

The Icebergian Unconscious

© 2018 Julie Hay

Discussion with participants on a recent webinar stimulated my thinking about how we define and describe the unconscious within transactional analysis. So with my thanks to them for, as usual, turning my teaching process into an exciting learning opportunity for me, the following is my summary of the key points we discussed and my representation of how we might imagine our own consciousness as being that part of the iceberg below the surface – and how this provides us with a way of understanding how our unconscious impacts our ability to see clearly even from that part of us that is above the surface. Previously (Hay, 2012) I have referred to an image of the TA practitioner needing a pickaxe so that they can make cracks in the concrete that has been poured over us as children, so that our physis (Berne, 1968) will generate our natural urge to grow to our potential. Using the metaphor of an iceberg means that instead of a pickaxe, perhaps we need to target clients with some warm water that can melt the problematic unconscious elements.

The Unconscious in TA

Cornell (2005) referred to characterological unconsciousness, transference unconsciousness and emergent unconsciousness, all with references to non-TA authors. However, he described first what he labelled Bernian unconsciousness when he wrote of how Berne's earlier comments that fit within the psychoanalytic tradition gradually disappeared from his writing as he appeared to work hard to set TA apart from psychoanalysis. Cornell wrote that Berne's better-known material came to have only implicit ways of indicating that unconscious processes might be at work, such as when he wrote about ulterior transactions, the psychological level of communication, the protocol, group images, and the private

structure of the individual, all without any explicit mention of the unconscious.

In terms of ulterior transactions, we can link this to the way in which Berne (1964) described three levels of games as if they coincide with different levels of being below awareness. First-degree games are those we play in public; second degree games are where we prefer to be in private, and Berne's third degree were those involving serious consequences. I have written (Hay, 1992) that I find it more helpful to imagine a scale of outcomes from mild to severe, because Berne's three degrees do not reflect the way in which people within organisations, for example, typically move through stages of verbal warnings, disciplinary procedures, and getting fired but do not arrive at the more serious outcomes such as those involving physical harm.

I think that these different levels of games reflect different levels of 'ulteriorness' or, in other words, how deeply buried our awareness is within our unconscious. Hence, with a first-degree game we are not particularly surprised when we reach the payoff, whereas someone playing a psychological game that ends up with them being dismissed from their job may express considerable shock when the payoff is reached. Other ways in which the levels of games might vary include examples such as "games which significantly detract from our performance; people becoming unwilling to cooperate with us ... colleagues complain to the boss about us verbal warnings into disciplinary we get fired or walk off the job ... the law is breached and we end up in court we take risks with safety and finish up in a hospital or morgue, or being sued." (Hay, 1992, p.132).

Ulrike Müller (2002) reviewed Berne's (1958, 1961, 1966, 1972) understanding of the term 'unconscious', pointing out that Berne tended to concentrate on questions, such as what is unconscious, repressed and/or cathected, how do they occur and

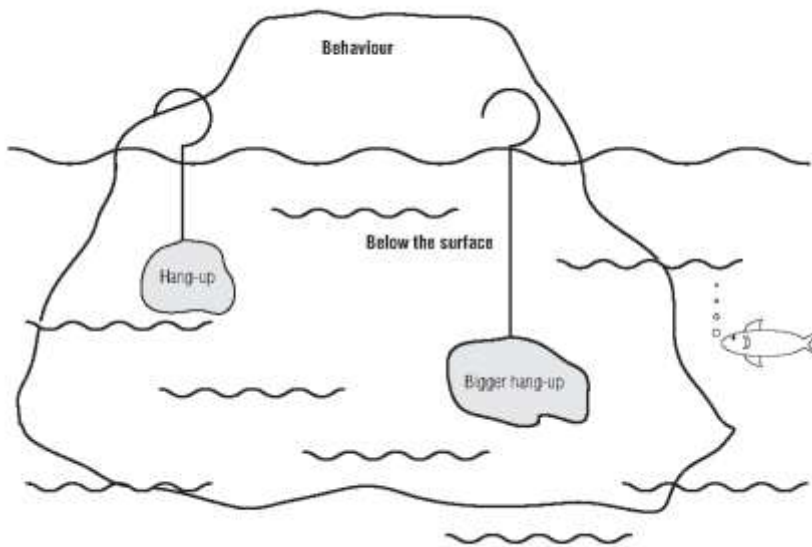


Figure 1: *The Iceberg* (Hay, 1993, p. 14 - diagram copied from 2nd edn Hay, 2009b, p. 4)

