

# Eric Berne's Development of Ego State Theory: Where Did It All Begin and Who Influenced Him?

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## **Abstract**

**This article traces the early beginnings of Berne's development of ego state theory through a careful reading of his published works. It also highlights the key theorists who influenced Berne in this regard and what contributions they made.**

I am currently engaged in writing a biography of Eric Berne, one aspect of which is tracing Berne's theoretical development, including those who influenced him. The focus of this particular article is the beginnings of ego state theory. I have chosen to focus on ego states because that is where Berne's development of transactional analysis began and because ego state theory is the cornerstone of transactional analysis theory. In Berne's own words, from a keynote he gave at the IV International Congress of Group Psychotherapy in Vienna in 1968, "Ego states are the key to Transactional Analysis. If you can't break it down to ego states, it is not Transactional Analysis" (Berne, 1973, p. 71).

In tracing his theoretical influences and development, I have drawn solely from Berne's published works, although I recognize that there may well have been other people, events, and experiences that also influenced the development of his theory in general and his ego state theory in particular.

In this article I first describe the beginnings and development of Berne's ego state theory and then explore the contribution of the main theorists who influenced him in this regard.

## **In the Beginning**

In this section I trace the introduction of the Adult and Child ego states in Berne's writings and then include brief descriptions of the ego image, ego model, and ego symbol because these were clearly important aspects of Berne's

thinking in his early development of ego state theory.

*The Adult and Child Ego States.* In his book *The Mind in Action*, Berne (1947) referred to the "ego" using a Freudian abstract frame of reference:

Awake or asleep, the Id continues to strive for gratification. During the waking hours it is prevented from asserting itself directly by the Superego, with its stern ideas of what is right and wrong, and by the Ego, with its realization of what consequences may follow unwise gratification of impulses. (p. 110)

By 1957, in his article entitled "Intuition V. The Ego Image," Berne (1957b) was writing quite differently about the ego and was clearly differentiating two different states of the ego. This is the first publication in which Berne started to describe his ego state theory. For example, he told the story of the lawyer who said, "Sometimes I feel that I'm not really a lawyer, I'm just a little boy" (p. 611). In the same article, Berne went on to state that there were two different conscious ego states, one an adult and one a child, and that this same division could be observed in every patient. Berne found using this perspective clinically useful; for example, he described a patient called Diana and then stated:

In the five years after the therapist focused on perception of her [Diana's] ego state (1951-1956), she required no further hospitalization. . . . her mature ego (the "adult") had been strengthened sufficiently so that she did not break down, and so that she recognized her troublesome feelings as delusions, the revival of an archaic ego state (Cf. Federn [1952]). (pp. 614-615)

I think it is reasonable to assume that "the therapist" in question was Berne himself, which means that he was thinking about different states of the ego from at least the early 1950s.

Also, this is the first time Berne cited Federn in relationship to ego states (see next section). In this quote, Berne was clearly distinguishing between a mature functioning ego and an archaic ego state. Later in the same article, Berne referred to these two aspects of the ego as the "adult" and the "child" (Berne, 1957b, p. 627) respectively, putting the words "adult" and "child" in quotation marks.

*Ego Image, Ego Model, and Ego Symbol.* Berne (1961/1991) emphasized that he developed his ego state theory phenomenologically, through clinical experience and observation. This can be clearly witnessed through his differentiation of the ego image, ego model, and ego symbol, all of which he considered to be guiding influences for the therapist (Berne, 1957b).

*Ego image:* Berne (1957b) described the ego image as the therapist's intuitive perception of the patient's "active archaic ego state" (p. 613), for example, an adult patient who is intuitively perceived by the therapist as a "child, writhing with embarrassment" (p. 615). Berne suggested the theoretical basis of the ego image originated in Federn's (1952) ideas, which were published posthumously. He quoted Weiss's (1950) summary of Federn's ideas as follows: "That ego configurations of former age levels are maintained in potential existence within one's personality is experimentally proven, since they can be re-catheted directly under special conditions; for instance, in hypnosis, in dreams, and in psychosis" (p. 80). Berne (1957b) then described how Federn maintained that many neurotics and latent psychotics were fixated in their ego states. With this in mind, Berne embellished his description of an ego image as an "intuitively selected paradigm of the patient's ego fixation" (p. 623). The ego image was particularly prized by Berne as a most clinically useful perceptual tool.

