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a professional
writer is an
amateur
who didn't
QUIT.

Richard Bach

Graphic by Ushika Kidd

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Christopher Robin

– a transactional analysis

CLAIRE BOWERS explores contaminations of the Adult ego state and the excluded Child ego state using AA Milne's characters as illustration.

RECENTLY I TOOK my children to see Disney's new film *Christopher Robin*. My son is sentimental about his soft toys, which he refers to as his 'friends' and has special names for all of them, so we were very excited about seeing the film together. However, I did not expect to experience an emotional roller coaster while watching the film!

While my children thoroughly enjoyed it, I was struck by the complexities of the characters and was hugely affected by the overarching theme of the sadness of growing up and leaving the fun of childhood behind.

I had other motives for seeing the film having used Milne's characters to introduce and illustrate Berne's (1961) ego state theory to my clients. This grew out of using familiar characters from children's stories to discuss ego states with a client who was very interested in children's characters. In researching children's characters I stumbled across Jennifer Adams' (2009) article 'Using *Winnie the Pooh* characters to illustrate the transactional analysis ego states'. Although my thinking differed in some ways from that of the author, I found it a very useful starting point for illustrating ego states in such a creative way and developed a display for the wall in my therapy room that I could refer to quickly and easily with clients.

My clients were not always familiar with the characters but using the visual representations, in addition to the words and phrases possibly associated with each ego state, helped to give a good overview of each ego state and I began to see my clients referring to these in their own understanding.

One photo of the display appears below (see Fig 1) and

more information on using these ideas can be found in Adams' (2009) article.

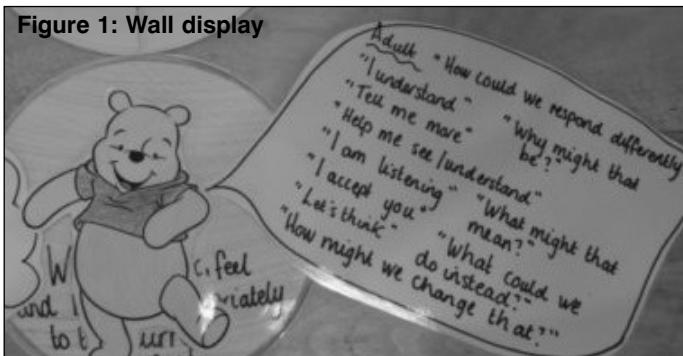
It was with these illustrations of ego states in mind that I watched the film. I will further explain the symbolic representation of each character as an ego state later.

The film *Christopher Robin* is loosely based on the early life of Christopher Robin Milne – the child of author AA Milne who wrote the *Winnie the Pooh* books – and a somewhat fictional, imagined later life (www.hollywoodreporter.com). The plot of the film introduces Christopher Robin during a 'farewell party' that his soft toy 'friends' throw for him before he leaves for boarding school. As the party ends, a conversation ensues between Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh whereby Christopher Robin states that his favourite thing is 'doing nothing' – 'when people call out at you ... "What are you going to do, Christopher Robin?" and you say "Oh, nothing" and then you go and do it.' Pooh responds, 'Doing nothing often leads to the very best of something.'

At this point, Christopher Robin has a fully formed Child ego state which he uses to explore and play creatively with his 'friends', however he is then seen packing his childhood memoirs into a small box which he stores beneath his bed while his parents call impatiently for him to leave for boarding school. They share a clipped and unemotional goodbye at the gates of the school and Christopher leaves for the next stage in his life.

The implication here seems to be that any childhood nurture, silliness and makebelieve has been left behind ready for adulthood, and the focus on academic achievement. The coldness of his parents – and the importance placed on a boarding school career (in the film) – led me to believe that academia, achievement and 'being a big boy' were valued by the portrayed parents (and other adults in the film) more than emotion, play and exploration. According to Stewart and Joines (2002, p62) 'such parents emphasise achievement and tend to equate worth and value with doing'; the long term effect potentially being an adult who 'feels anxious unless he is working'. Christopher Robin observes that he will no longer be 'allowed to do nothing' and, sure enough, in his early boarding school career he is chastised by a teacher for drawing a picture of his childhood 'friends'.

