

Asperger's in (and outside) the therapy room – 6

In the sixth of his series of articles about working with clients who have been, or may be, diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, **PETER FLOWERDEW** looks at Transactional Analysis as a gateway to dialogue

TRANSACTONAL ANALYSIS PROVIDES a gateway to dialogue between two worlds – and the gift of autonomy for Aspies. The two elements to the title of this article show how my understanding of how Transactional Analysis can be useful when working with Asperger's clients, has developed, and how I now perceive that what I and my clients call 'Aspie TA' can facilitate a profound dialogue between the Neuro-typical NT population and the Aspie population.

I also believe Mindblindness to be the most debilitating element of being an Aspie trying to negotiate an NT world. The surprise in this journey of discovery for me, has been the impact on Aspies of having a way to understand and adapt to the states of mind of NTs. The statement Ian Stewart made in his book on Eric Berne, 'Eric Berne made states of mind visible', triggered my awareness that TA can provide is a cognitive tool for Aspies to give them insight into other people's states of mind. With that insight, they can begin to perceive other people's motives; and there is, at last, an answer to the question 'why?'. With that answer, they are better positioned to choose who to trust, and who to avoid, in personal and in business life. Anxiety diminishes.

Many NT interventions intended to help Aspies 'fit in', all too often reinforce a 'Don't be you' injunction. In contrast, the insights from applying TA help Aspies to navigate the NT world. TA provides a tool for awareness, supports autonomy and provides an experience of intimacy; a doorway to autonomy for Aspies. This is not my belief, it is the reported lived experience of the group that I have been working with. Every model that I share with you has been validated by Aspies having said 'yes, that is my world, my experience'. Their joy has been having in their friends and family, particularly their partners, say 'now I understand; that makes sense'.

Our value base

Without wishing to bring political issues into the forum TA community, it is simply a fact that the experience of the referendum on Brexit and the election of the new president of the US disturbed me profoundly, even more

in their process than in their outcome. You can smile now, as I admit that it came as a shock to me to become aware that a lot of people, maybe half of the adult population, in the UK, and the US, did not share my value base. That fact had been staring me in the face, in the content of news broadcasts every day, every year, of my adult life, but it had not registered in its depth and implications until now. The section on the Value Base of TA in the TA101 seems to me, now, the most significant, the foundation of the whole thing, rather than a bit of intellectualisation to get past, to get onto 'the good stuff' on ego states.

The way in which I seek to be with people has been, for as far as my memory reaches, the OK-OK position that Berne and his students have aspired to. Here, as I write, in my imagination, I hear a collective groan, especially from TSTAs that I know, who hear that phrase said so glibly so unthinkingly by many people. So here is how I understand the statement, 'I'm OK, you're OK':

I'm OK, You're OK – people are OK

Every person has worth and value, whatever their behaviour.

In practice: 'It is fine for you to be who you are; and I will give you the right and space for you to be you; provided you give me the same right and the same space for me to be me.'

Difference is interesting, not a threat:

Different perspectives provide more options, therefore offer more resourcefulness and resilience.

Making space for difference is an invitation for me to deepen and develop my humanity.'

Goodwill is essential but not enough; we also need insight and skill. Otherwise, it is just words.

The other two core values are:

- 'everybody can think' and Aspies tend to excel at that and like to be around people who value that
- 'and they can change a decision', but that can be more difficult for Aspies than for NTs, because so much effort has gone into the decision in the first place.

Our values directly lead to three things that are experiences by Aspies in the presence of people who hold

New writing

these values: 1) we take time to make clear explicit contracts: which suits the relational style of Aspies and reduces social anxiety; 2) we take time to listen, and we are genuinely interested in their subjective reality; 3) we can provide the experience of being welcome and of being safe.

I would usually say 'safe and welcome' – being the fundamental needs of every child; needs that remain with us all our life. With Aspies I reverse the order, because, for 'me' to feel welcome, someone else has to welcome 'me' and if I experience being genuinely welcome, then I will feel safe, and validated – meeting the first two of the fundamental relational needs identified by Erkiné, Mursund and Trautman [1999].

In the workshops that I have presented with Aspie co-presenters over the past fifteen months, the experience of feeling welcomed, safe, valued and with 'kind' people, genuinely interested in them, in itself, has been a transformation. To quote one co-presenter:

'I have never experienced the like: a room of people who were genuinely interested in my experience, who were sensitive to my sensitivities and appreciative of my honesty. They called me brave and extraordinary, and made me believe it. They were a special sort of "kind"',

The participants were all therapists, counsellors and students working for my charity.