*Ego model:* At this time, Berne (1957b) referred to the ego model as the therapist's descriptive perception of the patient and as "an academic, inferential and rather stereotyped" (p. 617) model. He also described the ego model as a fleshless "perceptual skeleton" (p. 617) that could be added to bone by bone. Berne stated that he considered the ego model to

come to its "highest flower" (p. 621) in the work of Eugen Kahn (1931), who had developed models giving detailed clinical descriptions of various psychopathologies. Berne also added that later, Kahn (Kahn & Cohen, 1936) usefully attributed a "way of experiencing" (p. 381) to each of the psychopathological types he described.

*Ego symbol:* Berne (1957b) saw an ego symbol as an intermediate between an ego image and an ego model. He gave the example of a patient who brought to a session a magazine cutting of a plucked chicken lying on a couch cheerfully waiting to be cooked and eaten, and how this clearly represented the patient's attitude and feelings. This image of the chicken became Berne's ego symbol for this patient. Berne considered ego symbols to be similar to Silberer's (1951) approach to functional phenomenon. Silberer, an Austrian psychoanalyst (1882-1923), considered the images and symbols perceived in the hypnagogic state (i.e., the state of drowsiness/consciousness immediately preceding sleep) to be representative or symbolic of the physical or mental state of the perceiver and to reveal affects and emotions in a functional way.

In his later works, Berne largely dropped references to the ego image, ego model, and ego symbol and referred, instead, to the structural or ego state model.

### The Next Step

In this section, I will describe the introduction of the Parent ego state, structural analysis, and the first definition of an ego state in Berne's writings. I will also comment on the significance of 1957.

*The Parent Ego State.* In his 1957b article entitled "Intuition V. The Ego Image," Berne alluded for the first time to the Parent ego state, without naming it, when he wrote:

The therapist who works with ego images for a year or two will eventually run into a complication. He will find that there are not two, but several, ego states that have to be taken into account for more precise work. While the child-adult framework gives excellent results in many types of cases, it is possible to go farther. (p. 626)

It was in his next article, “Ego States in Psychotherapy,” that Berne (1957a) wrote for the first time explicitly about the Parent ego state:

It became evident that certain of his [the lawyer—Berne’s patient] attitudes did not belong to either the “child” or the “adult,” as we increased our understanding of those components. These anomalous attitudes were collected and crystallized into a third ego state which came to be called the “parent,” since they were evidently a reflection of parental prejudices. (p. 297)

Berne added that the “dialogue” (p. 298) between the ego states would sometimes, therefore, become a “trialogue” (p. 298). It was not until this second article published in 1957 that Berne began to capitalize the initial letters of ego states. He wrote in explanation, “It is more convenient to capitalize Parent, Adult and Child when ego states are referred to, than to put them in quotation marks” (p. 300).

From Berne’s early writings, a reader may come to believe there are only three ego states—a Parent ego state, a Child ego state, and an Adult ego state—when, in fact, these labels are intended to portray three categories of ego states. This point was emphasized by Stewart (1992) in his book entitled *Eric Berne*. For example, he clarified that “the word ‘Child’ on Berne’s full definition does not refer to ‘one ego-state’. It denotes a whole category of ego-states. All the ego-states in that category share one defining feature: they are archaic relics of the person’s own childhood” (p. 26). For further, and more recent, clarifications and theoretical developments regarding ego state theory, the reader is also referred to *Ego States*, edited by Sills and Hargaden (2003).