what are the effects, rather than directly on Freud's (1991/1923) ideas about repression proceeding from the ego, large portions of the ego and superego being unconscious, and Freud's concept of Besetzungsenergie (for which Müller references Strachey (referenced to Meisel & Kendrick 1985) for the admittedly inadequate translation as cathexis).

Müller also pointed out how Berne introduced the notion of the script protocol as an archeopsychic unconsciousness (Berne 1961) which means it comprises repressed psychological material from the earliest years of life. The maintenance of this is served by the full script, which is in turn maintained through discounting (Mellor & Schiff, 1975) in line with a frame of reference (Schiff, Schiff & Schiff, 1975). She reminded us also that Berne had cautioned that the unconscious, psychological level may be operating on both sides – in other words, the practitioner as well as the client is likely to have unconscious contaminations. Hence, Berne (1972) wrote that "True autonomy is the recognition that the Adult rarely functions without contamination" (p. 155).

Icebergs

In my first TA book written for the layperson (Hay, 1993) I presented a picture of an iceberg as shown in Figure 1, commenting that "People are like icebergs – the relatively small amount that shows above the surface is controlled by the great mass that is hidden beneath the waves. As we go further below the surface, we have less and less conscious awareness of what is contained there. We can be confident that there will be a number of useful aspects that keep us balanced. We can also be sure that there will be unhelpful aspects too, including some that we have no conscious awareness of. These become our hang-ups and sometimes interfere with our ability to interact with the world in genuine and skilful ways." (p. 13).

Van Beekum (2006) also used the metaphor of an iceberg but in his case he proposed that the TA iceberg did not go as deep as the iceberg of psychoanalysis. This thinking appears to be the basis for regarding relational TA as somehow more than earlier TA schools (which van Beekum refers to as approaches). He wrote of how

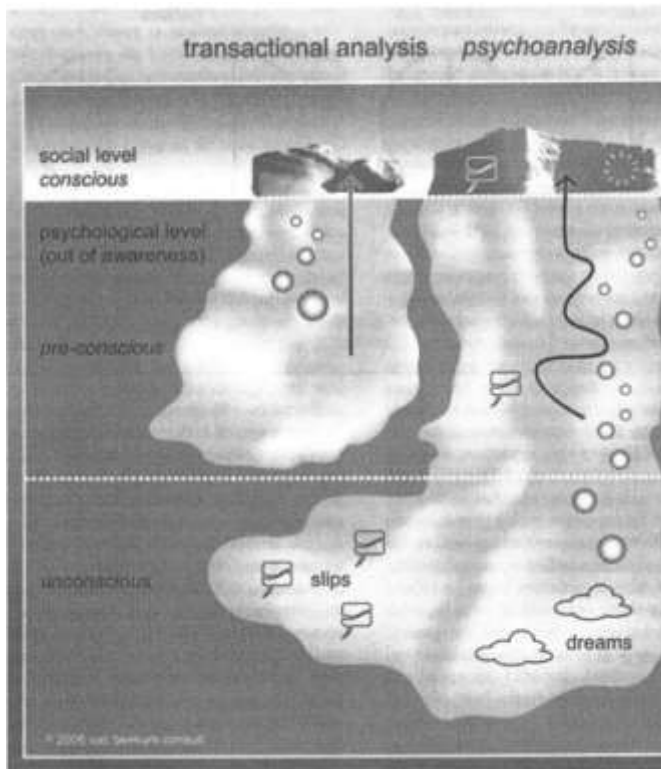


Figure 2: Icebergs (van Beekum 2006 p. 324)

the relational TA approach had been developing gradually over 20 years [in 2006] and that “It is obvious that the current rapprochement of transactional analysis and psychoanalysis in the shared area of relational psychotherapy is an important development for psychotherapists.” (p.318) before going on to propose that it is also relevant for non-psychotherapy TA practitioners.