I am constantly amazed at how the Aspies whom I work with are impacted by experiencing the quality of relationship offered by TA practitioners and how they embrace, explore and expand the theory and models.

Our models: the power of diagrams

What I want to share with you now, is how a dialogue with Richard (my client and co-presenter at the last two UKATA conferences and nine days of workshops), led to an insight that TA already had a model that allowed us to demonstrate to NTs the nature of mindblindness, and bring home the need for NTs to alter their communication style to create a dialogue with Aspies.

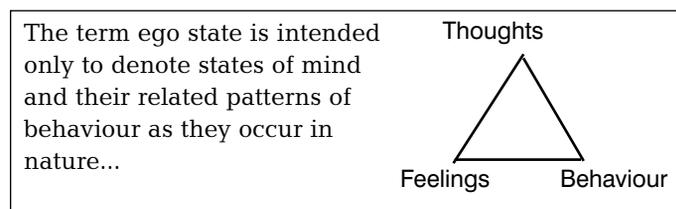
My original profession was engineering, and Richard is an engineer. Sharing the disciplines of engineering and the concepts and models of TA gave us an immediate cognitive resonance, which is the Aspie equivalent of mutuality. However, Richard has trained in Organisational TA, and I in Psychotherapy, so our models and way of thinking occasionally do not line up. In my training mode, I strive to teach a basic model of TA that is coherent and internally consistent, and is useful – the recognised qualities of a 'good' theory. Multiple, alternative, perspectives can then add depth and subtlety by embellishing the strong coherent core. I am passionate about that. So, when Richard presented a line of thought he was exploring, using a model developed by Taibi Kahler (1978), very different from the one I use, which is based on Ian Stewart's analysis (1992) of Eric Berne's

writing (1961) not only did I fail to understand his point, but I was also distracted at the time by concern for the potential for confusion in the little band of very literal minded Aspies that I had been teaching TA to, and who have become friends (a word hardly used by Aspies until now), so they discuss things among themselves. That uncomfortable moment could have faded into memory, but it niggled at the back of my mind. I had read Taibi's book, and intuitively I knew that this model had something to say about mindblindness, and that Richard was on to something.

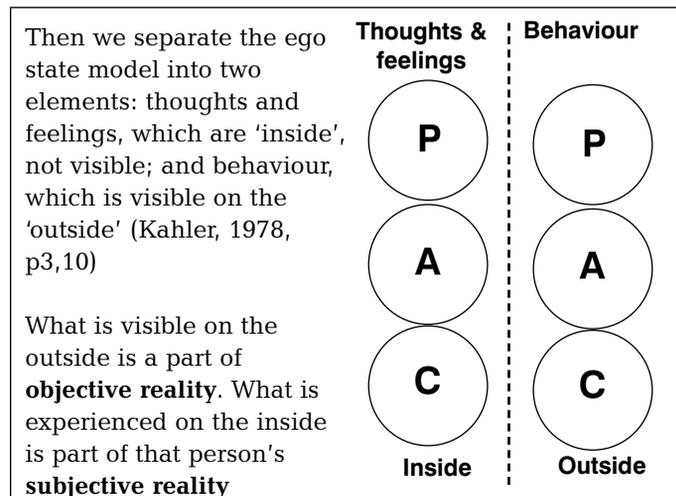
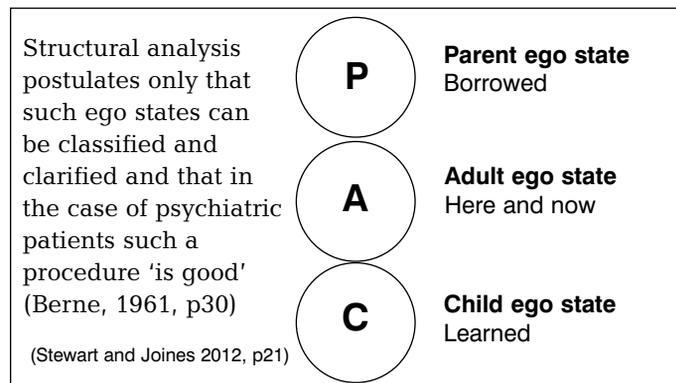
So here is the model that emerged, fully formed, in one image, concerning three aspects of reality that I present as three co-existing 'worlds': the objective world, our subjective world and a co-created intersubjective world.