Figure 1: Wall display



During his time at boarding school, Christopher Robin's father dies leading his mother to collect him to take him home. A 'helpful' relative, instead of comforting Christopher, tells him that he is the 'man of the house now' and Christopher's promise to return to Hundred Acre Wood to see Pooh Bear and their friends is broken.

I believe that, as a direct result of all of these experiences and interactions, Christopher Robin builds himself a script – 'an ongoing life plan formed in early childhood under parental pressure ... [propelling] ... the person towards his destiny, regardless of whether he fights it or says it is his own free will' (Berne, 1974, p52) – that contains counterinjunctive messages that he is stroked for, and hence drive him forward (Kahler, 1975, p280). He is stroked for his perfection, strength and resilience, hard work, lack of emotional response and serious attitude at the expense of his authentic Child needs to have fun, explore, enjoy, be childlike (and childish), develop peer friendships (Don't belong injunction) and be nurtured (Don't feel).

As a result of this, I would propose that Christopher Robin has developed both Type I and Type II impasses (See Fig 2) which I will explore in more detail later.

Using Stewart and Joines' Personality Adaptations Process Model (2002, p205) and Structure of Personality (2002, p35) Christopher Robin seems to have a Responsible Workaholic personality adaptation (Fig 3), and has 'difficulty enjoying what [he has] accomplished because [he does not] let [himself] relax, play and have fun' (Stewart & Joines, 2002, p77). His behaviour and verbal interactions with his wife and daughter demonstrate that he believes that work comes before everything else. He is seen closing the door while they play and dance together to shut out their 'noise' while he

works. Thus the boundaries between his Adult and Parent ego states have become lax (James & Jongeward, 1996, p227), allowing Parent beliefs and strategies to seep into his Adult ego state and be held as reality – thus forming Parent-Adult contaminations (Cornell, 2016, p20).

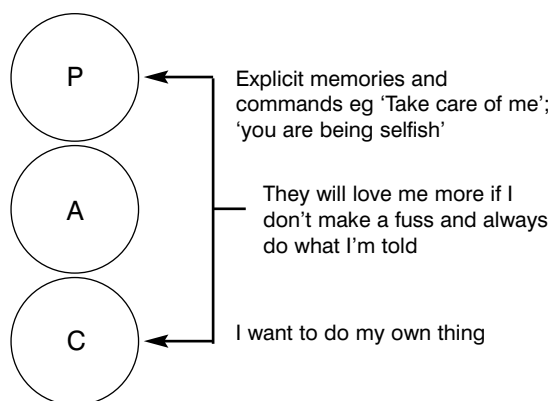
However, where I feel that Christopher Robin differs from Stewart and Joines' Personality Adaptations model (p205), and where I believe this is too simple a representation of him, is the fact that he also appears to have developed Child contaminations of the Adult ego state whereby he believes that carrying out his authentic needs to 'let go', 'have fun' (and go away with his family) and play/interact with his daughter will result in disaster (Cornell, 2016, p20) – this being represented by the potential collapse of the luggage company that he works for and the redundancies of a number of staff members. Interestingly, the CEO of the company – having delegated the work to Christopher, does, indeed, venture out to meet his Child needs through playing golf while Christopher Robin wrestles with his inability to 'measure and evaluate the here and now' (Cornell, 2016, p20) regarding the importance of putting his family first.

At this point, I began to question whether, in addition to a 'performing' adaptation (Stewart & Joines, p32) of Responsible Workaholic, Christopher Robin also has a 'surviving' adaptation of Creative Daydreamer (Stewart & Joines, p84) which would fit with the double contaminations and the absent parenting experienced by Christopher who may have had an 'early lack of availability by the caretakers, which felt like a threat to [his] existence' (Stewart & Joines, p85).

