

Stroking Models and Lockdowns

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In a previous IDTA Newsletter (Hay, 2020), I pointed out that the TA concept of stroking gives us a simple explanation of why the Covid lockdowns have been so stressful for so many people - it has severely disrupted their stroking patterns. In addition to the obvious problems due to lack of contact with family and friends, a major component of the stroking pattern of many people is situated at work, interacting with colleagues, customers, managers, and so on. This may be even more significant for some than the regular interactions with friends and family. Suddenly, all of these may have stopped. This change has been even more problematic for those who already lacked adequate stroking patterns before Covid, such as a client whose stroking pattern is largely restricted to an hour a week with their therapist, or a TA student who relies on the strokes from a weekend workshop once a month. Let's not forget those who teach, whose stroking patterns may rely too much on the interactions with their students.

As we continue with lockdowns, I have reviewed some of the earlier material about strokes and provide a summary below from 1961 to 1997- i.e. the previous century! I invite you to play with some of the models.

1961 - 1979

According to Novey (1987), the first reference to the term 'stroking' appeared in Berne (1961) when he wrote of the biological gains from playing games. Novey next indicates that Kupfer (1962) described 'verbal stroking' (recognition) as a substitute for the physical caressing necessary to preserve the physical health of an infant, and that stroking is based on a 'reciprocal trade agreement', with givers expecting to be compensated by strokes received.

Berne often referenced Spitz (1945), describing how Spitz's work in founding homes demonstrated that infants deprived of handling would be more likely to succumb to

diseases which were often fatal; however interpretations of Spitz's work have been challenged since then (Spitz excluded as irrelevant how long the babies had been breast-fed).

Capers (1967) wrote of the differences between spurious and authentic strokes, suggesting that what he referred to as 'praise/criticism' is not the same as stroking.

Dusay (1967) wrote that the early nourishment in the form of physical contact from a mother or mother substitute is known as *stroking*, the need for which continues throughout life.

Steiner (1970) wrote what has become well-known as the Warm Fuzzy Tale, and (Steiner 1971a) provided a more detailed description of strokes, as a special form of stimulation one person gives to another. In the same year, Steiner (1971b) introduced the concept of the stroke economy, listing the now familiar "Don't give strokes." "Don't ask for strokes." "Don't accept strokes." "Don't reject strokes and 'Don't stroke yourself'.

Samuels (1971) linked strokes to contact stimuli as necessary for physical survival and non-contact stimuli for psychological existence.

During the following year, Berne (1972) was published posthumously but appeared to make only one small reference to strokes as being the units of a ritual, even though this book contained a complete chapter on the principles of transactional analysis.

Two years later, Cooper & Kahler (1974) suggested an eightfold classification of strokes and discounts. Referring to Schiff's (1974) work on "four types of discounts or non-relevant stimuli or responses: self, significance, problem, and solution" (p. 30), they combine this with the way strokes are typically thought of as "positive, conditional and unconditional, and negative" (p. 30). They went on to suggest a three-dimensional (which however they show as two dimensional) classification system to eliminate the confusion that had occurred between discounts and negative strokes, and to incorporate OKness.

The three dimensions are: strokes versus discounts; positive versus negative; unconditional versus conditional. They point out that problems and solutions cannot be stroked so they refer only to self and to significance of others, listing the eight possible combinations as: unconditional negative discounts (UND); conditional negative discounts (CND); conditional positive discounts (CPD); unconditional positive discounts (UPD); unconditional negative strokes (UNS); conditional negative strokes (CNS); conditional positive strokes (CPS); and unconditional positive strokes (UPS). These are shown in Figure 1.

They provide the following examples:

UPS: "I like you [me] for you [me]."

CPS: "You [I] did a good job at work."

CNS: "You [I] did not do a good job at work."

UNS: "I don't like you [me] for you[*rself*] [me]."

UPD: "Sure I like you [me], I like everyone."

CPD: "You [I] did a good job a[t] work, after all everybody said so."