To model mindblindness

We begin with an ego state:

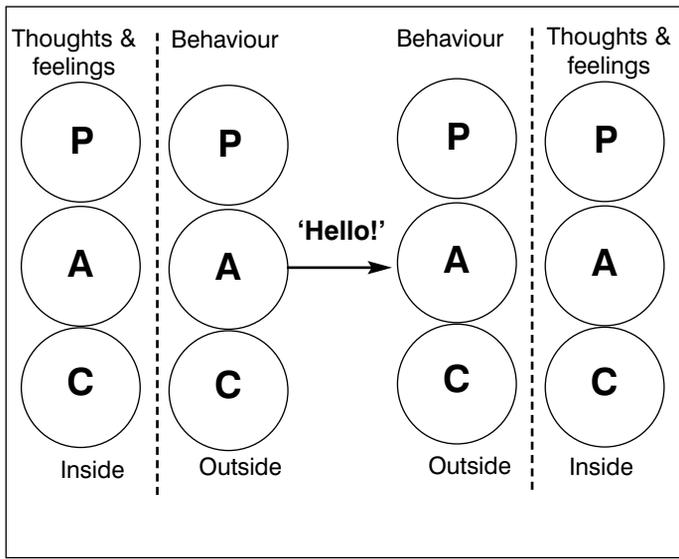


Then our model of personality



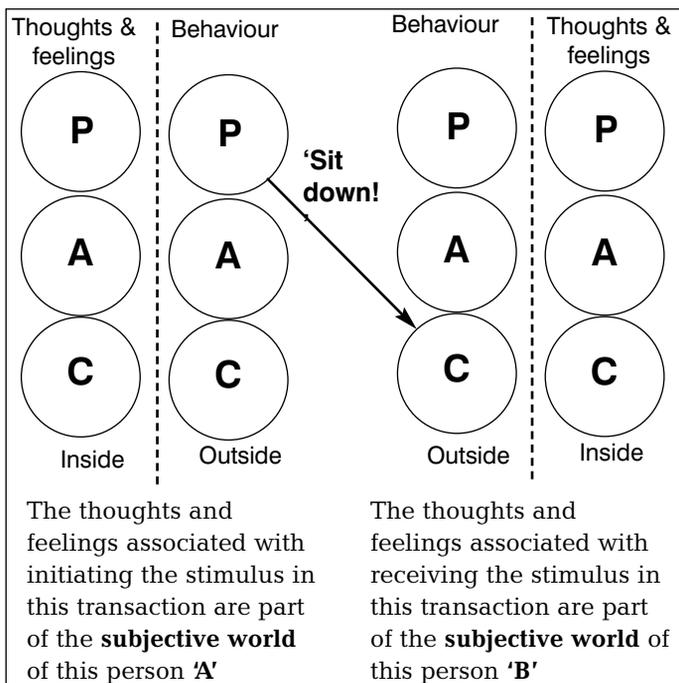
Relevant to therapy, is that for some Aspies their subjective reality comprises only their thoughts. They need to be taught both to recognise the somatic signature and the name of the feelings they are having. I have addressed this in my booklet *Asperger's in the Therapy Room*.

First, we use this model to look at transactions between two NTs, people who can 'mindread'.

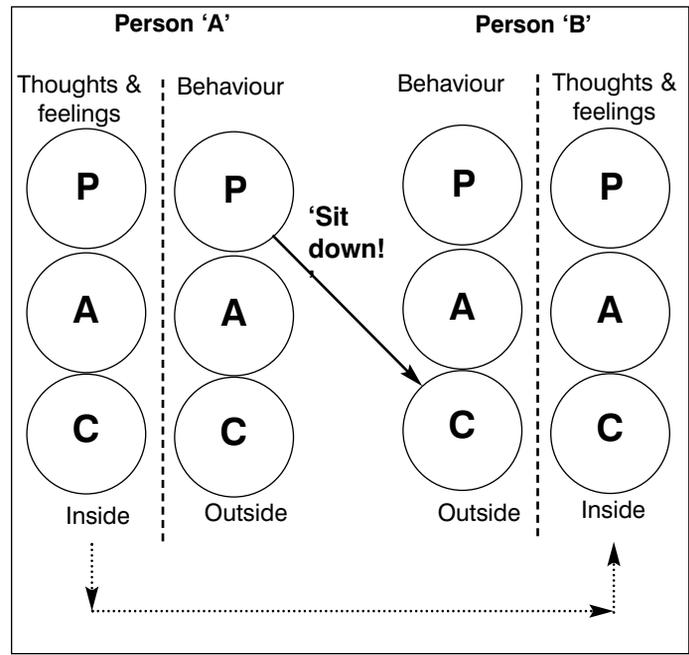


In the observable, objective world, the behavioural aspects of the transaction are available to both people.