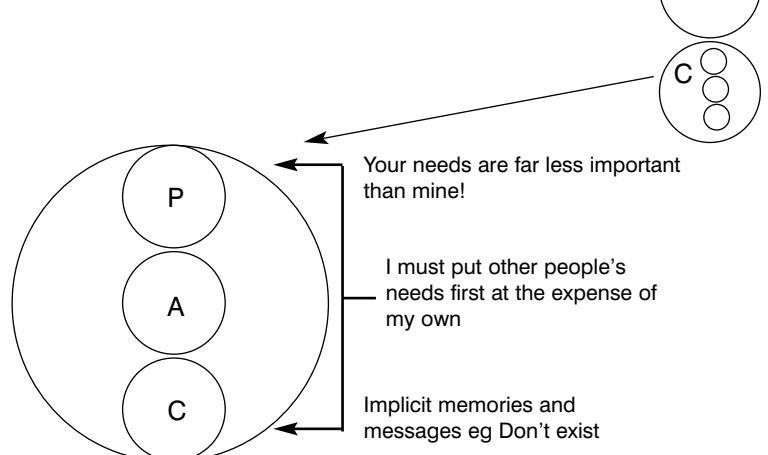
This combination of Responsible Workaholic and Creative Daydreamer adaptations (see Fig 3), qualities of which include being excellent employees, dutiful and

Figure 2: Type I and Type II impasses, illustrating the above example. Theory taken from Lapworth & Sills (2011, pp163-164) and illustrations based on www.tastudent.org.uk/ta-diagrams

Type I impasse



Type II impasse

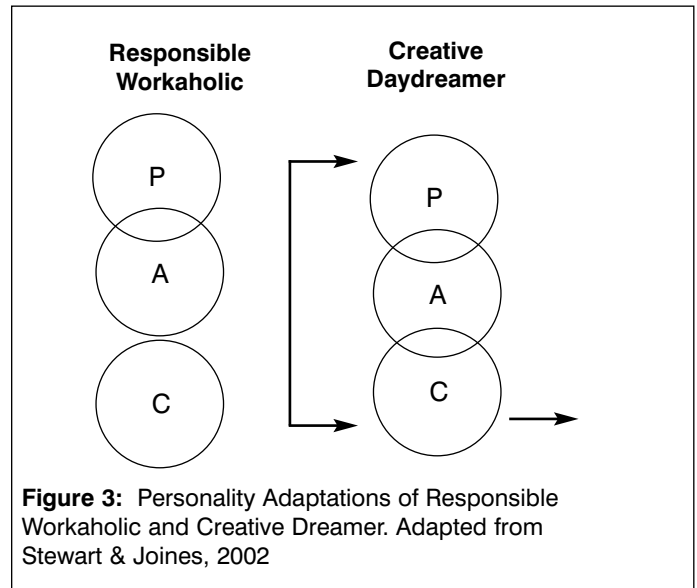


conscientious (Stewart & Joines, 2002, p98) seemed to fit for Christopher, except for the fact in addition to having lax ego state boundaries resulting in double contaminations, he also seemed to have excluded his Child ego state (see Fig 4) with an ongoing battle between his Child and Parent ego state. His authentic Child needs of wanting to rest/have fun are met with Parent commands making him believe this is laziness, and, in addition to this, Parent behaviours including working hard are met with Child guilt and fear for not being with his family (see Fig 4). Cornell states that 'whoever excludes the Child will find it impossible to feel pleasure, excitement and curiosity' (2016, p22) which Christopher Robin demonstrates through his inability to engage with his family – physically or emotionally – and the dread that he portrays at the thought of playing a board game with an (albeit somewhat oppressive) neighbour. Cornell (2016, p23) continues to explain that exclusion of ego states is never accidental but is instead a survival mechanism taken on by the young child at the time that the decision was made. This is also the case for contaminations (Cornell, p23). Therefore it would seem that Christopher, in gaining strokes for hard work and chastisement for imagination made the decision, as a young child, that in order to be OK, he needed to work hard and be the best and that having fun, being curious and exploring was detrimental to this – thus his Child became excluded.

