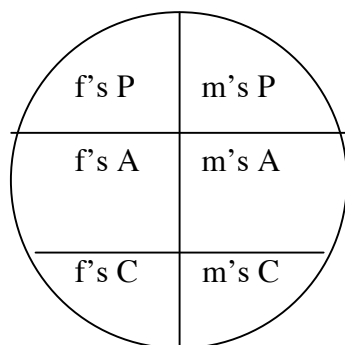


**HOW TO USE THE PARENT'S  
SECOND ORDER STRUCTURAL MODEL  
TO EXPLORE OUR REPRESENTATIONS OF SUCESS AT SCHOOL**

As I have worked for a long time on conflict management, I have been led to distinguish **intra psychic conflicts and relational conflicts** and my hypothesis is that very often, the relational conflict concealed an intra psychic conflict, the latter fuelling the former. Among relational conflicts, many **conflicts of values** crop up concerning the Parent ego state. In order to identify them, it is useful to work on each protagonist's Parent ego state. During this work, **an intra psychic conflict may appear inside the Parent ego state** of every person. This is not surprising when we observe how our Parent ego state was constituted.

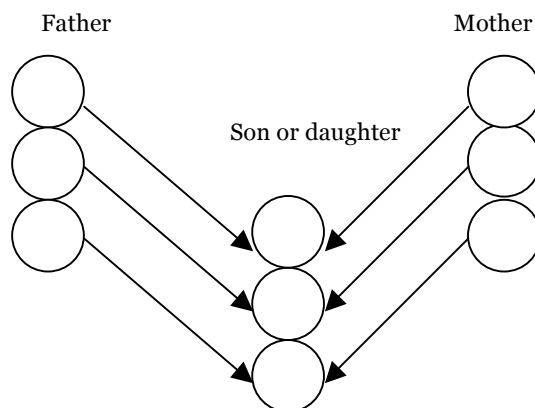
**A little theory:**

Our Parent ego state was built by introjecting the persons of our father and our mother<sup>1</sup>, each of them with their three ego states. In « Transactional analysis and psychotherapy »<sup>2</sup>, Berne draws the Parent's second order structural model by distinguishing what comes from the father and what comes from the mother, and inside each of the two parts of the ego states of the Parent, Adult and Child of the father or the mother.



**What is the difference between the real parents and the introjected parents?**

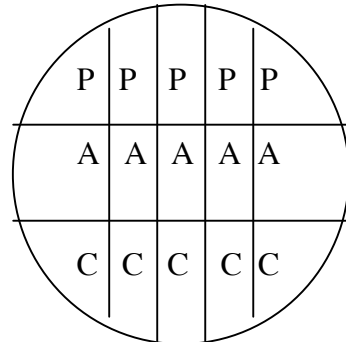
When the child was young, he received different messages from his parents concerning what was important to do and not to do. He also received non verbal messages coming from his parents' Child ego states showing their interest, feelings and reluctance towards him, and finally, he could also observe their behavior which was sometimes in total contradiction with their discourse. Such messages were sent by real people, but reception automatically altered them. What the child has integrated constitutes positive or negative script messages, from which he has drawn a certain number of conclusions and made a certain number of decisions. They indicate what is allowed or forbidden, what is prescribed and how to do it.



<sup>1</sup> Ian Stewart et Vann Joines : *manuel d'A.T.* InterEditions p. 50 et 51 (TA Today, pp 30-31)

<sup>2</sup> Eric Berne : *Analyse Transactionnelle et psychothérapie.*, Ed Payot, p.199 *Transactional analysis and psychotherapy*

Later on, the person's Parent ego state (P2) will take over the role of the real parents to influence his life choices. It contains not only the father's and mother's parental figures but also the figures of other people of authority around : relatives, teachers, nannies, friends. Here, I follow the model developed by Stanley Woolams<sup>3</sup>.



### How to explore our « Parent » system?

We can say that the person is influenced in his life choices by his representations of a certain number of subjects. In order to highlight the representations which help or limit him, I sometimes set the students in my groups some cognitive work with Berne's Parent's second order structural model, enriched by Woolams, as an interview guide.

I start from the principle that the intra psychic conflicts resulting from contradictory messages are of several kinds:

They come from a contradiction between the father's and the mother's messages.

They may also come from a contradiction inside the father's or the mother's person; then, the parents' personal impasses are integrated in P2.

### What method is followed?

I ask the student questions on what his parents used to say about health, love, family or success at school (Parent within the Parent); what they did in those areas of their every day lives (Adult within the Parent); what feelings they would show about that (Child within the Parent) and I write the student's answers on a large sheet of paper posted on the board, divided into six boxes as shown in the first figure page 1. At the end, I complete with the messages received from the other parental figures: teachers, other family members, doctor and nanny. Once the grid has been filled, we look for the points of convergence and divergence. It is clear for me that the messages can show inconsistencies, hence the blocks that the person cannot manage to overcome.

### Case study :

I started this kind of work on the theme of one's cooking : how a person chooses the way one eats, and in general, what influences choices in terms of food. Depending on the parents' country of origin, there are very different table traditions : cooking with butter in the west, oil in the south, beer, wine, cider; eating vegetables or charcuterie; planning wedding banquets, setting the table, entertaining in general.

