

Using the Parent-Adult-Child Model Alongside CAT

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This article was previously published in Reformulation only in part. We hope you will now enjoy the article in full. Eds.

Twelve years ago, when I started a communication skills group for day-patients in the hospital where I work, I started to use the basic Transactional Analysis model with group members to think about their position, whether Parent-derived, Child-derived, or Adult, in the communications we were working on. (Fundamentally, this is object relations, as integrated into our SDRs and our CAT work, but differently presented.) I was very interested to notice how quickly people made use of the model to think about relationships, communications, or sometimes just themselves. I have gone on to use it in my individual work with clients, especially where confusion in relationships needs addressing rapidly, and it often proves extremely useful to our work. I try to make sure now that I offer it at some point in the treatment. Although I almost invariably use the CAT model in therapy, on one occasion we ended up simply using the PAC model, as it addressed the client's needs to work with his family to change long-standing patterns of expectation, behaviour and communications. In fact he ended-up sharing the model with them: it worked well.

In CAT terms, I think it can elaborate the Exit Procedures work. More specifically it actually proposes a way forward - immediately for some people - with a model for how one might proceed with others, especially in difficult relationships, how to communicate in these, and why. So like our Reformulation, it provides an analysis, a rationale and a map. My version of it focuses on power relations, because I find it is very helpful for clients

to have a way of negotiating these confidently; this is frequently an issue for them, for everyone in fact! And of course, as in CAT, this new confidence increases a sense of efficacy and therefore self-esteem; thus mood is also improved. The version that I have over time developed for myself and my clients complements the Reformulation and the thrust of its work. The model also provides clarity about the different levels of functioning, (Parent, Adult, Child), which is always helpful. Thus suggestions/interpretations for instance along the lines of 'it may be that at the Adult level you are thinking and feeling that this is the right way forward, but at the Child level, you are still upset and wanting to keep yourself safe', (i.e. inner conflict), become clearer I believe. The model is also very useful for monitoring 'self-talk'.

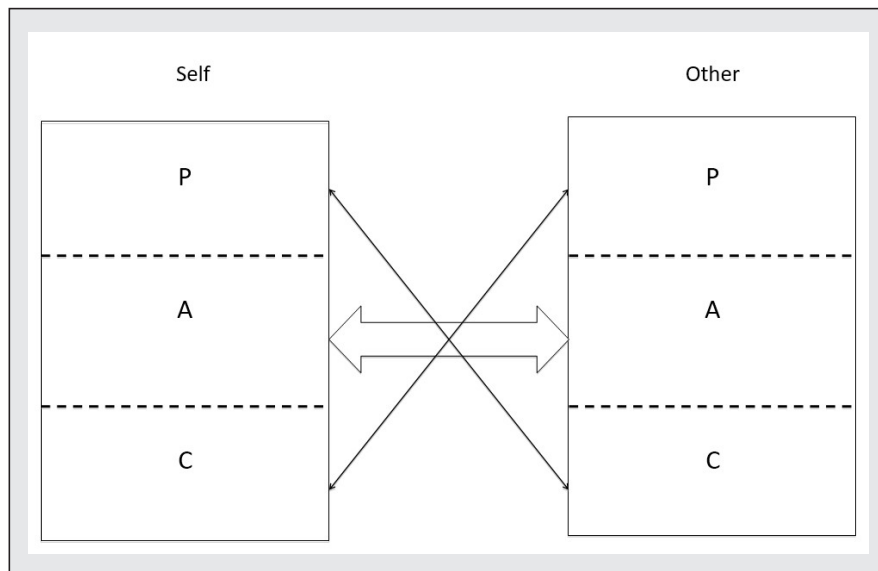
I present my version of the P-A-C model at any point that it appears to be helpful, as with the SDR, sitting alongside the client and drawing it out with them. We discuss it as we go, and I use coloured pens, which makes it more fun and more memorable. But the notes alone would probably mean little without real discussion beforehand, and might just seem like another thing to grapple with.

I have simplified some of the language used in T.A.. Just as I tend to use the terms 'patterns', 'questionnaire' and 'diagram' in CAT, I believe the less jargon we use with patients, the more readily usable a model is, and being usable is the aim. (I am always heartened to remember Freud did not coin the terms Ego, Id and Superego, which I think are daunting and smack of

exclusivity; they came from the English translation from the German. He used much simpler, everyday terms.) You will see, there is no place on the diagram, as it stands, for idealised parent/child; this keeps it simple and quickly recognisable, but one could use the diagram creatively, with colours, or otherwise, if needs be! However, I think that simplicity is of the essence.

These are my first notes on it, written for a client who asked for them. With thanks to Ben Elwell for the graphics.