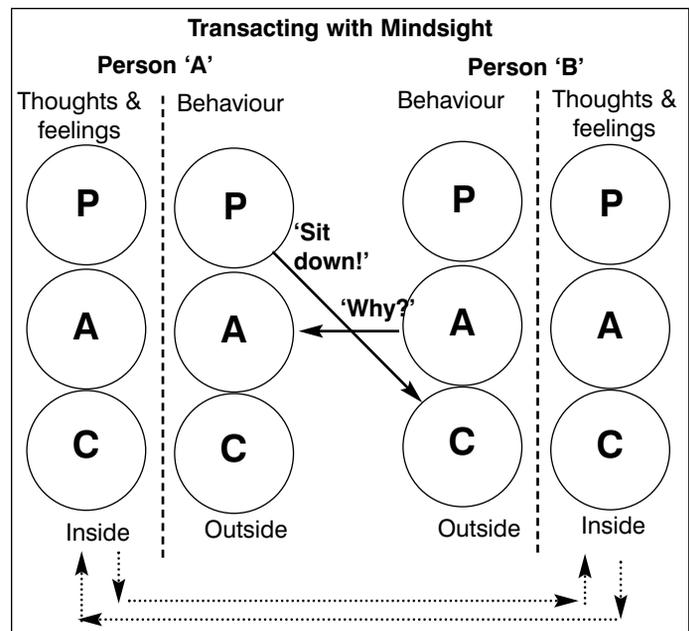
With the information so far, we might think that a ritual is taking place. If we were witnessing this, the tone of voice and body language might indicate the meeting of close friends, or lovers. Keep this in mind as you read on.



The following diagram illustrates how the thoughts and feelings associated with 'A' initiating the stimulus can be sensed and interpreted intuitively, by the recipient, 'B'. That information becomes part of the subjective world of 'B'.



The shift in the **subjective world of 'B'** can be intuitively sensed by 'A', and becomes part of the information that they use to understand the relational significance of the verbal, observable response to their original stimulus.

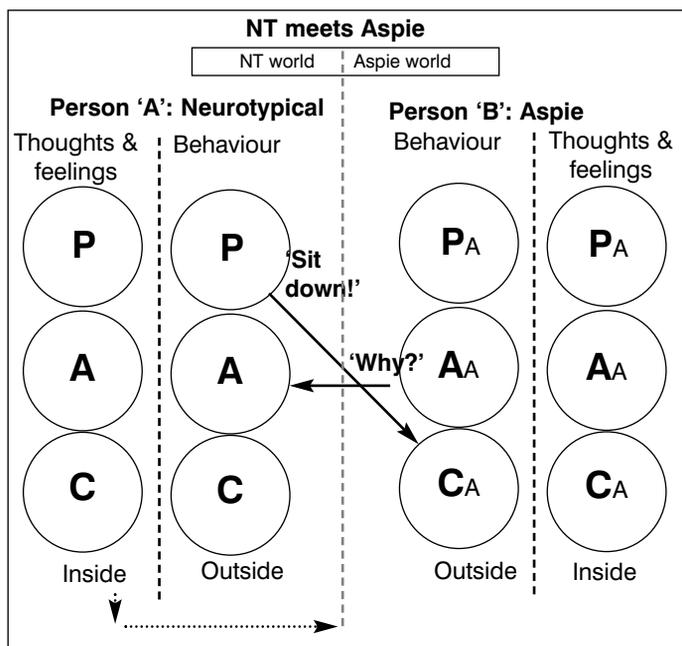


This non-verbal, intuitive understanding constitutes the **intersubjective world** co-created in the interaction.

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The observable A-A response will be experienced as congruent or incongruent with the intersubjective experience; i.e. person 'A' may or may not perceive an ulterior transaction, and that may or may not be related to Script.

