

OKness & Life Positions

The concept of 'OKness' is probably familiar even to people who have not read much transactional analysis (TA). This concept is the core of transactional analysis, both in terms of its philosophy, and of its contribution to the understanding of people and their interactions: the analysis of transactions. This handout explores the extension of the existing two dimensional 'OK Corral' (Ernst, 1971), and Berne's (1972/1975) elaboration of the third-handed position in his last book, published posthumously. The chapter presents ways in which this three-dimensional model furthers our understanding of individuals and relationships within a social context, with particular reference to working with children and young people.

OKness

OKness has been variously used to describe a philosophy of how we regard other people (Berne, 1972/1975), a frame of reference governing a person's whole outlook on life (*op. cit.*), and the minute-by-minute behavioural responses to what happens to us. (Ernst, 1971). It was Ernst who developed the 'OK Corral' which shows the four basic positions we can occupy in terms of the way we view ourselves and others. We can be either *OK* or *Not OK* with ourselves, and either *OK* or *not OK* with the other person:

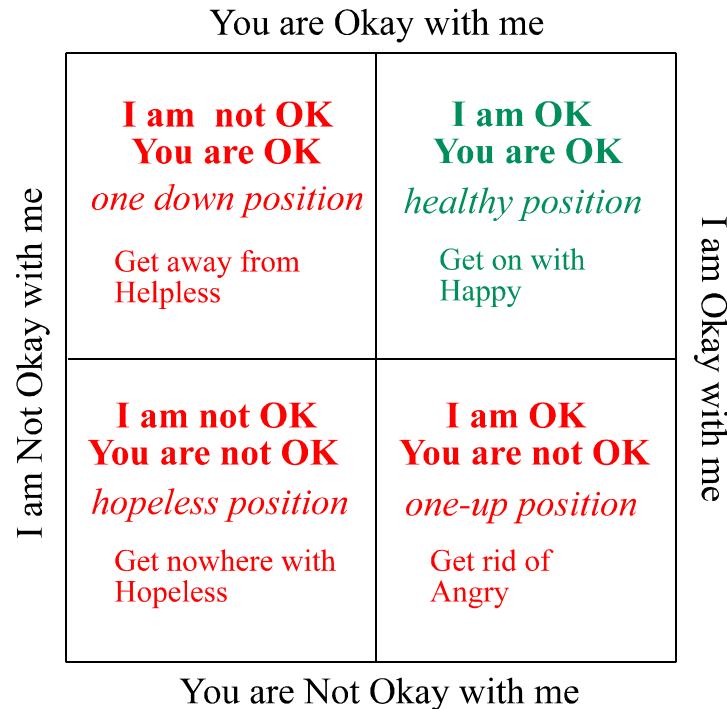


Figure 1 The OK Corral: The Grid to Get on With (Ernst, 1971)

If I am in the position of *I'm OK, You're OK* then I will see both myself and "you" in a positive and accepting way – which may or may not include agreeing with you. If this is my *existential life position*, it will represent my predominant way of being in the world. I am therefore likely to "get on with" you in that moment, even though I may not like "your" behaviour. This is an important distinction, given the tendency for parents (and



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other caregivers) in white western society to fuse children's personalities with their behaviour (e.g. "You're a bad girl/boy" – rather than something like "what you have just done is unacceptable, and I am willing to stay in contact with you to talk about how you could do it differently next time"). Very frequently, young people's behaviour and interactions "invite" caregivers to move away from this OK-OK position – often with the apparent aim of rejecting the young person. Staying "in there", keeping self and the young person OK, is therefore crucial to supporting them.

In a personal communication to White, Ted Novey defined OKness as meaning that: 'I am an acceptable human being with a right to live and meet my needs, and you are an acceptable human being with a right to live and get your needs met' (reported in White, 1994, p.271). Stewart and Joines (1987) describe OKness as meaning that: 'You and I both have worth, value and dignity as people. I accept myself as me and I accept you as you. This is a statement of essence rather than behaviour.' (p.6) Thus OKness can be seen as the way in which I value and feel comfortable with myself, you - and, in the context of this chapter, others.

Richard Erskine described OKness as:

"The belief and associated feeling of comfort that no matter what happens to me, no matter how bad the situation, I will learn and grow from the experience"

If I am in the *I'm Not OK, You're OK* position, I will see myself as less important or able than 'You', so that I am likely to give my power away to you, seek you to do things for me ("because You are so much better at than I am") and so on. I am likely to want to *get away from* 'You' in embarrassment or discomfort.