Van Beekum’s iceberg diagram (Figure 2) appears to indicate that there are deeper levels to the unconscious that are not taken into account within TA, with the former only dealing with a psychological level and a pre-conscious. However, within that deeper level he shows Freudian slips and dreams although both of those are often brought into consciousness fairly easily.

We can also contrast this with the way in which Taibi Kahler (1979a, 1979b) indicated that drivers reflect within their sentence

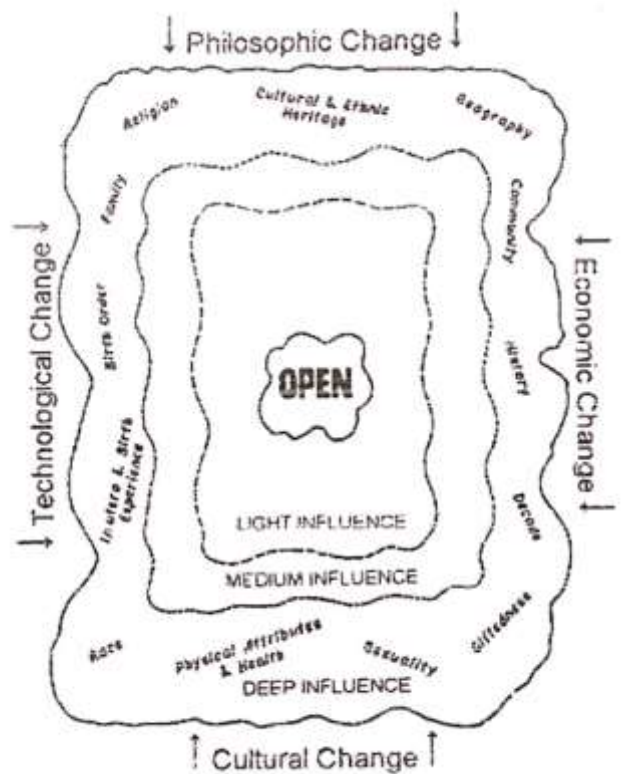


Figure 3: Frame of Reference (Clarke 1996 p. 215)

pattern the full pattern of the script. This means that our behaviour above the surface is linked to our deep script pattern, and hence to our protocol. As the protocol, according to Berne, develops as an archeopsychic unconsciousness, it would appear to be at a very deep level.

Frames of Reference

Schiff & Contributors (1975) introduced the notion of a frame of reference through which we perceive ourselves, others and the situation, and which is the mechanism via which we discount those elements that do not fit our preconceived map of the world. Jean Illsley Clarke (1988) develops this notion by proposing four parts to it, with a fifth added (Clarke, 1996) so that Figure 3 shows:

- The open area in the centre, which is the “capacity to incorporate new information without trying to alter or deflect it” (p. 214).

- The area of light influence, where information will be examined based on values and assumptions already held.
- The area of medium influence, where the assumptions are those from early family settings but are still “... easily remembered and open to examination” (p. 214).
- The area of deep influences, which are firmly entrenched, automatic, often outside awareness, and are “potent organisers of the individual’s response to life” (p. 214).
- The wrap of cultural change, where Clarke indicates that “Technological, economic, philosophic, and locus of power changes intrude on all areas of life and on all areas of one’s frame of reference.” (p. 215).

A Three-Dimensional Iceberg

Clarke’s diagram is of course two-dimensional but if we imagine that it is three-dimensional we can treat it as a way of understanding the impacts of the different areas as if they are levels of our unconscious. Hence, the Open level might be our consciousness and therefore above the surface. Just below the surface we will have unconscious aspects that are relatively easy to bring into our awareness, and which are presumably not linked to any deeper levels. Below that will be Clarke’s medium and deep influence levels. As we consider the areas as if they are levels, we also need to notice that there are likely to be connections between levels. Kahler (1978) has written about how we might see the doors to contact [doors to therapy, Paul Ware, 1983] and the levels of the miniscript (Kahler & Capers, 1974) as if they are on a set of steps that lead down into a basement. The doors to contact are above the surface, the driver is just below the surface, and the stopper, blamer and despairer are at increasingly deep levels of discomfort. An alternative metaphor for

understanding these connections is reflected in my original (Hay, 1993) diagram of an iceberg, where current consciousness is shown to have some inevitable ‘hooks’ into our unconscious. Perhaps we should make these hooks more barbed or with bristles to indicate the additional connections at different levels.