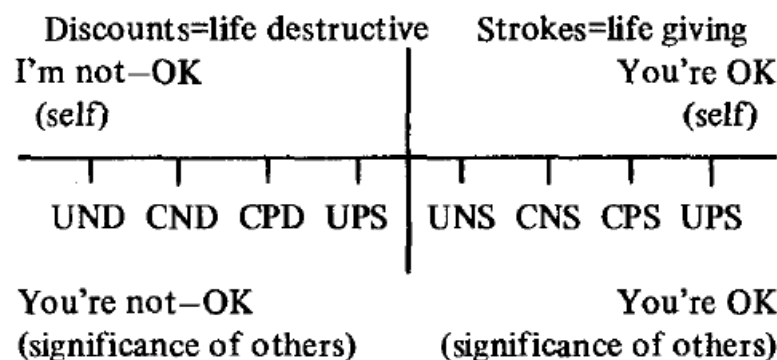
CND: "You [I] did a lousy job at work, after all everybody said so."

UND: "You're [I'm] basically no damn good like everybody else." (p. 31) ([*items*] in original, [*items*] in italics added).

They conclude with the comment that "Even conditional and unconditional negative strokes are life giving because they are

relevant. All discounts are life destructive. Negative strokes are better than no strokes [discounts] at all." (p. 31). It appears that Cooper & Kahler identified as negative discounts those strokes that might have sounded positive or negative but were followed immediately by a statement that was a discount. Their examples of these discounts are all of grandiosity (Schiff 1975) i.e. 'everybody'. Previously in the article they had included an example of "I like you, I like tall men" which is likewise grandiosity in terms of liking (all) tall men. They also distinguish between positive as pleasurable and negative as painful, which overlooks the ways in which constructive criticism might be experienced as painful yet still be given as an I'm OK, You're OK positive stroke.

Woollams & Brown (1978) provide a complete chapter on strokes which pulls together much of the material that had by then been produced by others. They begin by describing a stroke as a unit of attention which provides stimulation to an individual, referring to Spitz, and then to non-TA author (NTA) Brown (1970) and NTA Levine (1960) for work that showed how rats who are electrically shocked thrive better than those fed as well but given no stimulation. They also quote the NTA Harlow & Harlow (1962) well-known study of monkeys which showed that infant monkeys would spend more time with a 'punishing' fake mother that gave no food than they would with a fake mother that provided food but no stimulation.



Note that the UPS on left side of figure should read UPD, and You're OK in the top right hand corner should read I'm OK

Figure 1: Scale of Strokes and Discounts (Cooper & Kahler, 1974, p. 30)

Woollams and Brown pointed out that external strokes – from another person – are necessary for healthy functioning and the original source of the term ‘stroke’ was of a parent physically stroking a baby. However, they point out that stimulation for some people also comes from “... inanimate external sources such as nature, plus internal sources such as old memories, new fantasies or ideas, movement, and other forms of self-stimulation. Since people respond to the stimuli in much the same way that they respond to the strokes of social intercourse, we use the term internal strokes for these essentially solitary and internal ways of satisfying stimulus-hunger.” (p. 47). They also link internal strokes to the representation systems of auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, olfactory, gustatory and cognitive. They warn that an overreliance on internal strokes will not be enough; we need external strokes for optimal functioning.

They go on to write about positive strokes, which carry a “You’re OK” message and usually result in good feelings for the receiver; negative strokes which are painful and sometimes carry a “You’re not OK” message; filtered strokes which are distorted or contain non-relevant information and are therefore discounted strokes; and conditional for doing something versus unconditional for characteristics which occur naturally and hence will have more intensity.

They also write of stroke power, using a short story example to illustrate that a negative stroke will usually have far more impact than a larger number of positive strokes. In their example, a young man treats a young woman very well during an evening and then at the end suddenly rejects her – she is more likely to feel the impact of the rejection than the effect of the pleasant strokes during the rest of the evening. The intensity of the stroke power will also be affected by who is giving the stroke, and the way in which it is delivered. Routine caretaking of a child might represent five positive strokes whereas a parent’s anger might equate to 200 negative strokes, and their rage might even reach 1000 negative strokes. Woollams & Brown suggest

that the Little Professor in each person also operates a stroke filter which maintains the script by letting in only those strokes which fit the person’s frame of reference and filtering out any contradictory information, or distorting it in such a way that the meaning is changed before the stroke can be allowed through.