The boundaries between his ego states, however, remained lax (James & Jongeward, 1996, p227) with contaminations of both Parent and Child entering the Adult ego state and impairing his Adult functioning and ability to reality test. The authentic Child needs and desires are also excluded with guilt and shame still being felt as a result of Child-Adult contaminations (see Fig 4).

Sadly, Christopher Robin passes these contaminated beliefs and script messages onto his daughter, Madeline. She literally follows his script (Noriega, 2010, p196) and has taken on messages that were transmitted by Christopher Robin through the means of:

- ulterior transactions (Noriega, p199) – whereby a social stimulus (SS) is given with an ulterior psychological stimulus (PS) and both are responded to socially and psychologically (SR and PR) (see Fig 5).
- projective identification (Noriega, p202) – 'an unconscious defence mechanism . . . in which the person projects part of the self into the object with the unconscious intention of avoiding unpleasant feelings' (Laplanche and Pontalis in Noriega, p202). In the case of the film, Christopher Robin tells Madeline that 'nothing comes from nothing'. He is remembering the responses he received as a child from significant adults to his authentic Child needs and the shame he felt for 'doing nothing'. He then projects this feeling state onto Madeline who then feels compelled to behave in a new

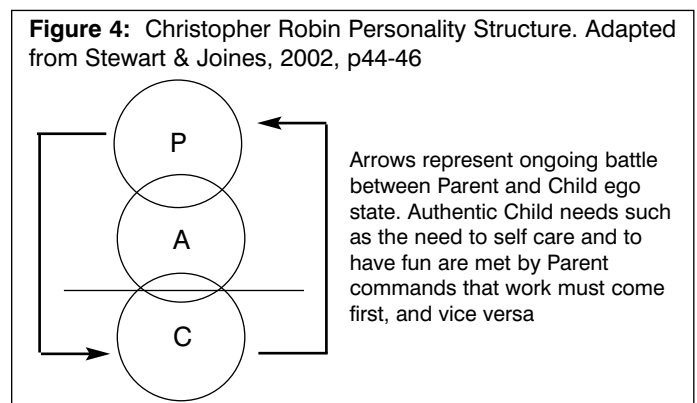


way pleasing to Christopher Robin (Hardagen & Sills, 2008, p60). Noriega (p202) says this is the primary way 'scripts are transmitted from one generation to the other.'

As a result of this, Madeline becomes a child who also does not know how to play, rest, be spontaneous or curious or to explore. When encouraged by her mother to go and play, Madeline responds saying 'I will play better and harder than any child has ever played'; an amusing point in the film but laden with sadness due to the childhood that she is missing out on. (See Fig 5)

And here, at the point of Christopher Robin excluding his Child ego state in addition to sending away his biological child, enters the representation of AA Milne's beloved characters as ego states, specifically exploring Winnie the Pooh, Tigger and Piglet – and Eeyore whom I felt was a good representation for the depression felt by Christopher Robin as a result of discounting his own authentic Child needs.

Winnie the Pooh magically arrives at Christopher Robin's home in London. Interestingly, Pooh, who represents the Adult ego state due to his rational, analytical thinking (Adams, p239) and his ability to reality test and try out different alternatives to solve a



problem, explains that he has lost his friends and seeks help from Christopher to find them. Although he has lost Kanga and Rabbit who are representative of the Parent ego state (Adams, p240), it is actually Piglet and Tigger (representative of Child ego state) whom he tries hard to find in the film – and who also eventually venture to London with Madeline to find Christopher when he leaves them again. I felt that this was a beautiful object lesson for the way in which Christopher begins to acknowledge (with Adult support from Pooh) that he has discounted his Child needs and that, in order to move forwards, he needs to account for this and un-exclude his Child ego state. As an aside, Kanga and Rabbit being left behind felt symbolic of Christopher learning to decontaminate his Adult ego state from Parent contaminations and leave the critical messages regarding resting, playing and not working so hard behind.

