

BEYOND THE PARENTAL FLIP

Introduction :

The Parental Flip is the quick shift a person makes from Child to Parent when, instead of dealing with feelings and experiences of the Child, the person moves to Parent ego state to take care of the needs of a Child other than her/his own, looking to the Child's needs according to a Parental view of what should be done (which may include looking after the Parent's own needs rather than those of the Child), rather than according to what the Child actually needs (Summerton, 1986a). I first identified the Parental Flip in an organisational setting, and later recognised it as a common happening both in everyday life and in groups. Then I began to see connections between the Parental Flip and countertransference, and discovered how the Parental Flip is a useful way to deal with countertransference in the training situation.

In its simplest form the Parental Flip consists of a therapist's or individual's lack of awareness of or sensitivity to his/her Child responses during interaction with a client, and instead of relating to these responses the therapist flips automatically to handling the situation from Parent in a way which satisfies his/her Parent. The actual choice to use Parent may be conscious and the flip itself unconscious in the sense of being discounted by Adult and dismissed from awareness. While the Parental Flip is applicable to issues of countertransference, I have found it in all aspects of interpersonal communication, and consequently I see it to have a broad application to transactional effectiveness.

A definition of the Parental Flip is given above. The story of how it was discovered is given below. A transactional analysis of the Parental Flip is given, followed by examples, and discussions relating the Parental Flip to selfhood. The origins of the Parental Flip are suggested to be connected with corrupted primal judgements (the individual's early response to a situation of discomfort). An example is given of how a trainee did a Parental Flip and, in supervision, discovered that unconsciously he himself had been helped because his clients had accepted his help.

Discovering the Parental Flip :

The paradigm for the Parental Flip was identified in a company consultation. I had joined the Board of Directors for a regular meeting. As the session began, a junior board member said that he was upset because that morning he had witnessed a serious disagreement between the Managing Director (MD) and Finance Director (FD). What had happened earlier was as follows : A representative of a foreign firm had announced a pre-mature arrival the previous day instead of two weeks later. When the news came, the MD had asked the FD if the financial reports would be ready. The FD checked with his staff, and reported back that by working through the night, they would have them printed by the next morning.

That night, the MD was at the airport to welcome the foreign representative, and the FD was in the office with his staff to complete the financial reports and print them. During the night the electricity failed. The printing was not completed. Before the meeting, the MD met the FD outside the boardroom and asked him if the reports were ready. The FD replied, "No !", and the MD exploded into a verbal attack. The FD exploded back. Later the MD explained that he had been very anxious. The FD said that he was frustrated because they had actually completed the work on time and had begun to print the reports when the electricity failed.

In response to the MD's story, I asked, "What were you feeling as you were walking towards the meeting room, and just before you spoke to the FD ?" He replied, "I was feeling very, very anxious." "How did you deal with your anxiety ?" "I didn't; and I exploded as I thought I had a right to do since our company's future depended on whether the FD had done his duty or not." I asked, "When you were anxious, which ego state were you in ?" The MD replied, "My Child." "And when you exploded, which ego state were you in then ?" After a thoughtful pause he replied, "The Parent, I think" "And to which ego state of the FD were you directing your anger ?" Smiling ruefully, the MD said, "I was exploding against his Child."

Then I asked the FD, "When you were waiting for the MD, what were you feeling ?" The FD replied, "I was feeling very scared that he would criticize me strongly". I asked, "In which ego state were you at that moment ?" "My Child." "And when you exploded back at the MD, which ego state were you in and to which ego state did you direct your anger ?" The FD replied, "I had switched to my Parent, and was firing off at the MD's Child."

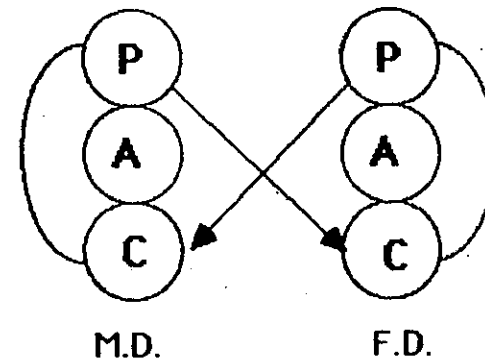


Fig. 1: The Parental Flip in Action.