This is a useful way of very rapidly orientating ourselves in any interaction with another person, when some difficulty seems to be arising. Alternatively one might use it to plan how one is going to communicate with someone, or with a group, so that one is as effective as possible. But the model can serve as a useful reference point when interacting with any person at all and in any setting. Practising this model consistently, in as many of our interactions with others as possible, will increase self-esteem; this is in part because we begin to see that we can be consistent in our approach to others and because we will now have a way of thinking about how to proceed in any given situation and thus feel more effective. (Because of these things, others tend to respect us more, but as you will see, this is not a direct aim of the method, but may be a welcome by-product of investing in this approach.) This is the only diagram we will need:



We can use this diagram as a kind of map, to understand what may be going wrong between oneself and someone else, and to re-orientate ourselves. At its simplest the thing to keep in mind will be this: we must remember to get ourselves into the Adult position if we feel we are straying into the Parent or Child, (either because we are behaving in that way or are feeling that way). We align ourselves with Adult – more about how later – we commit to it, and stay in that mode, no matter how the other(s) respond. Parent-to-Child, or Child-to-Parent- type interactions, (crossed interactions, as above), virtually always lead to problems, and so should be avoided.

Parent mode

In the Parent-Adult-Child model, this is the part of ourselves that is derived from the experiences of being parented, or being in roles ourselves where we are, broadly-speaking, doing 'parenting' activities, (caring for others, supervising or teaching others, managing others etc.), and the mode also contains our feelings on these activities. Because we remember what it was like, as infants and children, to be dependent on adults, therefore experiencing the carer as powerful and in control, and feeling relatively helpless ourselves, the Parent part is identified as the relatively powerful part of ourselves.

Positive Parent

(Parent and child sub-divide into positive and negative, Adult does not.)

This is the part of ourselves where the caring, nurturing, structuring and organising features are located. We draw on this whenever we are in a caring, managing, or organising role or mode, (i.e. whether we are actually managers, parents, or not).

'Negative Parent' is the mis-use of one's power in a situation, (in that one is identifying with a powerful role, but not for the purposes of caring, structuring, etc.). Thus, for instance, being over-controlling, (rather than facilitating), or even bullying or abusive.

Child mode

As with the Parent mode, this is derived from experiences and what we have made of them. It is the relatively less powerful, more dependent, more helpless mode, because we remember what it was like to be small. The concept of 'inner child' is very similar.

Positive Child

This is sometimes called 'free child' and contains, amongst others elements, our creativity, spontaneity and imagination. Playful aspects of sexuality are located here.

Negative Child

Because Child is the relatively less powerful part of ourselves, negative Child is defined as misusing that particular position, (consciously or not). Thus, passive-aggressive behaviour, such as sulking, is located here, as is manipulative behaviour, (i.e. as if it is not permissible to be clear and assertive with the other about our position). Also, not taking proper responsibility for ourselves, when we are able to, or inviting others to 'rescue' us.

Adult

Adult does not sub-divide into positive and negative, because, one might say, it is all positive! In Adult we are able to reflect on the different aspects of our experience, and decide how to proceed. On the diagram, the dotted-lines between the different positions reflect this permeability. (For instance, if we find ourselves wanting to sulk, we stand back from this, see that it belongs in Child, and move ourselves into Adult. If we want to, we can also later reflect on why this happened, or discuss it with the other.) Thus, we could describe Adult as a mode in which we 'compute' the other modes and what they contain, and then proceed, act. Or one might visualise it as shaping the material from Parent and Child, to use in the present situation. An example of this might be when someone feels a strong urge to help in a situation, but on reflecting on it 'in Adult' decides that it would actually in this situation be more helpful to stand back, give the other some space. Most of the time, in Adult, when all is going well, we are drawing on both the experience of Parent and Child, flexibly and fluidly, consciously or not, to inform our stance in Adult.

What defines the Adult mode?

As we have said, it is a state of mind in which one can stand back enough from the situation to be able to think, one

is not being impulsive. So one actively commits to thinking, reflecting and to inviting the other(s) into negotiation. Thinking, negotiating, need space and time; one cannot really do either in a hurry or a panic. So implied in this is the active creating of space and time to do the reflecting. The sort of words one could use, for instance, to put this over, might be: 'shall we talk about this again later when we both have a bit more time?' Or, 'I'm not sure if I can meet up then. I'll get back to you tomorrow when I've had a chance to look at my diary.' The language is to do with thinking, negotiating and making space for the interaction, or for personal reflection. It also communicates that one will keep the matter in mind and that one thinks it is important.

The fact that one is in a thinking mode and is making adequate space and time to deal with whatever it is, means that any high levels of emotion to do with the situation will probably be reduced. This will help both with reflection and negotiation, and in conflict with another will reduce escalation and will help facilitate finding shared ground and so a resolution.