At this point, we need to interpret differently what Clarke referred to as the fifth area as the context in which our iceberg is floating because it is clearly not a deeper level of unconsciousness. Instead, we can imagine that the context is the sea in which our iceberg is floating, and the degrees of change of various aspects of it are reflected in the size of the waves, how much the wind is blowing, whether we are near any other icebergs, or glaciers, islands or continents, or whether there are any sailing vessels in the vicinity, or any metaphorical birds, animals, mammals, fish, crustaceans, or likewise, sitting on us or nibbling away at us (or even defecating on us).

Pulling the ideas described above together, we can now represent this as a three-dimensional iceberg (Figure 4), with our consciousness above the surface and increasing levels of unconsciousness below, floating within a sea that comprises the various contextual factors that are impacting on us.

Alongside the iceberg, I have indicated on the left our circumstances - were we born/formed within a glacier or did we have to occupy a crevasse to come into existence; where have we been floating ever since and how supportive or not has our environment been; and what is the metaphorical weather like for us now. On the right hand side, I have shown the protocol at the very base of the iceberg; above this I believe that episcript (English, 1969) and transgenerational scripting (Noriega Gayol, 2004) will have occurred in such a way that the impact of this is more unconscious than our script, which we will

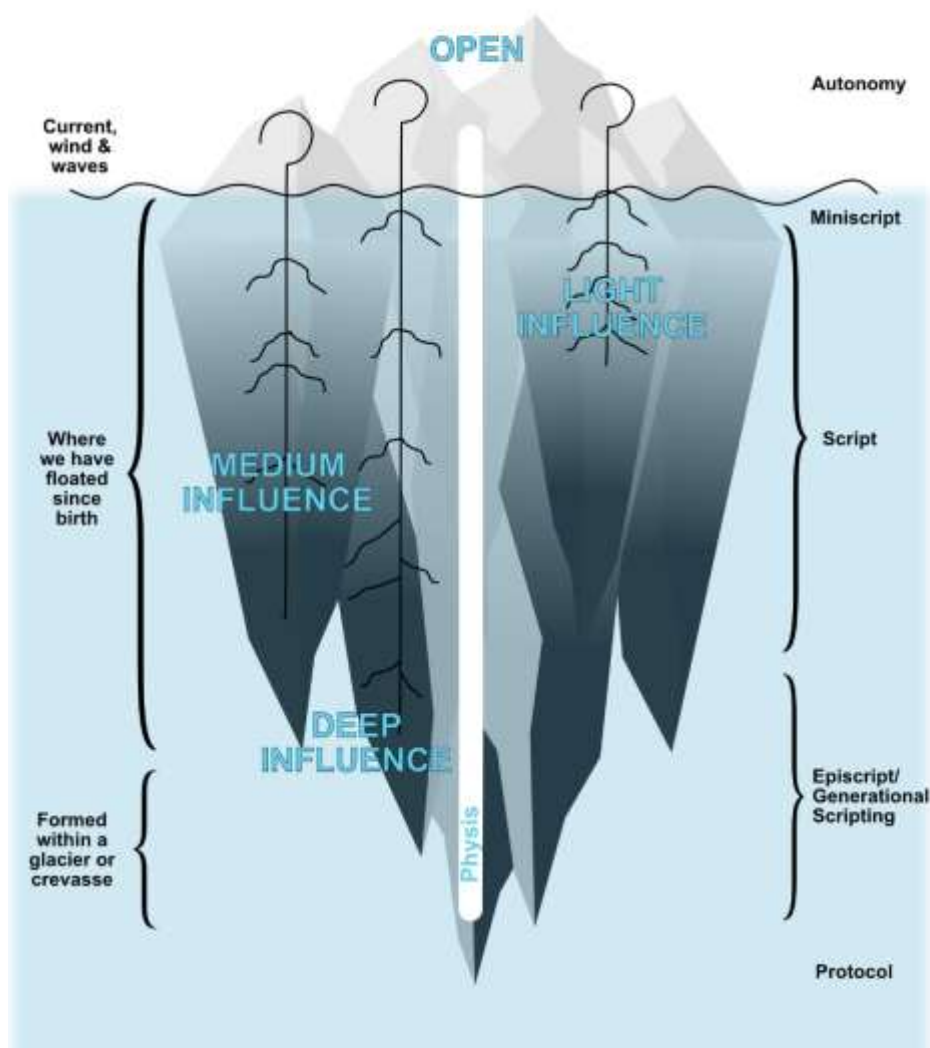


Figure 4: Icebergian Unconsciousness

have created with the benefit of our neocortex and which will therefore be easier to bring into consciousness once we learn some TA. Right at the top is the miniscript, the operation of which is mediating in terms of whether we are functioning above or below the surface. Although it is mixing my metaphors, I am reminded that Kahler (1978) showed a script diamond diagram in which he showed a hierarchy of OKness, with four levels of I'm OK, You're OK above the baseline and the driver and increasing levels of not OKness below. Later (Kahler, 2008), he used the metaphor of the floors of a condominium, with the driver being

exhibited at the base level and leading down into second degree distress in the basement and third degree distress in the cellar. I cannot see it in his books so perhaps I heard him describe this during a workshop; I have an image of a stepladder with 3 levels leading upwards that match Ware's (1983) open, target and trap doors, and 4 levels downwards that are driver, stopper, blamer and despairer.

In the same way that I have referred to Berne's (1962, 1966) original idea of existential life positions [i.e. not Franklin Ernst's (1971) behavioural life positions] as windows on the world that are made of