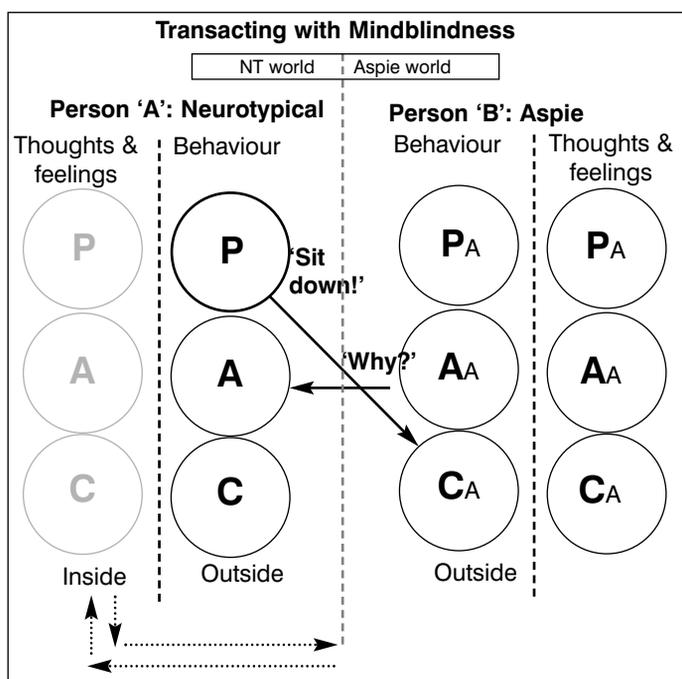
Now let's keep Person 'A' as an NT, and make Person 'B' an Aspie.



This diagram illustrates two important things:

1. the Adult of the Aspie functions in a different way to that of the NT, and that difference is reflected in archaic ego states too, as I shall discuss next time;
2. the subjective world of the NT is invisible to the Aspie.

Now let us look at it from the Aspie's point of view.



Because the subjective world of the NT is invisible to the Aspie, they cannot respond to it. The intersubjective world is not part of their reality. That is the single most important sentence in this article:

'The intersubjective world is not part of their reality.'

These two people live in totally different subjective worlds.

It is as if there is an invisible wall that blocks and distorts communications

I think of it this way:

It is as if the NTs can hear the theme music in the soundtrack of life. It tells you what is likely to happen next – a murder or a kiss.

The Aspies cannot hear the music of life.

Because the NT has sent an unambiguous psychological level message, their expectation is that the other person understands that message, and therefore understands the thoughts and feelings, the attitude, behind it.

Not realising that the message has not got through, the message that is returned from the Aspie, with an absent or inappropriate psychological message, as perceived by the NT, is likely to be perceived as a discount.

This is a particular example of a stroke filter, as the response will have an impact on the NTs thoughts and feelings, as indicated by the line from 'the wall' to their inner states.

On the principle that the perceived psychological message determines the behavioural outcome, the prospects do not look good for our Aspie.

Fully absorbing the implications of this diagram will help TA practitioners to make their own thoughts and feelings, especially strokes, explicit (verbally communicated) to their Aspie client.

The consequences of living in a world that does not accommodate Mindblindness

Anxiety Shame Isolation

*'...and so I decided...
sometimes it's better to be alone as
nobody can hurt you.'*

And I reply:

*'But nobody really wants to be alone ...
teach me how to be with you.'*

'If an Aspie cannot hear what you think and what you feel, they probably do not know what you think and what you feel. If they have a slight sense of it, they don't know what to do with it.'

If an Aspie cannot hear what you think and what you feel, they probably do not know what you think and what you feel. If they have a slight sense of it, they don't know what to do with it.

If we wish to create dialog, we have to adapt to their need.

'If you don't say it; I don't know it'.

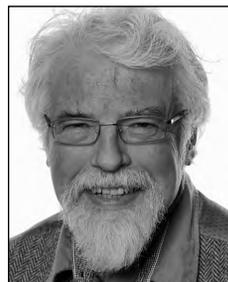
Thank you for your patience with this article. The concepts are easier to communicate interactively, but the magazine allows me to reach out to create awareness in more members of our community.

Maybe you could come to the workshops advertised under 'Events' on the Contact Point website: Life that Includes Asperger's: Creating a Dialogue between two Different Kinds of Mind.

Next time: An ego state model that captures neurodiversity.

References

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