*Structural Analysis*. In his article entitled “Ego States in Psychotherapy,” Berne (1957a) also, for the first time, referred to “structural analysis” (p. 296) and defined it as the “process of clearly differentiating ego states” (p. 296). He (Berne, 1961/1991) explained that in looking for confirmation in the literature for the findings of structural analysis (and transactional analysis), he was pleased “to discover, or re-discover, that he was following in the footsteps of two of the most remarkable of his teachers (Penfield and Federn)” (p. 20). Penfield’s and

Federn’s influence on Berne is discussed further in the next section.

*The first definition*: It was in his 1957a article that Berne proffered his first definition of an ego state: “An ‘ego state’ may be described phenomenologically as a coherent system of feelings, and operationally as a set of coherent behavior patterns; or pragmatically, as a system of feelings which motivates a related set of behavior patterns” (p. 295). In this early definition, Berne reveals the breadth of his thinking regarding the importance of experiencing and phenomenology, the observable and behavioral, and outcomes and pragmatism.

*The significance of 1957*: The year 1957 was significant in terms of the history of ego state theory and, therefore, of transactional analysis. That was the year when Berne first published articles about separate states of the ego. Yet we know that he was thinking about ego states from the early 1950s (e.g., the example of the client Diana described earlier). Could it be that after his application for membership in the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute was turned down, in 1956, that Berne felt freer to write and be open about his current thinking on the ego? A piece of evidence for this speculation comes in Berne’s book *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*, which was published in 1961. He noted that his use of the term “ego state” met with much resistance in psychoanalytic circles. He considered that many psychoanalysts preferred, and found it easier, to stick with their orthodox, concept-based theory, rather than to consider moving to a phenomenological, clinical-based approach.

### **The Main Influences on Eric Berne’s Development of Ego State Theory**

In this section, I will introduce the main theorists who influenced Berne and his development of ego state theory. In addition, I will explore the contribution of Freud, Freudian theory, and psychoanalysis on Berne’s thinking.

*The Main Influences—From Berne’s Own Words*. There are two quotes from Berne himself that acknowledge the teachers whom he felt influenced him the most. The first quote, given earlier in this paper, is the one in which Berne said he was looking for confirmation in

the literature to support his findings on structural analysis and was gratified to find "that he was following in the footsteps of two of the most remarkable of his teachers (Penfield and Federn)" (Berne, 1961/1991, p. 20). The second quote is as follows:

Of the many teachers who influenced my thinking and feeling (and here I am name-dropping, getting considerable satisfaction from having had the privilege of knowing them), the most meaningful have been Professor Eugen Kahn, the late Dr. Paul Federn and Prof. Erik Erikson. (Berne, 1963, p. xi)

It is clear from these quotes that Berne considered Federn, Erikson, Kahn, and Penfield to have been highly influential on his thinking.

*Paul Federn and ego state theory development:* The work of Federn (1871-1950, Austrian and American psychoanalyst) and (later) Weiss (1889-1970, Austrian and Italian psychoanalyst) was the precursor to Berne's own theoretical development of ego states. Weiss was Federn's chief exponent and the editor of Federn's (1952) book *Ego Psychology and the Psychoses*, which was published posthumously. According to Berne, Weiss both clarified and systematized Federn's ego psychology. I give below brief quotes from their preceding work on ego states, all of which were referred to by Berne.

Federn (1952) wrote of:

- "Day-by-day ego states" (p. 218)
- "A mental duologue between two parts of the ego, the adult and the infantile" (p. 93)

Weiss (1950) wrote:

- "Every ego-state is the actually experienced reality of one's mental and bodily ego with the contents of the lived-through period." (p. 141)
- "Two or more separate ego states may struggle to maintain integration and may consciously exist at one time." (p. 141)
- "The residual infantile ego state of the adult person" (p. 79)
- The " 'psychic presence' . . . the mental image of another ego" (p. 68)

Berne's development of ego state theory rests firmly on the foundations laid by Federn. For example, Berne (1957a) himself wrote that

some of the concepts he was using "were anticipated by Federn in his ego psychology" (p. 300), thereby clearly crediting Federn's influence. Berne concluded that what he was doing that was new was "not necessarily the concepts, but the emphasis and development" (p. 300). In terms of the significance of Federn's influence on Berne, it is also worth remembering that from 1941, Federn was Berne's first training analyst at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. Berne's analysis was cut short when he joined the United States Army in 1943.