distorting glass, we can imagine that our iceberg similarly has a surface that distorts/ discounts what we are perceiving. Our unconscious hang-ups are connected through to however we are thinking, feeling, and behaving. We may believe that we are fully conscious and have complete awareness but we are likely to still have vestiges of our original protocol – particularly when we factor in genetic predispositions - neuroscience nowadays informs us that it really is a mix of nature and nurture.

We can represent this within the metaphor by imagining that we have areas where the ice consists of clear, uncontaminated frozen water and other areas where there are varying degrees of contamination so that the ice is no longer clear. Our ability to perceive and construct our world will depend on where we are within that part of the iceberg that is above the surface, and how that connects to areas below the surface that are uncontaminated. To paraphrase the description of infinite regression (turtles all the way down), the existence of physis means there must be autonomy all the way down, even if only within a very fine sliver of ice.

Targeted Melting

Writing this article prompted me to look on Google, where I learned that it can be difficult to judge the shape an iceberg has below the surface. The length to height ratio varies between different icebergs and they have a variety of shapes; some have steep sides with flat tops but others have rounded tops, some have one or more spires, some look like a wedge and yet others have slots in them. Some are damaged when they scrape on the bottom of the ocean.

I also learned that some icebergs are made of clearer water than others. This depends on where they were formed – in some environments they may be white ice because they formed over many years

within a glacier; in others they may look blue because they formed more quickly within a crevasse. Other colours may be because of what is trapped within them but may also be due to dust or dirt on the surface. As they melt, the tiny air bubbles within them pop and they make a fizzing sound – just as we often ‘fizz’ as we experience a decontamination or deconfusion.

For me, this information is reassuring as it means the metaphor is even more useful when we think about the diversity of the human race. We can think of ourselves and our clients as icebergs. When I presented this metaphor originally (Hay, 1993), I went on to comment that the book, and hence the reason for learning TA, was about:

- “knowing what might be below the surface,
- knowing how this affects what shows above the surface,
- knowing how to use the useful parts below the surface,
- knowing how to change the parts that act like sabotage mechanisms,
- and knowing how to translate all of this into more effective behaviour above the waterline.” (p.14).