As explored earlier, I hypothesised that Christopher Robin had both Type I and Type II impasses – an impasse being the 'stuck point a person reaches when two ego states are at odds with each other' which have created an internal conflict resulting in Christopher being unable to express or respond to his authentic Child needs (Lapworth & Sills, 2011, p162).

There is a beautiful scene in the film where, on Christopher Robin leaving the toys again, Madeline takes a train journey to London with them and they engage in a game of 'Say What you See'. Pooh Bear – being the 'here and now' adult rationally states that he sees 'house, clouds, tree, dog, grass,'; Tigger – who represents the Free Child ego mode and is described by Adams (p240) as 'unrestrained, self indulgent, and primarily interested in the instant gratification of his wants and needs [seeing] ... every situation as an opportunity, often acting before he thinks' states that he sees 'speed, danger, recklessness.' He is excited and is able to express his excitement.

Piglet, on the other hand, represents the Adapted

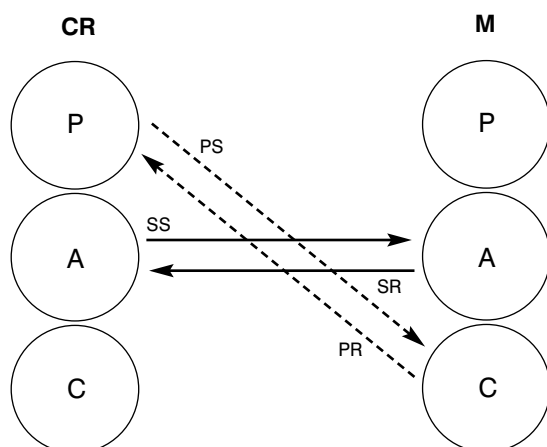
Child, and is described by Adams (p244) as believing the world is full of danger, having a big heart but a large amount of anxiety about consequences of his actions, states that he sees 'panic, worry and catastrophe'.

Eeyore was also used by Adams to represent Adapted Child. However, I felt that, in this example, he was more fitting as the depression and emptiness felt by Christopher Robin which are symptoms (or resulting decisions) of impasses felt by Christopher (see Fig 6a/b). Eeyore sees 'disgrace, shame, humiliation, depression.'

Goulding and Goulding (1979, p17) explain (and Lapworth & Sills, p166, present a step-by-step formula for this) that once an impasse has been identified, in order for it to be resolved, the client needs to revisit the situation from childhood in which they are able to (symbolically) confront their parent(s) – including identifying and re-experiencing feelings associated with the impasse. Work then needs to be done with the Child ego state in order for the Child in the client to become aware that they 'can survive changing the decision and "defying" the Parent' (Lapworth & Sills, p166). The new decision then needs to be integrated into the client's life as part of the relearning process.

In the film, through re-engaging with his 'friends', Christopher Robin first defies the 'Be Perfect' and 'Work Hard' counterinjunctions. He learns that the company did not crash without him being there and the time off allows him to reassess, rest and come up with an alternate plan to save the company which he puts into action. Once this Type I impasse is worked through, he is able to spend some time with his 'soft friends'. He remembers what it feels like to have fun, to be childlike and to be with his family; he remembers what it is like to be a child. He confronts the humiliation of 'letting go' and 'being silly and childlike' and realises that there are no disastrous consequences but instead he becomes closer to his family. Of course, for these changes to be effective in the long term, they will have to be fully integrated into