In an article that appeared in the same year and was a shortened version of the material in the chapter described above (Woollams 1978) placed more focus on internal strokes. He gave examples of positive strokes and wrote that negative ones are equally possible.

Summerton (1979) introduces RANI, which he uses as an acronym for Relationship Analysis Instrument. This makes use of the stroking combinations shown in Figure 2, of Parent to Parent, Adult to Adult, Child to Child, Parent to Child and Child to Parent, which Summerton points out are the most common in his experience.

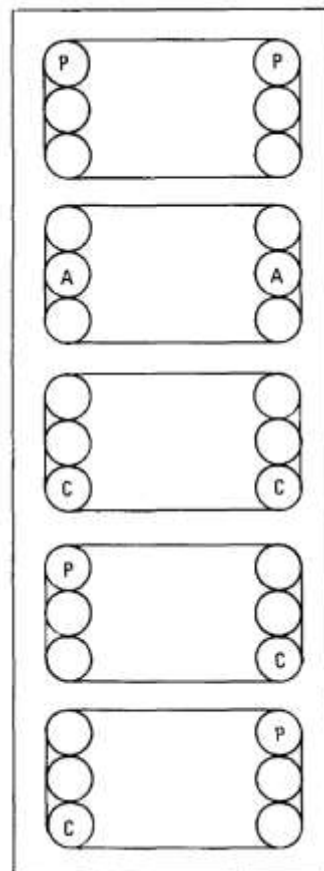


Figure 2: RANI (Summerton, 1979, p. 115)

Reminding us that strokes may be conditional or unconditional, Summerton also points out that in his experience they are rarely one or the other but on a scale between the two extremes. For positive and negative strokes, he describes them respectively as pleasant and supportive of the individual or unpleasant and destructive of the individual in some way or other. He links the four kinds of strokes to produce the following stroking combinations:

“+ U + C: positive unconditional positive conditional; +U - C: positive unconditional negative conditional; - U + C: negative unconditional positive conditional; - U - C: negative unconditional negative conditional. Here the code is: + = positive; - = negative; U = unconditional; and, C = conditional.

The stroking combinations are described colloquially. + U + C = I like you and I like what you do. + U - C = I like you and I do not like what you do. - U + C = I don't like you but I like the way you do things. - U - C = I neither like you nor what you do.” (p. 116).

He goes on to relate these to Berne's (1961) four relationship possibilities: Sympathy – get along well together; Antagonism – enjoy fighting or arguing with each other; Antipathy – cannot stand each other; and Indifference – have nothing to say to each other. He links these with symbols to the stroking combinations as shown in Figure 3.

Summerton goes on to provide some examples of how clients have used the Instrument to identify where they wish to change their relationships, such as Santosh who decided to ask for and listen to his wife's opinions in the Parent to Parent interaction.

He recommends that weightings are applied so that clients concentrate on one change at a time. He suggests that partners complete the Instrument individually before comparing notes, and that sometimes it may be necessary to consider 2nd order functioning in terms of Nurturing or Controlling Parent, Adapted or Free Child.

1980 - 1997

Sprietsma (1980) wrote about the Stroke-Scope, which he described as a diagram for analysing strokes in terms of their type, style and degree of recognition being given and received. He emphasised that he was using Berne's sense of stroke being a basic unit of recognition and a basic unit of transaction, pointing out that the term stroke was too often being equated only to positive and love and that every transaction is an exchange of a stimulus and a response stroke. He also proposed that there might be fifth category of TA theory – Stroke Analysis – alongside structural, transactional, game and script analysis.

He referred to Chuck Kelly in Radix Journal and Alexander Lowen in bioenergetics literature [no references given] for providing him with the factors of an Affective element of feeling and the Cognitive components of thinking and willing, from which he proposed that the affective component can be regarded as a continuum from pleasure to pain as the type of stroke, with cognitive linked to time structuring and on a continuum from action, towards the other, and passion, directed inwards, as the style of stroke. This produced the basic diagram shown as Figure 4.



