UNIT 3 STRUCTURE OF PERSONALITY:
THE TRANSACTIONAL ANALYTIC VIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Transactional Analysis, TA in short, is a psychological tool that enables us to understand the structure or the elements that constitute our personality. The way TA describes our personality is so simple and devoid of any so called psychotechnical jargon that anyone even without any background of personality psychology, can understand it. Unlike the other theories of personality, the concepts as described by transactional analysis are not constructs, but are experienced and observable realities that can help one to easily understand one's personality. This unit will focus on presenting the concepts and ideas on which the system of TA is based. The unit introduces the concept of Ego States and their different dimensions and functions. It also tells us about the effective and ineffective aspects of personality. If you follow the insights that are given in the unit, you will find it easy to monitor your own behaviour in appropriate ways. It will help you to handle your communication and relationships better. This unit will, therefore, help you in describing yourself as a person and understanding the underlying dynamics of your behaviour.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- become aware of your ego states,
- understand that underlying all your behaviours are the ego states,
• monitor your behaviour in appropriate and effective ways,
• understand what is meant by contaminations of the adult ego state and how to clean them up,
• use the concept of ego gram for bringing about changes in your personality.

3.3 THE CONCEPT OF EGO STATES

According to transactional analysis, the building blocks of our personality are ego states. The term 'ego state' means a state of the 'ego' or 'I'. Thus, the 'I' is central. A person is in a particular ego state at a particular moment and may be in another ego state a moment later. An ego state is a holistic set of consistent and coherent patterns of being, deciding, thinking, feeling and behaving, which can be experienced internally, and expressed externally by an individual. An ego state is basically something that we think and feel at a given point of time and is reflected in how we relate to ourselves and to other people. With a little bit of effort, we can observe ourselves behaving from a particular ego state. Ego states are experiential and observable elements of our personality. The word 'holistic' in the definition of ego states emphasizes that healthy personality is an integration of many elements. In TA we are dealing with the total experience of the individual and thus the different ego states are not limited to only any one way of functioning.

By understanding the concept of ego states in transactional analysis, we can come to know why we behave differently at different times. Once we know the why of human behaviour, it is easier for us to consciously mediate and control our own behaviour. This will give us a sense of freedom and responsibility. This perhaps, is one of the most attractive features of transactional analysis and the reason why we study it here. As teachers you will find that you can apply it very well to your own life situations.

According to transactional analysis, our personality is made up of basically three ego states – the Parent Ego State, the Adult Ego State and the Child Ego State. Each of the ego states has its sub-dimensions as well. The TA model of personality can be depicted diagrammatically by three circles stacked on top of each other and inscribed with the letters P, A, C inside the receptive circles.

Diagram showing the TA Model of Personality Structure

3.3.1 The Parent Ego State (P)

The parent ego state is that part of the personality which has been borrowed from our parents or from those who took their place, and from parental and
authoritarian figures in our daily lives. All of us, in childhood, absorb the personalities of others into our own. Usually without being conscious of it, we pick up other people's postures, gestures, habits, ideas and expressions. This collection of attitudes, feelings, and behaviours copied from any and all significant parent figures becomes the parent ego state. We record these ways of seeing and doing things in our brains and later in life they become almost automatic responses. When in a parent ego state, we literally behave the way our parents behaved.

The parent ego state is expressed outwardly in either of two ways; Critical or Nurturing Behaviours and Attitudes.

- **Critical Parent**

  The *critical parent ego state* is about blaming others and giving unconstructive criticism. It attacks other people judgemental, does not listen, is not interested in explanation and is extremely judgemental. The critical parent will write you off as a person rather than deal with your behaviour. Thus, as a teacher when you see a student talking in class distracting himself and you, you call him a nuisance. This is not dealing with the behaviour, but is labeling the student. When you do that you are behaving from the critical parent ego state.

- **Nurturing Parent**

  The *nurturing parent ego state* is primarily concerned with looking after, nurturing and comforting people. It is rooted in understanding and tries to make people feel good about themselves by instilling confidence. It encourages others to go on and is full of appreciation for people and their positive behaviours. Thus, when you congratulate a student on his/her winning an elocution contest, you are in your nurturing parent role. The nurturing parent supports life, growth, and self expression. It empowers a person to be a winner.

### 3.3.2 The Adult Ego State

The *adult ego state* behaviours are about collecting, analyzing and evaluating information and making sense and balanced judgments about things. The adult ego state deals with facts and not feelings and emotions. It responds to the feelings and emotions of its natural child ego state and the opinion and beliefs of the parent ego state, by thinking before speaking. The adult ego state is about trying to understand why it is that we respond or behave in a particular way and make a conscious choice.

The typical adult behaviours are being calm, rational, analytical, unemotional, logical and reasonable. The typical words used are Why? When? Where? What? How? Who? Does it make sense? Is it accurate and so on. It checks on reality before making conclusions and responses.

One can make a distinction between two aspects of the adult ego state: Photographic Adult and Combining Adult. Let us briefly see what they mean and how they function.
• Photographic Adult (PA)

The *photographic adult* is that part of the personality which perceives what is happening in the here and now, records it in the brain, remembers it and reports on it. Thus, when I tell you that you had worn the same saree in the party last week, I am in my photographic adult state.