If I am in the *I'm OK, You're Not OK* position, then I place myself in a "one up" position in relation to 'You'. This can take two principal forms – in the form of the Drama Triangle (Karpman 1968) roles of Rescuer and Persecutor. If I take the former role, then I have a need to "do things for" You, with the implicit (and sometimes explicit) message that you don't have the ability to do these things for yourself. (I also am unlikely to check out with You whether You want these things doing anyway!) If I take the Persecutor role, then I will blame, berate, oppress or criticise You for all the things You (supposedly) get wrong. I may make You the cause of all my troubles – without You, my life would be so much better. This is an angry position, and ultimately leads to my wanting to "get rid of" You.

The *I'm Not OK, You're Not OK* position is "hopeless". If neither I nor You are OK, I can't blame you for things that happen – we are both Not OK. This is often the temporary place two people get to at the low point in an argument – where we have moved beyond blaming ourselves or the other person and reached a "stalemate", "get nowhere" place.

It is important to distinguish between *existential life positions*, which are, in Berne's (1962) early definition, 'taken in early childhood (third to seventh year) in order to justify a decision based on early experience' (p.23), and Ernst's model which is *behavioural*. The latter will be observable, whereas the *existential life position* will be largely an internal process, underlying behaviour and reactions over time.

I, you and others (They) have a right to exist, to have needs and to set out to meet them. To dislike or disagree with someone is not necessarily synonymous with perceiving them as 'not OK'. It is possible to differ strongly from someone else,



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or to be unhappy with what they are doing, and still to hold them as being OK. This chapter examines some of the ways in which this 'ideal' situation of OKness can be out of balance in vario

Berne (1972/1975, p.87-88) went on to discuss the adjectives which can be assigned to the different positions. For example: Rich-Poor. These can be sorted into four variants, dependent on parental attitudes:

I am Rich (and therefore) OK, You are Poor (and therefore) not OK

I am Rich (and therefore) not OK, You are Poor (and therefore) OK

I Poor (and therefore) OK, You are Rich (and therefore) not OK

I am Poor (and therefore) not OK, You are Rich (and therefore) OK

(note that *I'm OK, You're OK* and *I'm Not OK, You're Not OK* do not appear in this formulation)

The traditional western view about wealth is that those who are rich either have innate superiority as members of the aristocracy, or have become rich because of their hard work. In contrast, according to this view, those without money are in the position they are because they are lazy, or not as "worthwhile" human beings as their "betters". Wealthy people who accept this view would correspond to the position of (a) above. Conversely, those without money who take on this view would correspond to the position (d). Occasionally, someone of aristocratic birth rejects their socialised view of class and assumes position (b), possibly romanticising the realities of poverty. Finally the hard line socialist view of wealth would correspond to position (c).

We have an illustration here of the subjective nature of the *not OK* positions – it is arguably desirable to hold none of these four positions on wealth if we believe in the innate value of all human beings!

Other examples of the assignment of adjectives in this way would be black-white, young-“grown up”) or male-female.

Context

No relationship exists in isolation. All of our interactions with one or more people take place in a variety of contexts - families, friendships, communities, teams, organisations, society at large and, increasingly, the global context. A young person is dealing with a complex web of relationships in their living situation, at school, in their local area, and in terms of the media. They may view themselves as 'OK' within their family, for instance, where they experience positive relationships. They may experience bullying at school, leading them to move to a 'not OK' position for at least the period they are in, or on the way to and from, school. They may see young people portrayed in a negative, uni-dimensional way in newspapers and on television, leading them to identify with and adopt an "I'm not OK" position, because "We're not OK".

Three dimensional OKness

Berne (1972/1975) made brief reference to *three handed* OKness in which he referred to 'They' as the *third hand* complement to 'I' and 'You'. With the exception of the present author (Davidson, 1999), Summers and Tudor (2000) and, in a specific context, Jacobs (1987), the third position of this *three-handed* vision has been largely overlooked in the TA literature.



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I have chosen the term *three dimensional* in preference to Berne's (op cit) term, on two grounds. Firstly, it carries something of the flavour of the difference, for instance, between seeing a scene in a two-dimensional way, and seeing the same scene in a three dimensions – either by having a moving picture, or by being physically there. A photograph conveys a good deal of information, but this is incomplete when compared to being able to move around the space and see it from different perspectives. Secondly, I prefer the term “dimension” because it has the flexibility of allowing the positions to consist of either one person, or many.