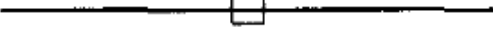

Relationship Type	Symbol	Stroking Combination
Sympathy		(+ U + C)
Antagonism		(+ U - C)
Antipathy		(- U + C)
Indifference		(- U - C)

Figure 3: Relationship Qualities (Summerton, 1979, p. 116)

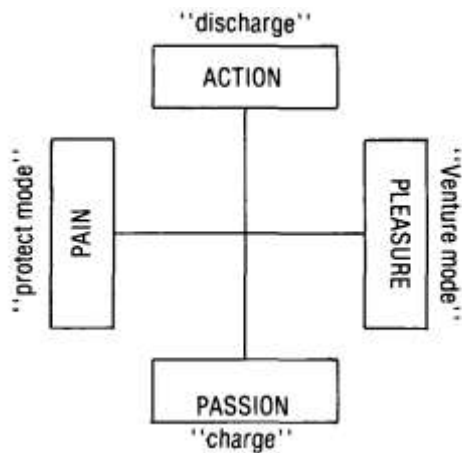


Figure 4: Four basic priorities (Sprietsma, 1980, p.69)

He explained that the Pleasure-Pain dimension is not the same as Positive - Negative strokes, preferring to use the latter definition in reference to the healthy or unhealthy effects of stroke; for example, it may be healthy and positive to disapprove of harmful behaviour.

He went on to add a Conditional-Unconditional distinction for the degree of intensity of the recognition involved, with the degree being partly influenced by how the recipient receives the stroke. He pointed out that stroking for doing and for being are closely entwined so the distinction needs to be what condition is being placed on the giving of the recognition, with unconditional being an external perception and objective, and conditional being more centred on the internal perception of the individual giving the stroke. He showed the degree of recognition as concentric circles with increasing intensity (Figure 5).

He went on to refer to accounting and discounting strokes rather than seeing discounting as the opposite of a stroke. Discounting of self occurs in the conditional, internal awareness whereas discounting shows up in unconditional, outward directed aspects. The person may also discount or account for the situation, such as ignoring or taking into account the road conditions when driving a car.

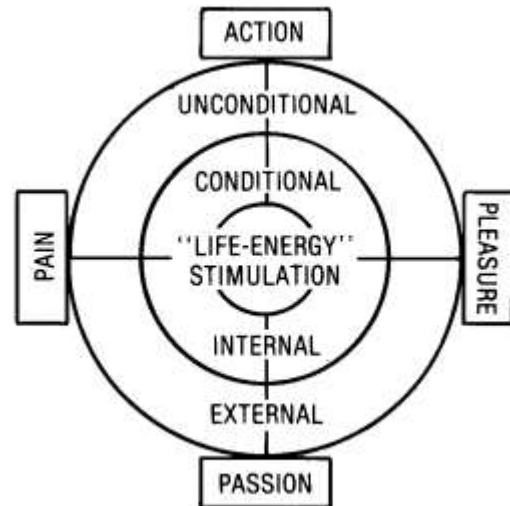


Figure 5: The Basic Stroke-Scope Diagram, Sprietsma, 1980, p.70

Sprietsma went on to synthesise from sources such as Timothy Leary as well as Chuck Kelly [no references given] to arrive at a more detailed diagram as shown below as Figure 6. In this, Acceptance is the combination of Pleasure flowing outward into Action; Submission is Pleasure building up to Passion; Dominant behaviour is Pain combined with Action; Rejection is Pain going into Passion. Acceptance can be likened to warm fuzzies; Submission to sugar or plastic fuzzies (sweet to receive but with no nutrients); Dominant will involve cold pricklies; and for Rejection he suggested poison pricklies.

Richard Erskine (1980) wrote of stroke ripoff as a way of getting attention from another person who may not wish to give the attention. He described how people come to therapy who are actively engaging in stroking exchanges but appear to have the same problems as others who are in strokeless environments, explaining that the problems may be because they are ripping people off for strokes. They may appear gregarious but people tire of them, or they may engage in continuous low-level conflicts. Erskine illustrates an example of interlocking racket systems, here as Figure 7, showing also how the problem manifests for the person who allows themselves to be ripped off for strokes.