When I drew the diagram shown in figure 1, and asked the two Directors, "Does this diagram give a picture of

what happened, namely, that both of you actually ignored the feelings in your Child and instead, flipped to your Parent (the flip being represented by the line drawn outside the three ego states from Child to Parent), and then you began a crossed communication, each coming from Parent and each aiming at the other's Child?" After some reflection, both replied, "Yes!", and with their answers, the Parental Flip was uncovered and discovered.

In their Parental Flips, each had excluded the Child experience from their Adult's processing, and had moved unthinkingly to Parent to deal with the Parental discomfort that was catalysed by the Child's discomfort. They did what many group members report they do when in moments of Child discomfort, instead of dealing with what this experience may be telling them about a situation, about themselves, or the person with whom they are communicating, they flip into a programmed Parent and respond in a way that is irrelevant to the external reality even though it is relevant to the internal reality of a Parental frame of mind.

Analysis of the Parental Flip :

In the above description two, complementary Parental Flips were observed. Here is an analysis of the Parental Flip of the MD. To begin with, the MD asked for information, and this information was given. The MD responded from Parent, and addressed his response to the Child of the FD. This fulfills the description of the Countertransference Transaction, Crossed Transaction Type II, given in the 'Hello' book (Berne, 1972, p. 17). The Parental Flip in itself, does not necessarily imply a Crossed Transaction: the transaction may be complementary. What the Parental Flip does imply is that, the MD generated experiences in his Child which he ignored and, discounting the Child, flipped to Parent from which he communicated, in this case with a crossed transaction. Once I recognised the Parental Flip in action, I began to observe that it is a frequent

phenomenon, both in everyday life, as well as in training and therapy groups.

The Parental Flip in Action—Tom's Story :

T. "When I was a little boy, my father once asked me something about history. I answered, and he laughingly said, "You're wrong!" Being sure that I had been correct, I was puzzled, and I went to look it up in one of my father's history text books. When I found that I had given the right answer, I took the book to my father and showed him. He looked at the book, and then closed it angrily and shouted at me, "You are a fool, how dare you think that you know more than I do!" I replied, "I'm sorry daddy", and I've been sorry ever since, and I don't know what to do about it. What is worse, now I deliberately set up my eldest child who is clever, to give me a correct answer, and then I tell her that she is stupid, and that she doesn't know anything, and when she is able to prove that I am mistaken, I do what my father did. I know I am doing something wrong, but I don't know how to stop myself."

O. "What do you think your father felt when you proved him to be wrong?"

T. "I guess he was embarrassed."

O. "Did he express his embarrassment and tell you that he was embarrassed because he had been proved incorrect?"

T. "No!"

O. "What did you feel when your daughter proved you wrong?"

T. "I was really angry."

O. "I'm remembering that you told me that when your daughter proved you wrong, you did what your father did, and you got angry. Do you think that, just as your father got angry rather than deal with his embarrassment, you may have got angry as a cover for some other feeling which you did not want to express openly?"

T. "It's possible!"

O. "Supposing you did have a feeling that you did not express, what might it have been?"

T. "The first thing that comes to my mind is to say I was feeling foolish and wanted to say sorry, and couldn't say that to my own daughter."

O. "Take time to let yourself remember. Were you feeling foolish when your daughter proved you wrong?"

T. "Well, (pause), actually that's right, I was feeling dam foolish, because she is only eleven years old, and she was standing there putting me in my place, and I had this urge to say what I used to say to my father, that I was sorry."

O. "Am I correct if I summarize what you have been saying as follows: you were in a situation in which you felt foolish, and instead of dealing with this feeling of foolishness, you did some kind of inner flip and you acted as your parent, your father did and shouted at your child?"

T. "That's exactly what I did."

The above conversation gives one example of a Parental Flip. Tom, who had come for counselling about how to deal with his daughter, discovered that instead of dealing with feelings which he experienced in his Child ego state, he flipped to his Parent and acted towards his daughter as his father had acted towards him many years before.

