

## Systemic Considerations - ETC

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*The ETC in the title is a 'donkey bridge' – a gimmick to help people remember what they have learned – and I realise that it will not work in languages other than English but, as the author of a book about TA Donkey Bridges, I couldn't resist inventing a new one. I will explain below what it means.*

During March 2021, I prepared a workbook entitled Systemic Considerations to be used as a handout on three 4-hour webinars that I was running. This prompted a question about what the word 'systemic' means. It might be defined as interacting entities within a boundary but systems are also influenced by their environments. I think about it as a set of things that are working together, where 'things' includes the surroundings. Whichever definition we use, systemic refers to just about everything that we pay attention to within transactional analysis – a single ego state, a person, an interaction, a family or a group, a school or an organisation, a country or a continent, and Earth and the universe.

### TA and Systems

Much has already been written in the TA literature, especially by Robert Massey (1985, 1989, 1995, 2006) writing about families, Roger Blakeney (1978) about organisations; Alan Jacobs (1987) about power and autocracy. Others have written about various TA concepts as systems – we have the racket/script system (Erskine & Zalcman, 1979; Erskine & Morsund, 1988), the comparative script system (Sills and Mazzetti, 2009), the organisational Parent system (Kouwenhoven, 2016), plus others that are describing systems without necessarily using that word. Berne's structural model is a system, script matrix is a map of a system, Fox (1975) summarised Berne's material on organisations into a system, Newton (2007) presented the health system as a metaphor and used within it many other smaller systems. Much of the general material within TA is all about us using TA theories and

techniques to analyse the ways in which our clients are operating systemically.

I now want to present a new way of looking at systems that draws on some specific concepts. Berne (1963) wrote of the culture of groups and his material was extended by Graham Barnes (1977) when it was applied to the culture of schools of TA, and by Pearl Drego (1983) when she wrote of the Cultural Parent. The key to these was the idea that you can consider the culture in terms of Parent, Adult and Child ego states being presented as:

- *etiquette* – consisting of those values and beliefs that are agreed to by most of the Parent ego states of those present - I write most because it is not necessary that everyone agrees with every value and belief – only that they do not overtly challenge it unless they are doing that within the character of the group;
- *character* – comprising those behaviours that tend to be outside the etiquette but in which the Child ego states of some of those present will be allowed to engage – what can we get away with that will not have us thrown out of the group;
- *technical* – what do the Adult ego states of those present recognise is necessary in order to perform the tasks of the group or organisation – again this may not involve all of the Adult ego states – it may be determined by specialist personnel or management – someone who understands the technical needs of the tasks or the business to be conducted.

Another TA concept that allows us to think systemically is the notion of psychological boundaries (Hay, 2018), which was a development of original ideas by Denton Roberts (1975) when he suggested that we have a nested set of boundaries ranging from personal to cultural. Hay develops this into a range of nested boundaries from intrapersonal through groups and places to the planet. We can imagine that the etiquette, character and technical will be different in different circumstances, so that as we move across our own boundaries there

will be different expectations that we need to take into account.

## ETC - Etiquette, Today, Character

*Note that I have changed the middle concept to Today instead of Technical – I will explain my rationale for this below.*

Holloway (1977) suggested a different way of drawing psychic organs to avoid the confusion of us constantly using three stacked circles for different models of ego states. However, Berne, Barnes and Drego all continued to draw circles when they were explaining Etiquette, Technical and Character. I propose that we now illustrate these concepts as shown in Figure 1, and how they combine into a system that includes three systems in Figure 2.