*Erik Erikson, ego identity, and psychosocial development:* Erikson (1902-1994, German-born American child and adult psychoanalyst and educator) was clearly influential to Berne, including being Berne's second analyst from 1947-1949 and one of the founders of the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Society. Erikson used his knowledge of cultural, environmental, and social influences to broaden and expand psychoanalytic theory and to move beyond Freud's narrow psychosexual focus. Erikson's concept of ego identity contributed to an understanding of personality as it develops over the life span, with particular emphasis on adolescence. Berne frequently cited Erikson's (1950, 1959) work in his writing.

*Eugen Kahn and the classification model:* Berne credits Kahn's (1887-1973, German and American psychiatrist) classification model as providing the template for the ego model (Berne, 1957b). He considered the ego model to come to its "highest flower" (p. 621) in the work of Kahn (1931). He also felt Kahn's attribution of a "way of experiencing" (Kahn & Cohen, 1936, p. 381) for each of his psychopathological categories was a useful way of thinking about and describing fixated ego states (Berne, 1957b). Berne (1963) wrote that of all his many teachers, Kahn represented one of "the most meaningful" (p. xi).

*Wilder Penfield and neurological (and other) research:* Berne frequently referred to Penfield's (1891-1976, American and Canadian neurosurgeon and neurologist) work, as he felt it provided evidence to confirm his own conclusions regarding ego state theory (Penfield himself did not use the term "ego state"). For example, Berne (1964) stated:

Ego states are normal physiological phenomena. The human brain is the organ or organizer of psychic life, and its products are organized and stored in the form of ego states. There is already concrete evidence for this in some findings of Penfield and his associates. (p. 26)

Berne (1961/1991) explained Penfield's work as follows: "Penfield [1952] has demonstrated that in epileptic subjects memories are retained in their natural form as ego states. By direct electrical stimulation of the bared temporal cortex of either side, he was able to evoke these phenomena" (p. 17). And he quoted from several of Penfield's books and articles, for example:

The subject feels again the emotion which the situation originally produced in him, and he is aware of the same interpretations, true or false, which he himself gave to the experience in the first place. Thus, evoked recollection is not the exact photographic or phonographic reproduction of past scenes and events. It is reproduction of what the patient saw and heard and felt and understood. (Penfield, 1952, p. 183)

Berne (1961/1991) considered that Penfield demonstrated, through his neurosurgical experiments, what Federn had first noted on psychiatric grounds, namely, that "psychological reality is based on complete and discrete ego states" (p. 18).

The significance and interpretation of Penfield's findings were subsequently questioned—for example, they occurred less than 8% of the time, and the same stimulation often evoked different effects. It is now thought that Penfield's findings are more likely related to "auras that precede epileptic attacks or to hallucinations than to rekindled memory traces" (Kolb & Wishaw, 1985, p. 71). However, it is clear that Berne was influenced by and used Penfield's work to confirm his ego state theory at the time he was developing it.

Berne (1961/1991) was also influenced by and quoted other research, for example, a psychiatric study on the use of LSD to facilitate psychotherapy (Chandler & Hartman, 1960). Berne was struck by the resemblance between this study's pharmacological reactivation of archaic ego states and that achieved through

Penfield's experiments involving electrical stimulation of the cortex. He noted that both sets of experiments described the simultaneous experiencing of two ego states (although neither used the actual words "ego states"), that is, "one oriented toward the current external and psychological reality, the other a 'reliving' (rather than mere recall) of scenes dating back as far as the first year of life" (Berne, 1961/1991, p. 19).