In the familiar formulation *I'm OK, You're OK*, “I” and “You” represent two persons or positions. The third dimension of ‘They’ may represent an actual third person or, in different situations, the rest of a family, a group or gang, everyone else/the world, and so on. It could be argued that I may not know the relationship between ‘You’ and ‘Them’ or that it may be irrelevant (see White, 1994, 1995). However, as with two-sided OKness, we are dealing with subjective judgments: it represents an internal process. When a young person views ‘You’ or ‘Them’ as not OK, this does not mean that this is an objective fact! What is important is that it reflects the young person's *perception* of that relationship. Such judgments are, of course, influenced by the nature and quality of the social relationships in which we grow and develop.

The Three-Dimensional model

If we are to take account of the third hand of three-handed positions, the OK Corral needs to be extended in order to include a third person or persons (see Figure 2). It can be seen that each of the four original positions is related to two

three-handed positions – where the third person/s are either OK or Not OK – as indicated by the arrows in the diagram.

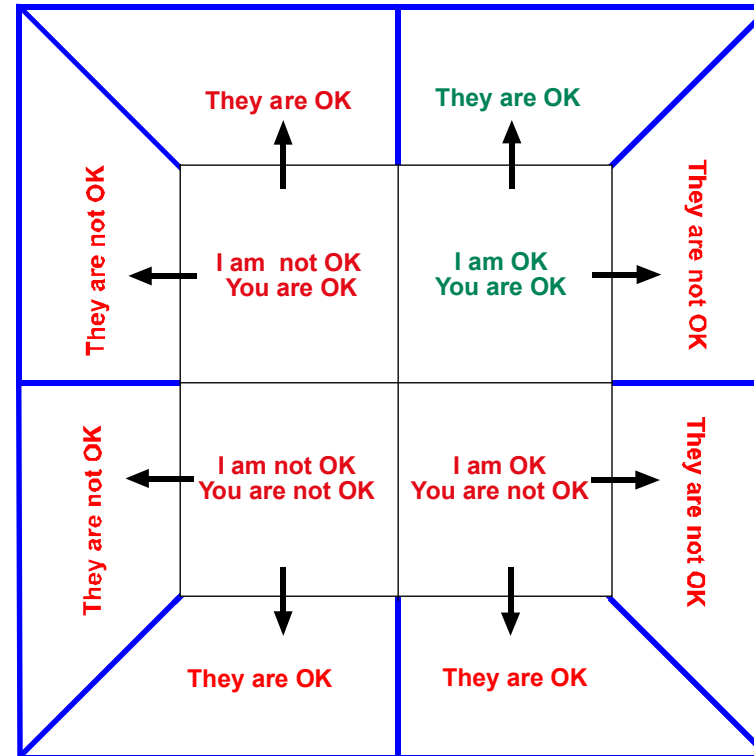


Figure 2 The three dimensional three-handed position

Figure 3 shows a development of this model, which represents the eight different three-handed positions as related triangular wedges in an ‘OK square’. The segments



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are numbered from 1 to 8, corresponding to the numbered descriptions which follow in this chapter. Each of the pairs of wedges (1 and 2, 3 and 4 etc) represent the two options which emerge from the original OK Corral. The options of OK – plus (“+”) or Not OK – minus (“-”) are in the order of I, You and They:

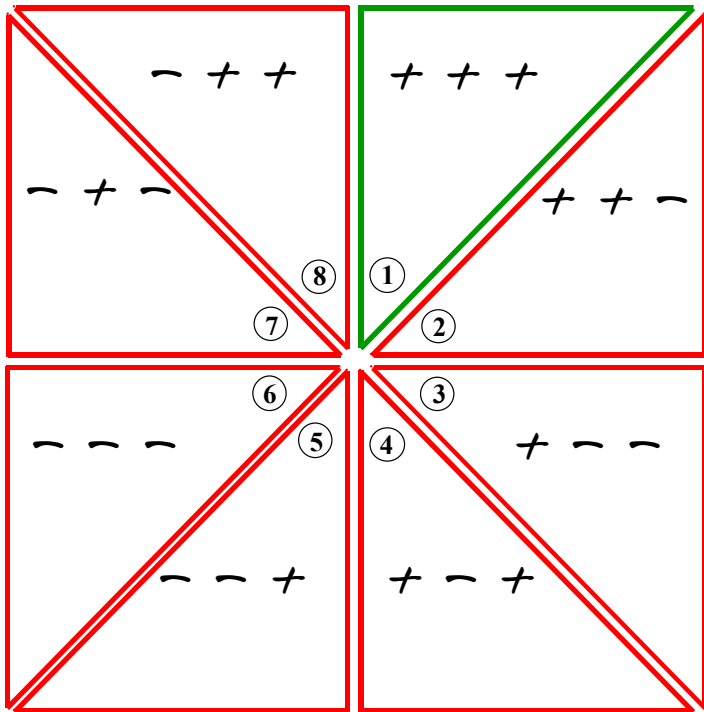


Figure 3 The OK square

Here these eight different three dimensional positions are elaborated and illustrated from the standpoint of young