• Combining Adult (CA)

*Combining adult* manifests in you when you tell your principal that in the forthcoming Board Examinations, the school is likely to get some sixty percent distinctions alone. Your prediction is based on your observation of how the present batch of students has been doing.

The combining adult is that part of the personality which makes calculations using data that comes from the photographic adult and what is stored in one's memory. It calculates probabilities, makes predictions and does most of the reasoning.

3.3.3 The Child Ego State (C)

The *child ego state* is the repository of feelings and emotions. Everyone carries within his/her brain and nervous system permanent recordings of the way he/she experienced the world, the way he/she felt about the world and the way he/she adapted to it. It is as if our mental tape recorder is recording events on the one track (parent) and the feelings associated with those events in another track (child). In other words, the child ego state is the recording of internal events or the responses of the little person to what he sees and hears. This recording takes place simultaneously with the recording of the external events from the parents ego states. It is the recording of joy, surprise, amazement and all the wonderful feelings associated with our first discoveries of life on the one hand and terror, agony and all the fearful feelings which we experience on the other. The child ego state is the source of our emotional responses. The child feels again the emotions which the situation originally produced in him/her, and he/she becomes aware of the same interpretations, true or false, which he/she gave to the experience in the first place. There are many things that can happen to us today as adults which recreate the situation of childhood; when this happens we say that our child ego state has taken over. The child ego state develops into four discernible parts; the Natural Child, the Compliant Child, the Rebellious Child and the Little Professor. Let us see what each one of these mean.

• Natural Child (NC)

The *natural child* behaviours are those which reflect a person’s needs and wants in an open, honest and non-manipulative way. The natural child expresses itself spontaneously without concern about others. It is energetic, feeling, loving, uninhibited and loves fun. It feels free and does what it wants. In it are found genetic recordings of all our primary urges.
• Adapted Child (AC)

The adapted child is that part of the child that exhibits a modification of the natural child’s inclinations. These adaptations occur in response to traumatic experiences, training and demands from significant authority figures. Adaptations may occur in two ways: submissive or compliant child, and rebellious child. Let us see how each of these gain expression in behaviour.

• Compliant Child (CC)

In the compliant child state, you do what other people want you to do regardless of how you feel about it. You behave in the way you believe other people expect or want you to behave, rather than in the way that matches with how you feel as you would in the natural child. Even if common sense tells you not to comply with the request, you still do.

• Rebellious Child (RC)

The rebellious child is that part of the person that rebels against authority that is experienced as an imposition. It is reasonable and makes sense. It is reactive in its behaviour. Let us take an example. Suppose you are given three substitution periods on the same day, and you go and tell your principal that you will not go for any of them, this will be a ‘rebellious child behaviour’.

• Little Professor (LP)

The little professor is the thinking part of the child ego state. It is creative, has initiative and is manipulative. With the little professor, the child psyches out a situation and seems to have an inborn ability to dream up new ideas, “pull the right strings” to reach a desired goal and take initiative to know what to do in a given situation. Consider the following example. A mother scolds her son. He goes and hugs her with a charming smile. The mother forgets her anger. In this example, the son successfully changes the unpleasant situation he is in, into a pleasant one.

3.4 EGO STATE FUNCTIONS

We have three ego states and we need to have all three of them functioning in an integrated way, in order to lead healthy lives. Yet, each ego state has its own distinct functions. Let us see what these functions are.

The parent ego state helps persons to be good parents and to organize their own lives according to a scale of values and judgements. Just as good parents provide substance, support, love and direction to their children, the parent ego state provides nurture, safeguards and regulations for ourselves and others. It helps us to carry out countless routine tasks automatically without the need to think about them thoroughly, each time.

The adult ego state functions in updating the parent and the child. It examines the data in the parent to see whether what it prescribes is true and still applicable today. It also keeps emotional expressions appropriate. It gathers
and processes data in the present, tests reality and decides what course of action to take.

The child ego state stands to get one's needs met. Each child wants satisfaction of its hunger and gratification of its needs and will express joy when gratified, and anger when frustrated. At the same time, it wants to survive in what may appear to be dangerous situations. In short, the child ego state is used to expressing emotions, getting one's way, being creative and having fun.

3.5 EFFECTIVE EGO STATES

We have studied about seven different ego state dimensions in the foregoing sections. A person functioning more in the nurturing parent ego state, or adult state and natural child, is thought to be more healthy and effective in comparison to others as these ego states support his and other people's well being.

3.6 INEFFECTIVE EGO STATES

The four other ego states, namely, the critical parent, rebellious child, compliant child and little professor are the not so healthy aspects of the personality, especially if one frequently operates from them. They usually lead one to behave ineffectively and become a loser.

3.7 THE TASK AHEAD

We have so far described the constituents of our personality in terms of ego states. We need all these ego states as they have their distinctive roles in making us either effective or ineffective. The knowledge of transactional analysis should help us to move towards more healthy and effective ways of functioning. How do we achieve it is the next question we need to ask.