Figure 5: Ulterior transactions transmitted from Christopher to Madeline



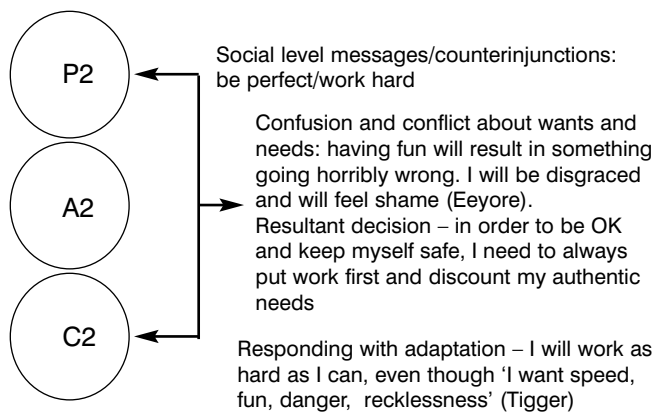
Adult intended SS: 'This is how you work hard – work is important.'

Adult intended SR: 'I will ensure that I always do my best and follow your example.'

PS: 'Resting/playing are a waste of time.'

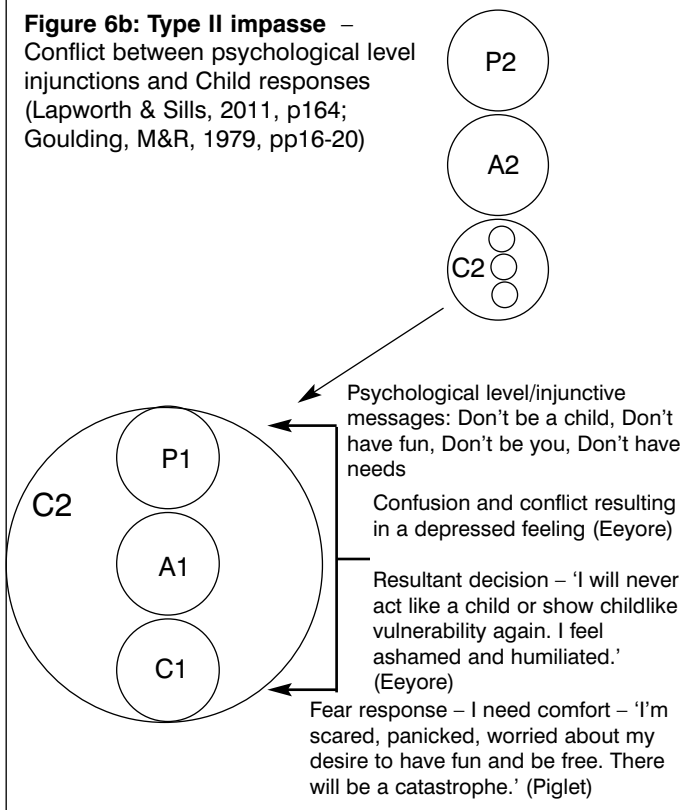
PR: 'I mustn't be seen to be wasting my time with rest or play.'

Figure 6a: Type I impasse Conflict between C and P



(Lapworth and Sills, 2011, p163), diagrams based on www.TAstudent.com

Figure 6b: Type II impasse – Conflict between psychological level injunctions and Child responses (Lapworth & Sills, 2011, p164; Goulding, M&R, 1979, pp16-20)



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Christopher Robin's life as part of the 'relearning' process (Woollams & Brown, 1979, p231).

The film ends with Christopher Robin and his family visiting the Hundred Acre Wood to see Piglet, Tigger, Pooh and co, and a post credits scene reveals Christopher, as an old man, playing 'Busy Doing Nothing' on the piano while his soft friends relax on the beach around him. Eeyore states: 'Thank you for noticing me.'

Through integrating the new decision into his life, it would seem that Christopher Robin is no longer driven to work hard and be perfect and has realised that, in fact, it is OK to have needs, to have feelings, to be (like) a child, to have fun and, ultimately, to rest.



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