultures emphasize cooperation and cause people who are strong individuals to feel they are not OK. These cultural scripts can affect whole populations in a harmful way.

Rackets

One aspect of scripts is the existential payoff of games, that is, the bad feelings that are accumulated and can eventually blow up and lead to an emotional disaster. Each game’s existential payoff accumulates to eventually cause a predicted script outcome. Some people collect angry feelings that they will eventually use to justify a divorce. Others accumulate depressive feelings to justify suicide. The fact that people are creating situations that produce the negative feelings of their script choices is called their emotional racket.

Permission, Protection, and Potency

Permission is an important part of a transactional analysis. It involves the educator or therapist saying, “You can do what your parents or other people told you was wrong,” or “You don’t have to keep doing what you decided to do as a child.” For example, if a person who is now very shy was told, “Don’t ask for anything,” one permission would be to ask what is wanted or needed: “Ask for strokes. You deserve them.” When a person takes a permission and goes against parental and social demands and wishes, his or her Child is apt to become frightened. That is why protection is an important part of change. Protection is given or offered by the teacher or therapist—preferably with a group’s support—to a person who is ready to change his or her script. The therapist and the group offer protection to the person when they say, “Don’t worry. Everything is going to be all right. We’ll back you up and take care of you when you’re scared.” Permission and protection increase the therapeutic
potency of a transactional analyst by introducing the Nurturing Parent into the situation. Use of the therapist’s Parent and Child (as when having fun during therapy) makes the transactional analyst more effective than the professional who uses only a third of his or her personality and relates to clients only with his or her Adult.

Contracts

Transactional analysis therapists work contractually. That is, they make agreements about what specific outcome the client desires. Typical contracts include “getting over depression,” “getting rid of my headaches,” “stop abusing alcohol,” “earning a decent living,” or “getting good grades.” While a lot can go on in psychotherapy, the long-term therapeutic contract is “always on top” as the guiding goal of a transactional analyst. In addition, transactional analysis will make short-term contracts for homework—for example, for sobriety or for no suicide—to help clients achieve their overall contractual goals.

Since people are born OK, it stands to reason that with competent help they can return to their original OK position. The capacity to be OK is waiting in every person, ready to be released from the prohibitions of script. Transactional analysts know that by making clear, goal-oriented therapeutic contracts, effectively analyzing people’s transactions, powerfully giving people permission to change, and protecting them from their fears, it is possible for everyone to have a chance to become happy, loving, and productive.

This core concepts document is also available in the following languages: French (translated by Marc Devos), German (translated by Edith Zurcher), Italian (translated by Claudia Chiapetti), Portuguese (translated by Anamaria Cohen), Spanish (translated by Patricia Rincón Gallardo and Octavio Riveri), and Hungarian (translated by Regina Scanto).

REFERENCE


Perspectives in Transactional Analysis
by Muriel James

Includes 20 essays covering a wide range of topics, including basic transactional analysis principles/techniques, fascinating accounts of Muriel’s own life and her relationship with Eric Berne, the drama of cultural scripts, techniques for personality structural change, spirituality and the human spirit, and special applications of transactional analysis in clinical and organizational settings. Previously published and edited for this volume, many of these papers are no longer available elsewhere.

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