### **The Contribution of Freud, Freudian Theory, and Psychoanalysis**

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis. From 1941-1956 Berne trained as a Freudian analyst and was a third-generation Freudian. A careful reading of Berne's published books and articles reveals that Berne continued to refer to and be informed by his Freudian psychoanalytic training for the remainder of his life. This was acknowledged by Paul McCormick, the editor of Berne's book *Intuition and Ego States*, which was published posthumously: "Readers may see . . . from all of Berne's books [and articles] . . . that he [Berne] has not disavowed his indebtedness to Freudian theory, regardless of his having parted from the Freudians" (McCormick, 1977, p. ix).

Berne continued to use Freudian theory in two main ways: first, to clarify, delineate, and differentiate his own theories and concepts from Freudian ones, and second, to describe, discuss, and make links between his clinical experiences and findings (especially where he had no developed theory or concept of his own) and Freudian theory. So, for example, Berne differentiated and contrasted his Child ego state from Freud's (1933) id: "The Child, archaic as it is, is still an organized ego state, while the id, according to Freud, is 'a chaos . . . it has no organization and no unified will' " (Berne, 1957a, p. 301).

He also compared and likened his Adult ego state with Freud's "ego":

Although there are theoretical differences which become significant in advanced work, for ordinary purposes it is not necessary to distinguish the Adult and Freud's 'ego.' Both have the task of dealing simultaneously with internal and external forces, and

both are most clearly manifested when the individual is attempting to deal objectively with external reality. (Berne, 1957a, p. 301)

And, in the following quote, we can see Berne making a theoretical link between his theory and Freud's theory: "The characteristic of the archaeopsyché is what Freud calls primary process; that of the neopsyché, secondary process; and that of the extero-psyché, something akin to identification" (Berne, 1961/1991, p. 240).

In the early 1960s, Berne (1961/1991) clarified the relationship between his use of psychoanalytic and Freudian concepts and his own theory:

Psychoanalysis and its cognates as used in this book are meant to refer to what is known as "orthodox" psychoanalysis, that is, the resolution of infantile conflicts through the systematic use of free association, dealing with the phenomena of transference and resistance according to the principles of Freud. It may be borne in mind, however, that after fifteen years the psychoanalytic movement and the writer officially parted company (on the most friendly terms) a few years ago, and that the writer's concept of ego function is different from that of the majority of orthodox psychoanalysts, approaching more closely the viewpoints of Federn (1952) and his pupil Edoardo Weiss (1950). (pp. 12-13)

A quote from Berne's reply to a critique of transactional analysis, in 1969, succinctly sums up his attitude toward Freudian (and behaviorist) theory:

As to the Freudian and behavioristic elements in transactional theory, I think both Freud and Pavlov (as well as some of their followers) were right, and I think I am right too, so I am not ready to discard any of us. Therefore, there has to be a way to get us together, which may take another ten years to do more elegantly than I have done it so far. (p. 478)

One further point of interest comes from the Note section of Chapter 17 of Berne's (1961/1991) book *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*. In it Berne explained how structural analysis was noted in 1895 by Breuer and Freud

(1895/1950) in their work with Anna O. when they observed Anna O. displaying two separate states of consciousness, a normal one and a childish one. Berne explained that for cogent reasons at the time, Freud concentrated on psychodynamics, resulting in a conceptual structure rather than a clinical one.

### Conclusion

This article has traced the early beginnings of Berne's development of ego state theory and discovered the key theorists who influenced Berne in the development of this theory. Berne's first reference to ego states came in his 1957 article entitled "Intuition V. The Ego Image." In it he clearly differentiated between "adult" and "child" ego states. Berne (1957b) explicitly named the "parent" ego state later in the same year in his next article, *Ego States in Psychotherapy*. It was there that Berne referred to structural analysis for the first time and gave his first definition of an ego state.

In his development of ego state theory, Berne was clearly influenced by the work of many theorists, the main ones being Federn, Erikson, Kahn, and Penfield. Berne also continued to use and be informed by Freudian theory. What becomes transparent is that Berne developed and built his own theory of ego states from the foundations laid by Paul Federn.

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