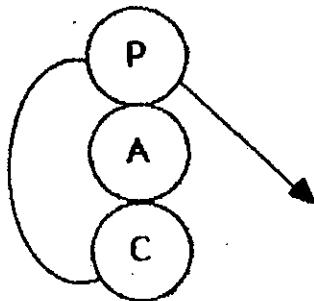


Fig. 2: The Parental Flip

Minnie's Story :

M. "I'm feeling so upset and angry. I got a gold medal for being first in the university. All my friends came to the convocation. I felt very happy when I got the medal, and came down from the dais feeling proud of myself. Then I saw my friends, and I thought, "They took so much trouble to come here with me." Afterwards, when we all got together, I said, "Come with me and we will celebrate together." We went to a restaurant, and I did all the ordering all the looking after them, because I felt that I should do this. At the same time I knew it was supposed to be my celebration, and not a celebration which I organized for my friends. Yet, I thought I should look after them. And I find that all the time, whenever I am feeling good, I have to do something for someone else, and it is becoming a terrible burden for me, and I don't know what to do."

O. Are you telling me that when you feel good in your Child and flowing with that feeling, you do a flip to your Parent and then begin looking after others and feeling bad about this?

M. Yes, that's what I do.

Minnie's story is one that is common for many women. She did not have permission to enjoy her life and successes for herself; on the contrary when she did experience joy or success, then she felt that she had to make some kind of payment for it. What she reported is another example of a Parental Flip. She had an experience in her Child ego state, and instead of dealing with that experience did a flip to her Parent. From her Parent, Minnie looked after others as a substitute for looking after and rewarding herself at a moment when it would have been appropriate to do this. Both Minnie's and Tom's stories tell how the Parental Flip may be therapeutic in identifying parameters of personal problems.

The Parental Flip and Selfhood :

While reading what Berne wrote in *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* regarding the real self and the executive self I got a suggestion of the Parental Flip. There Berne described the way in which Mrs. Tettar could at the one time be in one ego state in relation to her free cathexis and in another ego state in relation to her executive power, "the Child has the executive power while the Adult is still experienced as her "real self"." (Berne, 1961, p 41). He said in summary that Self is where the free cathexis is, and the executive normally lies where the active cathexis is, though at times it is with the unbound cathexis (Berne, 1964, p. 299). Berne's description of self as related to cathexis or psychic energy, has been treated at length by the present author and a model for understanding the true self as distinct from the executive self has been suggested and discussed (Drego, 1986, P. 72-76). What is written there is not too dissimilar to Laing's division of true self and false self, the true self being divorced from observable activity, and the false self (which is also called the personality) being observable behaviourally and socially (Laing, 1960, p. 73). It is also along the lines of Masterson's differentiation of the true self from the defensive selves, the true self being submerged beneath one or other of the defensive selves (Masterson, 1985). At a deeper level of analysis, it finds an echo in what Ken and Mary Woods have written regarding the arrest in development among B.P.D.'s (borderline personality disordered persons) who are unable to differentiate their self from their affect or from the affect of the symbiotic partner (Woods, 1982, p. 289). Within the dynamics of the Parental Flip is some kind of inner P₁ projection (cfr. Moiso, 1985, p. 194) or splitting (Mahler, 1975, p. 192) and a countertransference from this inner projection to the individual's Parent assuming protection of the Child without being in touch with the Child's actual needs.

Referring back to the MD's Parental Flip which was analysed above : in his Parental Flip, he dissociated his True Self from his Executive Self, and while the True Self was still in Child, the Executive Self was in Parent. Soon after starting the interactions, he shifted his whole cathexis to Parent and was locked into a Parent-Child communication. Many clients who have described their Parental Flips to me indicate that in the actual moment of the Flip, they frequently have an awareness especially in Adult that they have done a Flip, and that by discounting the Child, they cathect their Parental ego state. This Flip is not to be confused with the ego splitting that takes place with B.P.D.'s and N.P.D.'s, (narcissistic personality disorders) : in these cases, there is a split from one kind of Parental ego state within the Child ego state, into another (cfr. Haykin, 1980; Moiso, 1985).

Discussion—origins of the Parental Flip :

I find in Berne's *Primal Images and Primal Judgments* a pointer to the origin of the Parental Flip : "An infant under six months who was brought to the clinic by his mother responded happily to one social worker's cooing, but burst into tears and buried his face in his mother's breast when another tried similar tactics. He responded in the same way on subsequent visits... It may be inferred that an infant's responses to people, especially strangers such as baby-sitters, are based on primal judgments appropriate to his age, as to whether they threaten his security or promise satisfaction for his current needs : in the oral phase, for example, "Does this one bring me what I crave?" (Berne, 1955, p. 75). What Berne identifies in the above text are, firstly, the primal needs of the infant, secondly, a response to the reality situation through the primal image that the infant has of the two different social workers, and thirdly the accompanying primal judgment that is expressed by the infant's bursting into tears and expressing its opinion of the social worker as well as evoking reliable measures for safety by putting its head in mother's breast.