It is a position which is both respectful of oneself and of the other; you are equals, as two human beings, no matter who the interaction is with: a head of state, a friend, or someone at the bottom of the hierarchy in your organisation. Both of you, and your views, are important and valid. Implied in this is also that you expect respect, at all times. (So for instance, if someone is trying to pressurise you into something, or into a view, you could say: 'I'm still not sure I agree with you, perhaps we'll have to agree to differ, or may be come back to it another time'. As a manager, therefore, we may need to make the overall decision, but this is communicated in a respectful way; (and negotiation and discussion may be a part of this if it is a process). And as a parent, with children, or

adolescents, we will aim to draw the child – even infant – into as equal and respectful a relationship as is possible from early on, albeit that the parent takes responsibility for their safety and other aspects of their lives till the moment they are really ready to begin to take those over, in any given area

In conflict, (and there are so many examples of conflict between ourselves and others in any one day, major or not), we are not out to win. Our aim in Adult is to deepen our understanding and our relationship with the other. Conflict in Adult must lead to negotiation. Hopefully a joint decision, or at least a good compromise, can be arrived at together and this will promote further work, or friendship, together, where relevant. To aim to win is an example of power play; thus we may in one sense win the conflict, yet damage the relationship, and so arguably in another, more significant sense, have in fact lost.

In conflict, as elsewhere, we need to communicate that we are 'owning' our own responses, not blaming the other for them. An example of blaming would be, 'you always make me so annoyed when you take that line with me'. (In fact the annoyance is our own response, someone else might not feel annoyed in the same situation.) Thus it is more accurate to say: 'when you speak to me like that I find myself feeling quite annoyed', or, '...I feel quite annoyed'. This helps prevent escalation of the conflict, as it encourages thinking, not fighting and may help the other to reflect on their part too.

It can help, both in a negotiation and in conflict, to communicate in the language you use – or by simply talking about it with them – the process you have in mind to help you both. You offer this. For instance: 'what I am thinking is that we talk this through now and see where we get to, but if we need to talk again, we could find times that suit us both for that'.

As a way of dealing with bullying the model is helpful in that one is constantly reminded of the need to practise the skills of being in Adult and therefore when one is suddenly 'attacked' psychologically, the clear, assertive state in which we expect respect and can look after ourselves – drawing on positive Parent – comes so much more easily. This is a good reason for never allowing any even slight bullying by another person to go unremarked in some way, even if it is just putting down a marker you can come back to

Finally, in Adult mode one is clear and assertive. Firstly clear with oneself about one's own position, may be after some reflection. (The idea of 'consulting with oneself' may be useful here.) For some people being clear with oneself can be the initial challenge as one gets used to being more respectful of one's own needs and feelings. And secondly, the straight-forward communication of what you have decided, or the discussion of this. One implication of this is also that there is no games-playing or power-play, at least by yourself! Parent-Child or Child-Parent interactions are by definition games-playing, in that they imply some manipulation of power-relations between two people, or an attempt at this, and invitation to it: we must not collude, or 'accept the invitation'.

How do we get ourselves into Adult and stay there?

Firstly having this model clearly in mind, even carrying the diagram with us in a pocket to begin with, to remind us. Then, as above, committing to practising it as often as possible, particularly noticing when we depart from it and reflecting on this, is very instructive and helps the new way of being with others to become automatic and comfortable.

In the immediate situation, no matter what we are feeling, when we choose to move quickly into Adult, we choose the

language which reflects the elements above; (this is probably similar to the language you would choose to use in a work situation: considered, respectful, clear). We invite the other into an Adult interaction in this way. One uses words quite consciously that reflect those elements, and even if it sounds a bit odd to you to begin with, you will get used to it and it will probably give you a lot of confidence, especially as you now know where you are going with the interaction. The other will almost certainly not realise 'what you are doing', (in these terms), but will notice the clarity and respectfulness, of your message. When you begin to see how well this works it becomes much easier, even very natural to use this language. (It helps if our body language also broadly reflects our approach in Adult: relaxed, open and deflecting distractions where relevant – e.g. turning off mobile phones - in order to make proper space for the interaction.)

Crossed interactions

In a 'crossed interaction' one is said to 'invite the other' into a particular type of communication, and this language is very useful: it reminds us that we do not have to accept the invitation, or collude with it! For example, someone in Parent mode, might invite someone into Child, by being bullying. The other does not have to 'accept the invitation'. Or, someone in Child might invite the other into Parent in a communication about needing psychological rescue of some sort. Again, they do not need to accept the invitation, (though of course the pressure can be very great sometimes and that is where this model is very useful, in thinking this through). When we feel ourselves 'put into Child' or 'put into Parent' (i.e. the pressure is very great, and our feelings come into play so that it is hard to resist the invitation), we need to think quickly about how to get ourselves into the Adult mode, and begin to use that language and thought. We do not need to feel adult

to be in Adult; we go ahead and use the skills we are practising or have learnt. When we hear ourselves responding in this more considered way, we tend to gain confidence in ourselves and it generally then gets easier.