Figure 1: Etiquette, Today, Character

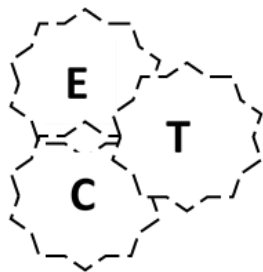


Figure 2: ETC

I have drawn dashed lines because within TA literature that is usually what we do when something exists only at the psychological level – when we cannot see it. I have changed them into circles with fuzzy edges so they are clearly not meant to be representing ego states. I have clustered them in a different way, which Berne (1961) also did in his early representations of the structural model of ego states. I have also overlapped them because I want to indicate that they are the systems which interconnect into one larger system. Berne drew some versions that were overlapping but he only did that when writing of perversions, and of course we normally only consider overlapping ego states as

representing contaminations. I propose that we can also consider that etiquette, technical and character may be overlapping and that we can take a positive psychology perspective and recognise that this could mean that etiquette and character are preventing technical from being in the here and now, but it could also mean that they are operating like a Venn diagram and interacting healthily and influencing each other. For now I am writing about etiquette, technical and character rather than about individual ego states but I think that we could use the same diagram with P, A, C within the fuzzy circles – maybe I will write about that in another article . . . .

The other significant change I am making is that I am changing 'Technical' to 'Today'. For me, this fits much better with the way in which Berne was indicating that this aspect of the culture should be decided based on the reality of the situation and the tasks or processes that need to be performed. This is also why I have situated the fuzzy circle with the T in it to the side of the other two circles. If we are functioning in the here-and-now, it is our Adult that is presented mainly to the world, with our Parent store of role models and our Child store of our own emotional and psychological experiences that are available as resources.

Of course, we could also draw these fuzzy circles with overlaps to represent problematic contaminations, and we could draw any one of them with solid lines to indicate exclusion. This could represent groups and organisations where the Etiquette may be so heavy that no displays of Character are allowed or where the Technical processes are out-of-date and do not reflect the current situation. It could also be done to represent groups and organisations where the Character is out of control, so that the Etiquette no longer seems to exist, and again where the Technical processes are not relevant to the current situation because those involved are only doing what they feel like doing. There are of course many groups and organisations where it is the Technical, or Today, that is being excluded and which are operating on the basis of a conflict between Etiquette and Character, with the high level of excitement that

accompanies a high level of psychological game playing.

## Groups

We can incorporate the ETC diagrams of individuals into the TA concept of group imagoes (Berne 1963; Hay 2009) as shown in Figure 3.

Please note that in the diagram I have used a dashed line for the imago. This is done to indicate that this diagram is 'only' a psychological image held by group members. Dashed lines are usually used to represent healthy boundaries in TA diagrams (Hay 2018). An individual member may have an image of an unhealthy boundary for the group, either as a dotted line which represents boundaries that are too porous, or a solid line which represents a boundary that prevents movement into or out of the group.

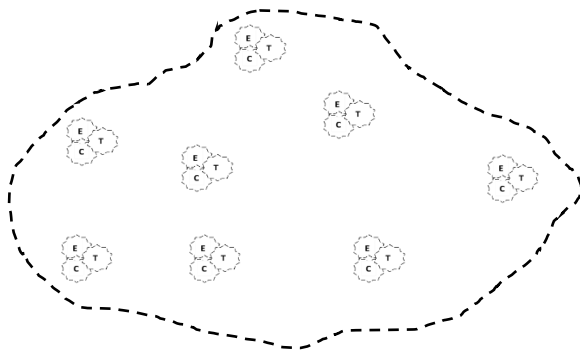


Figure 3: ETCs and Group Imagoes

During the early stages of group formation, there are likely to be several individuals with several different Etiquettes, Characters and even different perspectives on the 'technical' requirements for Today. As they get to know each other, at least at a psychological level, they will begin to recognise what they have in common. We really need a moving diagram to illustrate this process. Those with similar Etiquettes may be drawn together whilst those with similar preferences about Character may also be drawn together. Those with similar 'Today' perspectives may be puzzled why the others are not willing to address the tasks of the group in a straightforward, logical manner.

If we are working with the group, we might invite them to sketch out their own imagoes

and to include within those the relative sizes of the different elements of each person. We can easily imagine that some will have 'larger' Parent, Child or Adult ego states and therefore more significant dynamics about Etiquette, Character or Today. This might explain why some become:

- leaders – Parent if controlling or nurturing, Adult if genuinely democratic.
- followers – Child if adapted, submissive, rebellious or withdrawn, Adult if they recognise that someone else will be a more effective leader than they would.
- technical 'experts' but not leaders or followers because they are the most up-to-date members of the group in terms of today's requirements for undertaking the tasks of the group.