Already in this pre-egostate period of his writings. Berne separates three differing mind-sets of the infant: one which focuses on its needs suggesting a very early Child ego state, a second that emphasises its images (which suggest a very early Adult ego state), and the third includes its judgments (which suggest a very early Parent ego state). However, the threefold structure of the infant's personality was not the focus of Berne's study when he wrote that article. His focus was the fact that Primal Images and their accompanying Primal Judgments persist into adulthood, and frequently can be the cause of reactions to situations which do not fit reality testing, even though sometimes they may be effective and functional while at other times they are anything but functional.

The relationship of this material to the Parental Flip is to be found in what Mother models for the infant at the moment when the infant turns away from the undesired outsider, and what is thereby progressively introjected into the primitive Parent of the infant and into further developing Parental ego states as the person grows towards adulthood. Berne suggests that if, in the first few minutes of interviewing a client for the first time, the therapist allows himself or herself to use "free-floating association", he/she may generate some primal images from which a primal judgment may be elicited that gives a guideline for dealing with the client. A practical problem about this is that, as Berne has described, while the little infant may form primal judgments in reaction to primal images in order to meet primal needs, the little infant may also be enticed away from the primal judgment to form a corrupted primal judgment for which it is rewarded. From then on, the infant may produce the corrupted primal judgment in response to a primal image rather than an untainted primal judgment.

That the Parental Flip is not limited to grown-up's but can also be identified in children is borne out of the

experience of the little four-and-a-half year old girl who wanted to spend time with her mother, but whose mother wanted to do something and did not want to be bothered by the little girl. Mother told the maid to look after and play with the little girl. The little girl was angry and instead of expressing her anger, haughtily told the maid-servant, "Don't you dare touch me! Go to the kitchen and wash dishes." Another example: I read in a recent Reader's Digest of a Parental Flip of a small boy who, frightened of the dark, took hold of his father's hand and said, "I'm holding your hand in case you get frightened!"

Later in his writings Berne identified the Countertransference Transaction as the therapist's response from Parent to the client's Child (Berne, 1972, p. 17). He also describes the countertransference relationship as the therapists' script interlocking with that of the client (Berne, 1972 p. 352, cfr. Drego, 1986, Ch. 1). This reinforces what he wrote earlier, "the social and phenomenological reality of ego states is the primary consideration" in psychotherapy (Berne, 1961, p. 140). Berne's view was that if the countertransference is dealt with transactionally and on the spot, then the therapist can remedy negative effects of the countertransference without needing to go into deep self-analysis (Berne, 1966, p. 299). Berne does not write about the therapist's using the countertransference phenomena as part of empathetic understanding, though he suggests that while the "primal judgments are particularly subject to distortion through countertransference", still they may be useful to the therapist in helping the client (Berne, 1955).

In their insightful work on countertransference, Tansey and Burke identify three approaches to countertransference, the first being the classical approach which includes all the therapist's responses to the client in therapy, the second being the triggering off inside the therapist of his/her own unresolved (or otherwise) therapeutic issues, and the third being what the client, by pro-

jective identification, may induce in the therapist (Burke, 1989, chs. 2 & 3). Berne deals mostly with the second meaning. He links it with intuitive process, "here called primal judgments ... which is primarily based on forgotten infantile experience" (Berne, 1955, p. 95), and he advocates caution in using it. Generally speaking in TA literature, the focus is more on the second approach mentioned above, for example, "when dealing with children, the therapist's Child may be hooked into archaic issues in the resulting countertransference," (Clarkson & Fish, 1988, p. 130), and on failure in therapy: "the therapist has unrecognized or unresolved countertransference issues, (Shmukler & Friedman, 1988, p. 83), though Novellino mentions both the therapist's own issues through "rubberbanding" as well as the client's projections onto the therapist, this latter fitting Tansey & Burke's third category (Novellino, 1984, p. 63, cfr. Kupfer, 1971).