people. In the figures I use the abbreviated versions: I for ‘I’m’, U for ‘You’re’, T for ‘They’re’, + for ‘OK’ and – (minus) for ‘not OK’. Triangulating these relationships highlights the fact that although ‘I’ and ‘You’ can sometimes become ‘We’, there are other times when ‘I’ may feel isolated from both ‘You’ and ‘They’.

1) “Everyone’s OK”

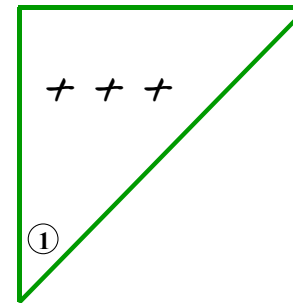


Figure 4 I’m OK, You’re OK, They’re OK

There is balance here, in that a young person is not needing to place themselves in the one up or one down position either within their relationships, or in relation to anyone else outside those relationships. This is not to say that they will be in agreement with everyone in their sphere, simply that they treat people they relate to with respect, and expect others to treat them in the same way. Just as with the OK Corral, where “I’m OK You’re OK” is regarded as the “healthy” position, this is the only “healthy” position of the eight.

2) "We're OK while we keep Him/Her/Them Not OK"

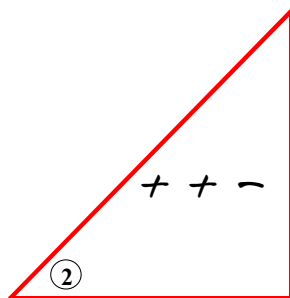


Figure 5 I'm OK, You're OK, They're not OK

Here the young person's relationships with others can only stay OK by making someone else not OK. These 'others' can be a whole range of people. The young person is also likely to shift who is not OK, depending on who they are with in the moment. A passage from Doyle's (1998) novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* illustrates this well:

It was great. Liam was finished now; Kevin and me wouldn't even talk to him any more. I was delighted. I didn't know why. I liked Liam. It seemed important though. If you were going to be best friends with anyone - Kevin - you had to hate a lot of other people, the two of you, together. It made you better friends. And now Liam was sitting beside Charles Leavy. There was just me and Kevin now, no one else. (pp.181-2)

This encapsulates the dynamics of this position which could be characterised as a symbiotic relationship relying on the demonising of a third person. This position is common at all levels of social relationships. It describes the dynamics between gangs, many political parties and most religions. It

can be seen as the root of all discriminatory attitudes toward people of different race, gender, sexuality, class, intellectual or physical ability. This position also describes political relationships, for example, George Bush's dismissal of certain states as forming an Axis of Evil.

3) "No-one except me around here is OK"

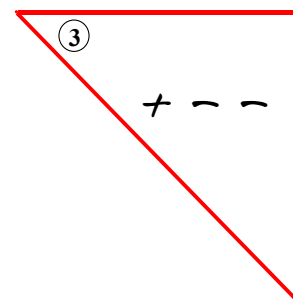


Figure 6 I'm OK, You're not OK, They're not OK

This is the antisocial position. The young person is consistent in treating everyone else as not OK. They are likely to be identified as a bully. Alternatively they may be someone who plays the psychological game 'Gotcha' on a regular basis: in other words, always catching people out with some aspect of themselves that is supposedly wrong. This position may also follow on from position 2 – a young person may start a relationship with someone on a positive basis – styling them as "different from all the others" only to move to the negative position of Not-OKing them. "You're no different after all – I knew I shouldn't have trusted you"

Harry Potter at home is on the receiving end of this position – Dudley and Harry's aunt and uncle, singly and collectively make Harry ('You') Not OK, and everyone who has any



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connection with him ('They' – Hogwarts, his parents etc etc)
Not OK too.