There are many possible examples of crossed interactions, an almost infinite number! An easy way of checking if a crossed interaction is taking place is to ask oneself if one person is behaving or speaking to the other person as if the other person was either above them or below them, in some sense; the 'positional check'. For instance, if you are talked down to by someone, or feel you are, they are probably in Parent and inviting you into Child. If someone is idealising you or asking you to rescue them, 'putting you (up) on a pedestal', or even inviting you to bully them, they are in Child, inviting you into Parent.

There is no Parent-to-Parent in this model. If there is a power struggle, whether to gain control or offer care, (e.g. two warring parents, or two barristers fighting it out), then it is because one wants the dominant position and in that sense one is inviting the other 'into Child'. Likewise there is no Child-to-Child, because although two people in a struggle or competition may look childish, ('throwing their toys out of the pram' for instance), this is not the same. They are, arguably, perceiving the other as a threat and therefore locating them mentally in Parent mode.

What happens if the other does not respond in Adult even if we invite them into it?

They may well not, at least not at first. The aim is not to change their behaviour but to change ours, to take responsibility for it. This is key to the model. But then, if you think about it, when have we ever been able to change anybody else's behaviour? It is better to accept this reality and focus on how we might properly and

consistently proceed. This leads to a much greater sense of control in a situation – paradoxically as it might at first seem – because we are now controlling the one thing we can actually be effective in, managing ourselves.

This can be a big relief, especially for some people, because we don't have to work so hard trying to manage every situation any longer. (Though interestingly, it does seem that when we ourselves stop playing games, others seem to feel invited to take more responsibility for themselves and may well go into a different mode after a while, especially when they realise this is for the long run, we are standing firm). However, if they do not, we do not change our approach, though we may now need to think about how to make our message clearer. If this still is not being understood, we may decide at some point to invite them to discuss the situation and that would be a good example of the Adult-Adult mode of communication. (In the longer run, to protect ourselves, or for the sake of our mental health, we may need to think carefully about a relationship in which the other consistently wields all the power, or tries to. Or one in which one is constantly invited into either Parent or Child, not responding to the Adult-Adult invitation.)

Is it 'manipulative' to be so consciously thinking about one's language and behaviour in communications? This is something that concerns people sometimes. If manipulative implies putting some sort of pressure on the other to achieve the outcome one is aiming for, as arguably the term means, then no: no pressure at all is brought to bear, rather the opposite.

Working on the model for ourselves

Right at the start, it can be difficult for some people to imagine themselves using the Adult mode consistently.

When people begin to try it out however, they soon discover that it is surprisingly easy and I think this is often because they now have the model in their mind they can think their way through situations and relationships more readily. In other words, they now know what they are doing. When we begin to hear ourselves responding more calmly and clearly, sometimes simply repeating what we have said if the other questions it, we begin to feel more confident, more the part. Generally, people respond 'in Adult' when we are in Adult, but if they do not, using the model, we can now think through what may be happening between us. This helps us to plan where we will go next with the interaction, or when we have a chance to talk to that person again. And it gives us a way of discussing the situation with a third party, thinking it

through with them, if we feel we need to. In the longer term, consistently feeling more effective and in control - of our responses and decisions - in interactions and relationships, is good for our self esteem. (Being able now to be consistent, not changing in a 'chameleon-like' way to fit in with other people, is extremely helpful for our sense of self: we no longer feel as if we are acting a part with them.) This of course will have a knock-on effect on mood. For some people, certain types of patterns in relationships which have been causing demoralisation and therefore low mood, can now be rectified and this is where profound change can take place.

When getting used to using the model it can be quite helpful, as with CAT and CBT, to make notes on the events of the day that may be relevant, e.g.

noticing and evaluating how you dealt with certain situations and whether you think you utilised the Adult mode. Also, what might you try out next time? If looking back you think that you were in Parent or Child at some point, write down what you might say and do in a similar situation next time. In writing things down that we have done and said and how others have responded, then re-reading this later, we often notice interesting detail or patterns that we did not see before. Also re-reading your notes from further back, noticing how you are now doing things differently, how it is going, can be both interesting and encouraging.

Using this approach to practising the model we can never 'fail'; we only ever get more information when things do not go as we hoped, which will help us the next time.

Integrating Trauma Developments into CAT

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