By asking several people what their parents said about what was important in that field, what they did and how they did it, what feelings they showed on that occasion, I made a whole childhood past resurface, and triggered an awareness of the family inheritance in relation to which every person made archaic or more recent decisions. Contradictory messages can be analysed. The message « You eat everything on your plate because other people may be starving» is an old message which is reactivated in times of war. It contradicts

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Woolams ; Michael Brown ; Kristyn Huige : Transactional Analysis in brief, p.3

the principle « Everyone knows what is good for oneself.». « We don't eat pork » is a parental religious interdict which is confirmed or not by the customs of the country where people live. Depending on the country, people who eat frogs, chitterlings, pork sausage or whale, will be frowned. The message « Be slim, don't put on weight », sent for example when saying something like « You've put on weight ! », reinforced with an expression of disapproval, may go together with « Eat the nice cake mummy has made for you! »

Many themes can be tackled similarly: money, love, family, children, being successful in society, at school, the choice of a an occupation.

### **Being successful at school, choosing an occupation :**

When I was working as a school inspector, I had the opportunity to meet the parents of children with problems, whose collaboration we sought in order to help the children work better at school or simply adapt with less suffering. I noticed the type of messages which helped the children, and those that hampered their development. The message « Don't rise above me (don't grow up) », in an immigrant family with a low level of literacy, does not have the same impact as « Make us proud of you», or « You must be successful» or else « School is the opportunity we weren't given, take it! » In a privileged environment, the same message « Don't rise above us ! » can also be found, possibly concealing a message « Don't leave us » or « Don't reject us! ».

Later on, when I was preparing trainees for certification in Transactional Analysis, for some of them, I came across a number of obstacles to write their exam, be successful and recognized, and the obstacles seemed to me to be connected to the representations the candidates had about writing and success. Consequently, I started working with my students on the messages they had receive about school, success at school, writing and choosing an occupation.

Here is some interesting food for thought regarding our representations, and how they condition our actions. Somme messages are contradictory and others reinforce each other. They can be divided into two categories : contradictions between the two parents or inside each parent.

### **Contradictions between father and mother :**

- ❖ About school work, a boy hears his father say that anything he can do is useless; the father does not encourage his son, nor does he teaches him what he knows. On the contrary, the boy's mother considers school as a means of social promotion and says : « Don't do what your father or I did; look at us, we're not happy! » and she is active in being professionally successful. Every parent is coherent in their ego states; the words, the acts and the feelings expressed correspond but they diverge from each other.
- ❖ About choosing an occupation, a girl hears her mother praise mothers who raise their kids well, and disparage those who « harm their children as they insist on having an occupation ». Only one exception: a school teacher's occupation. Her father clearly sees her in higher studies and even holding responsible positions that his wife considers as reserved for men; so does the grandmother. Many girls may limit their professional choices by obeying the interdiction rather than the permission.
- ❖ As regards the importance of studying, a girl from the middle class may receive from her father the message « It is not important for a woman to study. What is important is being knowledgeable (as a social foil) and children! », whereas her mother's message may be « It is important for a woman to earn a salary (in case there's a hitch)». Although the girl is a bright pupil, she may be tempted to limit herself in her professional choices.

- ❖ In France, some parents consider teachers as « talent killers » and school as a place of social conformity. How can the path of studies be reconciled with the path of originality ?

### **Contradictions inside the father or the mother :**

- ❖ **Between what I say and what I do :** the father makes a harsh criticism of his daughter's handwriting because it is illegible and cannot be understood, thus implying that it is important to make oneself understood. On the other hand, he never talks to her and never voices what he expects from her. There is no model to express oneself or to communicate.
- ❖ **Between what I say and what I show :** for example, when a parent repeats that being successful at school is essential, but gives closer attention and shows greater love to the child who is slower at school.  
Or when a parent says that his daughter is « a clumsy oaf », but gives non verbal signals of secret satisfaction.
- ❖ **Between what I do and what I show :** a father talks with his daughter, presents her with books, shares his extensive knowledge ; he seeks her admiration but at a non verbal level, expresses the wish that nobody does better than him. The message is « Don't rise above me ». There is some likelihood that she will obey the interdiction.

**Reinforcement of the messages :** for a number of teachers who were born to blue colour workers, recent immigrants or former farmers, the messages coming from the father and the mother will be directed at social success obtained via school. The school teacher is somebody important and admired; school is the way to get out of tough social condition and earn freedom. Talk, behaviour (support, attention, appreciation of the child, further self training setting the example that one can learn at any age), proud feelings, exhilaration in front of a successful child, all go in the same direction. With a positive message, a teacher will often reinforce this dynamics. He can also create it when the family environment lacks in stimulations although it is not hostile.

The consequences of contradictory messages received by pupils bear significantly on the school script. Unconscious school choices result from a creative compromise between interdictions and permissions, and the choice of an occupation as well. This kind of exploring is useful to accept one's inheritance and feel free to make new decisions. It is always a moving piece of work.

### **Conclusion :**

Teaching is an occupation which mobilises the Parent ego state significantly as it consists, for the teacher, in passing on what he has received, and in doing so inside an institutional context he represents. A teacher's Parent ego state contains the introjected figures of his own parents and teachers, hence the importance of pointing the likely sources of internal conflicts inside his P2. Those conflicts are sometimes the source of paradoxical injunctions such as « I teach you, I invite you to be successful, but don't rise above me! »; « I teach you how to think things over, develop your critical mind, but beware, not at my expense! » ; « You have the right to be successful, but don't make money out of it! » .

Exploring one's Parent ego state is therefore a means to make a difference in one's representations between what comes from one's parents and what comes from oneself, and as a consequence, regain one's freedom and responsibility.