Figure 6: Stroke-Scope (Sprietsma, 1980, p.72)

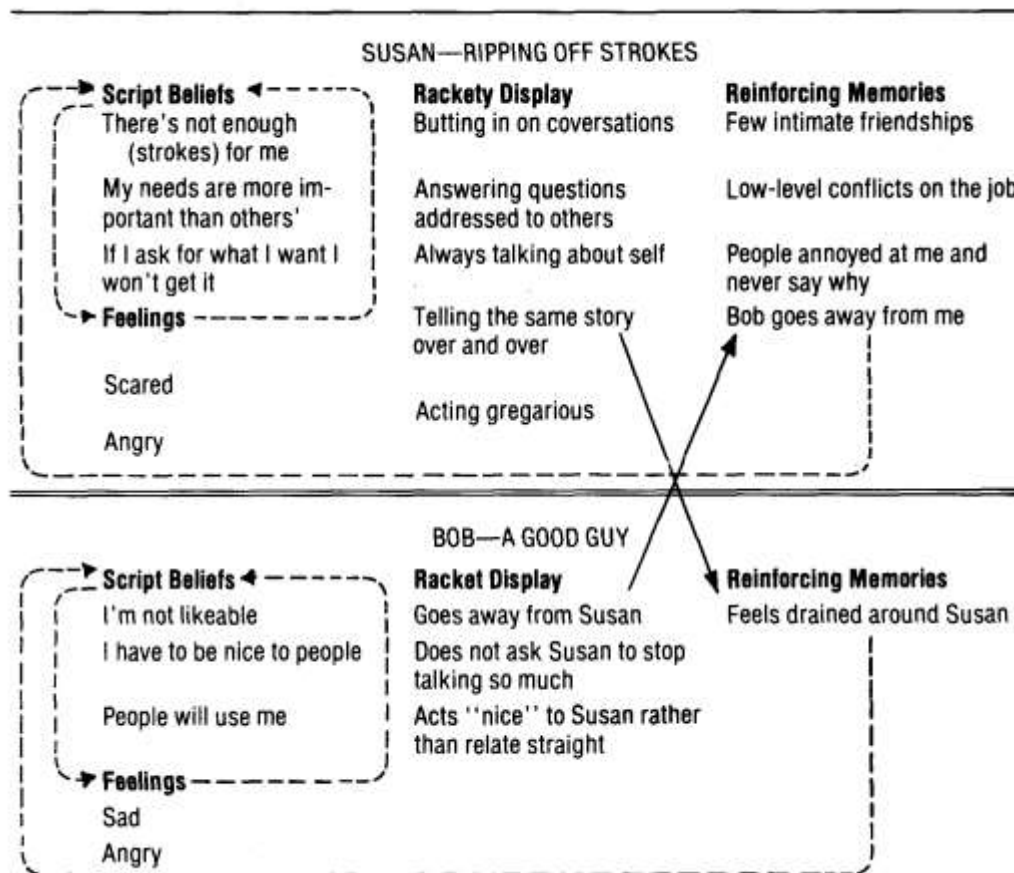


Figure 7: Interlocking Racket System (Erskine, 1980, p.75)

Dorothea Hunt and Edward Kuekes (1984) describe what they refer to as the Stroke Lattice as a diagram (Figure 8) within which clients can consider examples of 16 different types of strokes. Where there are gaps, the practitioner might prompt the person with examples; the aim is to identify those areas where the client stroking pattern needs to be changed. They note that they use positive to indicate something pleasurable and negative for something painful, and contact as physical touch and noncontact as without physical touch.

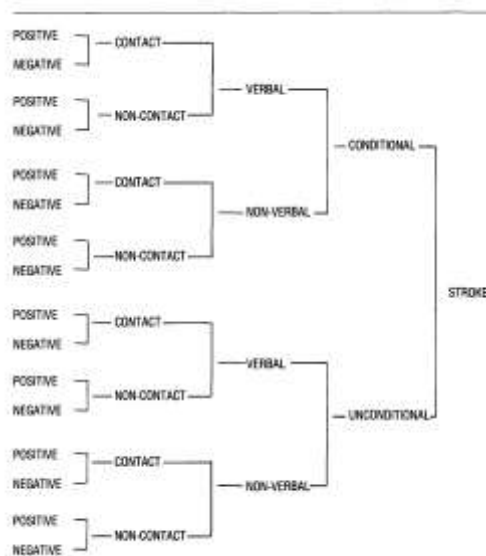


Figure 8: Stroke Lattice (Hunt & Kuekes, 1984, p.73)