With this extended three-dimensional iceberg, I have a message for TA practitioners – we can use the wide range of interlinked TA concepts to work with our clients to identify where the contaminated ice is situated, so that together we can target some metaphorical warm water at the appropriate areas. With some clients, the temperature of the water may need to be increased. With some clients, we may need to help them find a warmer sea within which to live, at least for as long as they need healing to take place. With some clients, we need to take care that we do not initiate too much melting before they are ready. The amount, positioning and temperature of the water required may

give us an indication of whether the client needs a developmental or a psychotherapeutic TA approach.

References

Berne, Eric (1958) Transactional Analysis: A New and Effective Method of Group Psychotherapy *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 12 735-743 reprinted as Chapter 7 in Berne, Eric (1977) *Intuition and Ego States* San Francisco: Transactional Publications 145-158 Ed. Paul Mc Cormick, publisher TA Press

Berne, Eric (1961) *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* New York: Grove Press

Berne, Eric (1962) Classification of positions *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* 1:3 23

Berne, Eric (1964) *Games People Play*, New York: Grove Press

Berne, Eric (1966) *Principles of Group Treatment*, New York: Grove Press Inc

Berne, Eric (1968) *A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis* 3rd edition New York: Simon and Schuster (original work published in 1947 as *The Mind in Action*, New York: Simon and Schuster)

Berne, Eric. (1972) *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* New York: Grove Press

Clarke, Jean Illsley (1988). What is frame of reference? *WE Newsletter* 5: 4 2-5

Clarke, Jean Illsley (1996) The Synergistic Use of Five Transactional Analysis Concepts by Educators *Transactional Analysis Journal* 26:3 214-219

English, Fanita (1969) Episcrypt and the "Hot Potato" Game *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* 8:32 77-82

Ernst Franklin (1971) The OK Corral; the grid for get-on-with *Transactional Analysis Journal* 1:4 231-240

Freud, Sigmund (1991) *The Ego and the Id* Vol 11 of *The Penguin Freud Library* (J Strachey trans) London: Penguin (Original work published 1923) 339-407

Hay, Julie (1992) *Transactional Analysis for Trainers* Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, (republished 1996) Watford: Sherwood Publishing

Hay, Julie (1993) *Working it Out at Work - Understanding Attitudes and Building Relationships* Watford: Sherwood Publishing

Hay, Julie (2012) *Donkey Bridges for Developmental TA* 2nd edit Hertford: Sherwood Publishing

Kahler, Taibi (1978) *Transactional Analysis Revisited* Little Rock, AR: Human Development Publications

Kahler, Taibi (1979a) *Managing with the Process Communication Model* 2nd edition Little Rock, AR: Human Development Publications

Kahler, Taibi (1979b) *Process Therapy in Brief* 3rd edition Little Rock, AR: Human Development Publications.

Kahler, Taibi (2008) *The Process Therapy Model: The Six Personality Types with Adaptations* USA: Taibi Kahler Associates

Kahler Taibi & Capers, Hedges (1974) The miniscript *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 4:1 26-42

Meisel, Perry & Kendrick, Walter (Eds) 1985 *Bloomsbury/Freud: The Letters of James and Alix Strachey 1924-1925* New York: Basic Books

Mellor Ken & Schiff Eric (1975) Discounting *Transactional Analysis Journal* 5:3 295-302

Müller, Ulrike (2002) What Eric Berne Meant by "Unconscious": Aspects of Depth Psychology in Transactional Analysis *Transactional Analysis Journal* 32:2 107-115

Noriega Gayol, Gloria (2004) Codependence: A Transgenerational Script *Transactional Analysis Journal* 34:4 312-322

Schiff, Jacqui & Contributors (1975), *Cathexis Reader: Transactional Analysis Treatment of Psychosis*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc

Schiff, Jacqui, Schiff, Aaron & Schiff, Eric (1975) Frames of Reference *Transactional Analysis Journal* 5:3 290-294

Van Beekum, Servaas (2006) The Relational Consultant *Transactional Analysis Journal* 36:4 318-329

Ware, Paul (1983) Personality Adaptations (Doors to Therapy) *Transactional Analysis Journal* 13:1 11-19