As was discussed earlier, it is clear that we have three ego states with their own functions. The ego state boundaries need to be intact in order to maintain their functional autonomy. At the same time, it is necessary to shift from one ego state to another as we interact with reality which enables us to behave in contextually appropriate ways. Only this makes our behaviour effective. There are, however, some problems which make the task of integrated functioning of the ego states difficult. We shall discuss here two such dysfunctional behaviours, namely, contamination and exclusion of ego states.

3.8 CONTAMINATION OF EGO STATES

Many distortions of reality result from the phenomenon of contamination. Contamination is an intrusion of the parent and/or the child into the adult ego state. It inhibits and spoils the adults' clear, objective thinking. This can lead to distortions of thinking and feeling. Prejudices, superstitions, cultural or ethnic biases are examples of parent contaminating adult ego state. The adult accepts them without thinking and evaluating them. For example, if a teacher accepts the belief that children coming from a lower socio-economic background are of inferior intelligence and subsequently treats children accordingly, he is
functioning from a contaminated adult ego state. A cultural prejudice is accepted as a fact. This can be shown diagrammatically in the following way:

Diagram showing Contamination of Adults by the Parent Ego States.

Contamination from the child occurs if the person’s self-image, decisions and feelings are unrealistic. A boy who is scared to go into a dark room because there might be a snake there shows a contamination of his adult ego state by his child ego state. His fear has no basis in reality. This can be diagrammatically represented as follows:

Diagram showing Contamination of Adult by the Child Ego State

3.9 EXCLUSION OF EGO STATES

Ego states are excluded when a person does not act from them under normal circumstances. An example of this is evident in a mother excluding her child ego state because she is supposed to be responsible for everyone else. She looks after every one else’s needs, except her own. What she does not know and do is, that while she takes care of others, she also needs to care for her own needs.

3.10 THE CONCEPT OF DECONTAMINATION OF EGO STATES

The more the adult ego state is contaminated either by the parent ego state or by the child ego state, the less autonomy the person has. He is driven by either the parent prejudices and rigidities or by the child fears and compulsions. This makes the person ineffective in dealing with the present challenges confronting him both in his personal life and his professional area.

Contaminations can be cured by examining old information and gathering new information. One may raise questions, get facts or be open to new observations. The new information needs to be thought out thoroughly, evaluated and then accepted into the personality. The end product of decontaminated thinking is a changed attitude which leads to changed behaviour.
3.11 THE EGO GRAM

The *ego gram* is a way of looking at our ego functioning. We can use it for self-awareness and for intuitive assessment of others. The appraisal is best done quickly, by intuition and without too much reasoning. The ego gram consists of a bar-diagram with eight bars: one each for controlling parent, nurturing parent, photographic adult, combining adult, natural child, compliant child, rebellious child and little professor. The height of each bar is an intuitive assessment of the amount of time spent on each ego state, taken from a total of 100 for each ego state function. The ego gram can be for a total life situation, or for a particular situation such as the teaching situation. You could draw your ego gram on the outline provided.

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<tr>
<th>CP</th>
<th>NP</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>NC</th>
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After you have drawn your ego gram, you could seek feedback from those who know you closely, may be from your colleagues or family members. This will help you to build a more realistic ego gram. Look at your ego gram and check if its bars are higher on the more effective ego state functions in comparison to the more ineffective ones. If not, work out an action plan to bring about the needed personality changes in you. This is how you will have more control and responsibility over your life.

3.12 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed in this unit that the structure of personality consists of the three ego states and their sub-parts. The parent ego state is the source of values and order and manifests itself in controlling and nurturing ways. It consists of copied behaviour from persons who were significant to us when we were children. The process of copying was unconscious and consequently we are not conscious of the content of our parent ego state. Hence, becoming aware of how we behave from our parent ego state can help us to direct our behaviour instead of being directed by it. Similarly, the child ego state is the recording of our emotional experiences and how we responded with emotions to things that happened to us in childhood. Many of our emotions today that get activated when things happen are simply a replay of the same old feelings. We are not aware of how our emotions get triggered off today. Our learning of transactional analysis can help us to become aware of them and give us freedom to choose to respond to situations with appropriate emotional expression. The adult ego state functions to inform the person with the available knowledge of both the external reality and the inner reality that comprises both the parent ego state and the child ego state. This enables the adult ego state to make decisions based on rational assessment of both inner and outer reality. The adult ego state needs to be strengthened as the executive of the personality. Therefore, anything that suppresses the autonomous functioning of the adult ego state like contamination and exclusion needs to be removed, so that each of the three ego states functions in harmony with each other and with the adult as the executive. This leads to the holistic and integrated functioning of the person.
3.13 UNIT-END EXERCISES

1. What is the structure of personality according to transactional analysis?
2. What words and behaviours can help you identify nurturing parent, adult and natural child ego states?
3. When you come on as a critical parent ego state in class to your students, what ego states will they respond to you from?
4. What ego state should you be using when you teach?
5. What is the negative behaviour in a little professor which people dislike?

3.15 SUGGESTED READINGS