Kate Meredith (1986) proposed what she referred to as the Stroke-O-Graph as a way to help people develop psychological literacy through helping them understand the legitimacy of satisfying their psychological needs in the same way that they expect to meet their biological needs. She quoted Berne (1961) for the three basic psychological needs of stimulus, position and structure hunger, and for the recognition that people seek to meet these hungers through strokes. The Stroke-O-Graph in the basic version, as shown in Figure 9, is a chart where the client can record the time spent in specific structures and types of stroke. Clients are given an explanation of the various concepts and how to record them. A more complex version includes the client noting the degree of stroke

intensity (1-10) and their psychological position (using numbers to indicate 1. good; 2. blaming; 3. depressed, running away or rescuing; 4. hopeless/helpless).

Jorge Oller-Vallejo (1994) suggested that we consider an additional classification of attributive strokes, which relates to the physical and psychological differences between people and therefore bridges the gap between conditional and unconditional strokes. Warning that we need to avoid negative attributive strokes, he gives several examples of positive: "“I like your dark eyes," "I love your enigmatic look," "I liked your spontaneity when you were talking," "I admire your tenacity in doing this job," "I enjoyed the rigor of your reasoning," and "I appreciate your musical talent.”" (p. 187), followed by some examples of negative attributive strokes: "“You're short," "You work slowly," "I resent your (sic) getting so near me," and "I don't understand why you get lost so easily.”" (p.187).

Oller-Vallejo emphasises that we must be careful not to reinforce script injunctions so we need to ensure the attributive stroke relates to a specific situation, such as stroking someone for working hard on a particular project rather than stroking them for working hard generally.

Isabella D’Amore (1997) critiqued the way in which the concept of strokes, as recognition hunger, has come to be seen within TA as a widely held theory of motivation whereas her analysis of Berne’s writing indicates that the emphasis should be on stimulus hunger and social intercourse. She defined motivation as “a dynamic process of being or, rather, the way through which human beings interact, in a bivectoral continuum, with the world and each other.” (p.181). She was writing to correct what she saw as a distortion, reminding us that Berne never wrote of a specific motivation theory but referred to three drives or hungers related to structuring time: stimulus or sensation hunger, recognition hunger, and structure hunger (Berne, 1972). She went on to point out that Steiner (1971a) altered the meaning of Berne’s words, emphasising strokes rather

STRUCTURE	(Example) MONDAY		TUESDAY		WEDNESDAY		THU Hrs.
	Hrs.	Type	Hrs.	Type	Hrs.	Type	
WITHDRAWAL	8	—C*					
Details	3	—C					
	Restless sleep: Lonely, watched T.V.						
RITUALS	1	+C					
Details	Social C'tee meeting - praised for work done.						
PASTIMES	½	+ u/c					
Details	Talked to neighbor						
ACTIVITIES	8	+C & —C					
Details	3	—C					
	Work: Housework						
RACKETS & GAMES	½	—U/C					
Details	Fight with boyfriend.						
INTIMACY							
Details	—						
PLAY							
Details	—						
Total	24						
Remarks. Average:	Usually sleep better						

* —C = negative conditional.

Figure 1

Figure 9: Stroke-O-Graph (The Mini Version) (Meredith, 1986, p.162)

than the original emphasis on the value of the social relationship. This made Steiner's material unidirectional, through his emphasis on the significance of strokes from parents whereas Berne had referred to social handling and physical intimacy.

D'Amore goes on to review Berne's material across the years from the late 1940's until his posthumous publication in 1972, as well as pointing out that other authors have followed Steiner's lead. She adds that Berne mentioned the term stroke only seven times in all of his work that had been translated into Italian, whereas "it is almost impossible to count the number of times he talked about *stimulus*, *hunger for stimulus*, *need for stimulus* (biological, social, psychological), and *structural stimuli*." (p.190) (italics in original).

She concludes that we need to reflect on the tendency to focus on behavioural change rather than on a vast range of elements including biological, psychological and social.

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