In a practical article Crespelle offers a suggestion for group observation: note how the therapist is using her/his own countertransference in relation to the client (Crespelle, 1988, p. 251). Kernberg (1984, ch. 17) deals at length and in depth with countertransference giving several dimensions in addition to those given above. He, Masterson, Tansey and Burke, and many others all agree that the therapist needs to be aware of countertransference material arising within the self, and that this awareness is essential in directing the course of therapy. The problem for some professionals and para-professionals, who have not gone into psychoanalysis is that they are unable to identify when they have gone into countertransference, and the Parental Flip is offered here as a simple alternative to identify when countertransference is at work, and hence provide access to its phenomenology.

The Influence of Primal Judgment—Raja's Story:
Trainee Raja related to me that when he was an infant, his mother was afraid of being left alone in the dark, though

she had no fear of the dark as such. He senses that he had a deep judgment of fear as a way to get rewarded by mother. At a very early age he also came under the influence of an ayah who, recognizing his impulse to fear, used the threat of ghosts that come in the dark to instil in him compliance to what she wanted him to do. The result was that he spent his life unable to sleep in the dark unless there was a companion with him or he had a light on. Because of this, he had had to give up several jobs. What had happened was that his primal judgment about the dark being a restful and safe environment was corrupted into a judgment that the dark was fearful, and thence further corrupted to the dark being fearful because ghosts were present.

A few months ago Raja was counselling a group of children who were sharing with one another their fear of a nearby cemetery. In the cemetery there was a faulty light that used to go off at times. The children attributed the light's going off to the work of ghosts, and they believed that there were ghosts in the cemetery. Raja went with them into the cemetery, telling them there were no ghosts. As they went in, the light went off, and Raja's immediate reaction was, "Let me get out of here quickly." He stopped himself with the thought, "If I run away, then these children will be burdened for their life with the false belief that there are ghosts able to extinguish lights, etc." He stayed and continued to reassure them. As he reassured them, they began to reassure one another, and to his surprise, hearing them, his Child felt reassured. He began to feel a healing inside his own Child ego state as he himself was accepting reassurance from the children at a very deep level of freedom from fear of ghosts. The concrete result is that since that moment he has been able to sleep alone and in the dark without any companion in the room (Bhagat, 1989).

Facilitating the Parental Flip :

The following are a few ideas that the author uses when facilitating individuals who present evidence of a Parental Flip.

1. The first step is to invite the individual to recognize that this intrapsychic behaviour has been taking place, so as to identify from social interaction the evidence of the Parental Flip. Besides often being a lot of fun when done in groups because everyone identifies with the process, this process itself will be facilitated by analysis of the phenomenological and social dimensions of the Parental Flip (Summerton, 1988, pp. 46-48). Raja was excited to identify his Parental Flip when dealing with the children, and he recognised that it had been a common feature of his interactions especially with authority figures.

2. The second step is to support the individuals to alert the Adult and modify the Parent so that they will stop discounting the Child and start giving the Child permission to have any feelings its wants and protection to have these in ways that are physically and socially safe. This step presumes that the person accepts that the Parental Flip is not the only nor best option she or he has.

3. Educate the individual that she/he needs to reassure the Child from Adult and Parent that it, the Child, will have a chance to express its feelings in a safe way and in a safe environment.

4. Encourage the individual to continue functioning effectively from Adult in a given, negative situation, while at the same time respecting and counting the feelings in the Child, and treating these feelings as part of the environment in which decisions have to be made. This is what Raja recognized himself to have done.

5. When the individual is a professional trainee, then she/he may be encouraged to see in the Parental Flip a useful tool for understanding that precisely because the Child has been discounted, there may be a countertransference issue in relation to the Client or colleague with whom the professional is interacting at that moment, and this countertransference issue may be useful in identifying productive options for dealing with that person. While Raja confesses that he is not fully aware of countertransference, he knows what to do when he recognizes his Parental Flip. He recognized also that he had actually got a benefit from his countertransference which was a healing influence: when he heard the children giving reassurance to one another, the little Infant ego state inside him accepted this reassurance, and he was able to de-corrupt his primal judgment and have a sense of being alright with the dark.

Conclusion :

Discovered as a common phenomenon in human interaction, and conceptually related to Berne's ideas of selfhood and primal judgments, the Parental Flip offers a pathway to identify countertransference in the training/therapeutic environment, and a tool for productive communication in everyday situations of marriage and family counselling, team building and personal effectiveness.

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