These might be illustrated as shown in Figure 4.

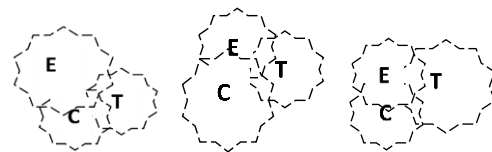


Figure 4: Individuals with unbalanced ETC

In later stages of group formation, and especially in groups that have been running for some time, it might well be that the imagoes now have a hierarchy within them. The 'pecking order' may be represented by a diagram in which the leader and those close to the leader are shown at the top of the imago and have larger Etiquettes compared to the size of the Character and Today. Some of the followers might then be shown nearer the bottom of the imago, with a larger Character, and possibly even distinguished by whether that is seen by the leaders as positive (not too much Character) or negative, with considerable Character that is directly opposing the group Etiquette set by the others.

It is likely that in groups such as this, those who may have a larger Today may simply be seen by the others as another form of negative Character. This is particularly likely if the leaders setting the Etiquette for the group

believe, inaccurately, that they have a better awareness of what is needed in terms of undertaking the group tasks, or if they are more interested in maintaining the group in its current form than they are in completing the tasks.

An alternative way of showing a group could be based on Berne's (1963) core structural diagram, as shown in Figure 5. In this the leadership are shown as setting the Etiquette, with some of the members of the group following that Etiquette and some of them displaying Character with varying degrees of rebellion against the Etiquette. In an unhealthy group, those attempting to operate on the basis of Today may exist only as occasional disconnected individuals.

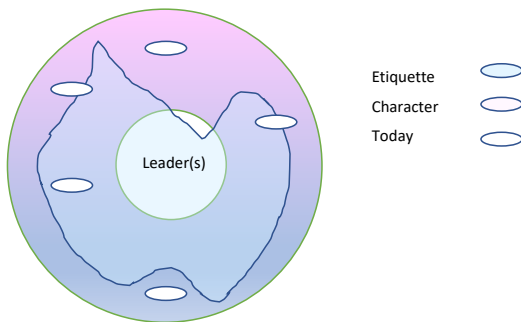


Figure 5: ETC applied to Group Structure

## Organisations

WE can apply the ETC idea to organisations in the same ways as for groups.

First, we can imagine an organisation as being a collection of groups with their own ETCs. Using a typical triangle shape to reflect that many organisations are hierarchical, this might look as shown in Figure 6. Each of the group imagoes represents a team of people. Some of those groups will be effective teams with healthy imagoes and some may have very unhealthy imagoes. This representation could be overlaid onto a normal organisation chart, based on how team members see their own groups or on how the managers, and the senior managers, perceive the teams.

Alternatively, we could shade in the organisation, using whichever shape seems appropriate, in the same way that Figure 5 has been done for a group.

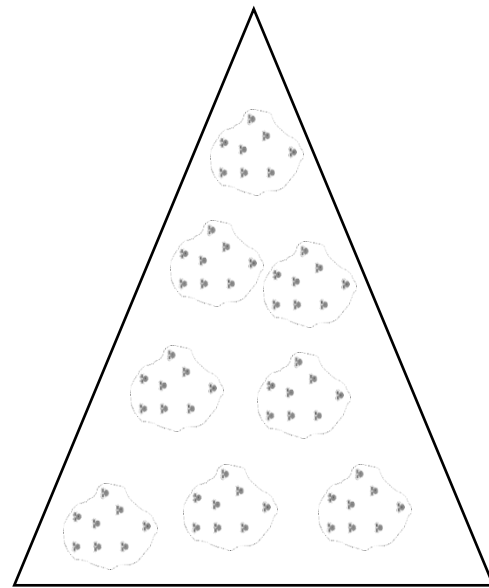


Figure 6: An organisation comprised of imagoes of groups of individual ETCs.

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