4) "You're the only one around here who's not OK"

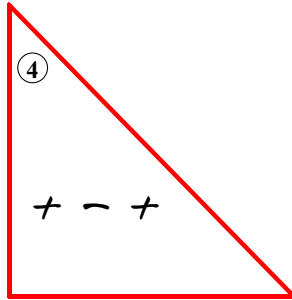


Figure 7 I'm OK, You're not OK, They're OK

This is a persecutor/blaming/scapegoating position. Here the young person may pick on one member of the group or gang, pointing out that everyone else is doing just fine. 'They' are not necessarily involved in this – they merely serve as the means to further the blaming process! this process could be going on within the gang when they are in their "private" space, despite the fact that to outsiders, all the gang are "OK" with each other and it is the rest of the world that is *Not OK*. There is frequently a "pecking order" with some members being bullied or picked upon. Similarly, families frequently present a united front to the world – "he's one of us *Bloggs* and no-one touches any of us and gets away with it"

5) "They're the only ones around here who are OK"

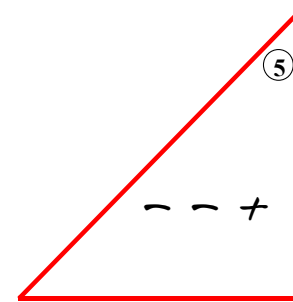


Figure 8 I'm not OK, You're not OK, They're OK

Here the young person might scapegoat a particular person, blaming them for some slight or problem. An alternative pattern is to scapegoat everyone within a group and making another group or gang OK, by elevating them in some way. From the viewpoint of a gang or other social grouping ('We'), there is not necessarily the unity that may be seen from the outside. There is likely to be a pecking order, with scapegoating being common. Moreover, the leader of the gang may be seen in a variety of OK and not OK ways by the individual members of the group (see 3 above).



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6) "No-one's OK"

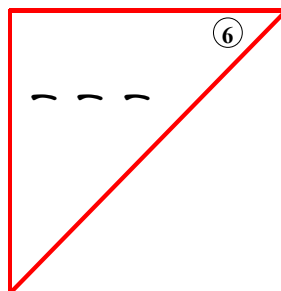


Figure 9 *I'm not OK, You're not OK, They're not OK*

A 'hopeless' position from all sides. If this were to be more than a temporary position, it would reflect a severely dysfunctional young person who has lived, or is now living, in a dysfunctional situation. They would represent a high risk – since without the hope of self, others or the world being any different, the young person might well engage in violence to others (either 'you' or 'them') or self harm. There is unlikely to be positive attachment here, since the combination of Not OKness on all sides is unlikely to promote trust, or the motivation to get close to others.

7) "You're the only one around here who is OK"

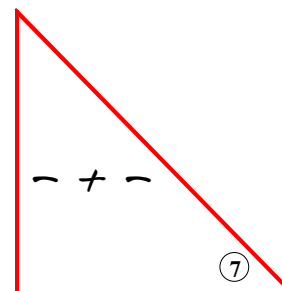


Figure 10 *I'm not OK, You're OK, They're not OK*

Here the young person could be idealising or idolising the person they are addressing ('You'). They might be saying something like "You're so clever. No-one else here knows how to do it. I'd like you to show me how to do it." They are likely to see themselves as inferior to the other person, though other people are also seen as being Not OK.

8) "Everyone except me around here is OK"

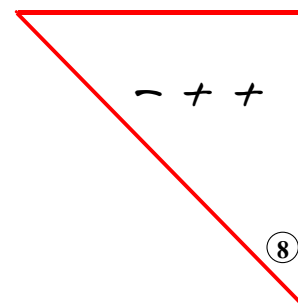


Figure 11 *I'm not OK, You're OK, They're OK*

Here the young person may be seeing themselves as a Victim



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in terms of the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968). They will be generally be isolated within the relationships and groups of which they are a part, for instance, a young person who feels less competent than other members of their peer group. They are likely to have very low self-esteem, and to negatively compare themselves with others – whether known or unknown to them. They may well have a “don’t Belong” injunction (Gouldings, 1976) They may switch from this position to position 3 (*I’m the only one around here who’s OK*) which will feel less uncomfortable.

Conclusion

The extension of the two-handed ‘I’m OK, You’re OK’ to include the third hand of ‘They’ offers a way to understand a young person’s social context in a way that accounts for differences in their sense of their own and others’ OKness. Whilst everyone may have their particular existential life position, this may not necessarily fit with the observable, social level of their interactions with others. This model can be used to work with a young person to assist them in understanding their transactions with others and to put words to some of their experiences. It can also be used from the perspective of a teacher, parent or other caregiver to help make sense of the young person’s responses in relation to others.

It has been successfully used in organisations with teams of individuals struggling to relate to each other in effective ways. In that context, once they recognise the patterns they perpetuate, individuals frequently make changes, or at least set out to make them.

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