

# Transactional Analysis of Communication Styles in HIV/AIDS Advertisements

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## Abstract

Television advertising has been an important medium for health promotion campaigns addressing HIV/AIDS. This study sought to evaluate the 'Grim Reaper' and 'Multiple Beds' advertisements frequently broadcasted throughout Australia. Our model for evaluation was based on a theoretical synthesis of television advertising, transactional analysis (TA) and recall congruence. Eighty-three participants viewed each advertisement and rated which ego state the source of the message was attempting to 'hook' in the audience. They also predicted their own ego state during sexual intercourse and rated the effectiveness of the advertisements. As predicted by TA theory, a crossed transaction was associated with significantly less psychological impact than a parallel transaction for the 'Grim Reaper' advertisement. A similar trend was apparent for the 'Multiple Beds' advertisement. Important issues which warrant further research in order to evaluate whether transactional analysis could be a useful tool in promoting health are discussed.

## Keywords

*AIDS/HIV, ego states, health promotion, television advertising, transactional analysis*

the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) has affected millions of people worldwide, both through actual infection by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and because of the threat which it presents through ease of transmission, attendant physical and psychological degeneration and its fatal consequences. As no accepted 'cure' for the disease has yet been identified, great emphasis has been given to developing effective prevention through increasing awareness of the virus and promoting low-risk behaviours (Kaplan, Sallis, & Patterson, 1993). The mass media, including television, radio, newspapers and magazines, have had an important role to play in disseminating information on HIV/AIDS (Romer & Hornick, 1992).

It is argued that the role of the mass media is to influence individuals, both indirectly and cumulatively, through the repetition of scientifically validated information to the public (Bush & Boller, 1991). With regard to HIV/AIDS, television has been found to be a major and reliable source of information in both the United States (Henggler, Melton, & Rodrigue, 1992) and Australia (Saha & Pilkington, 1993). Bray and Chapman (1991) found that 93 percent of randomly selected subjects could recall at least one advertisement or programme about AIDS on television. Particularly striking was the high rate of recall for the 'Grim Reaper' advertisement, which was first aired in early 1987. This advertisement personifies AIDS as the figure of death. In 1988, 73 percent of the sample were able to recall this advertisement and one year later, in 1989, a follow-up survey found that 72 percent of people were still able to recall it. However, while this recall rate is impressive, its effect on reducing high-risk behaviours is not clear. An early evaluation of the advertisement documented reactions of fear, denial and disbelief (Taylor, 1988). Furthermore, advertisements which convey fear may lead to irrational behaviour due to increased anxiety (Bush & Boller, 1991).

It can be argued that the most important time to influence high-risk behaviour is immediately prior to it occurring. In the case of HIV infection through sexual intercourse, this would mean that health-promotion messages about HIV/AIDS would need to be recalled during sexual foreplay. Thus there may be an important relation-

ship between the 'state of mind' in which people are when they receive health-promotion messages about HIV/AIDS, and the 'state of mind' in which they are during sexual foreplay and intercourse. Eric Berne's (1964) theory of transactional analysis identifies child, adult and parent ego states (or states of mind), and this theory has also been related to sexual behaviour (Berne, 1970). Although Berne's theory has had appeal among the general public and has been influential as a school of psychotherapy, it has not been empirically evaluated in many applied settings. A recent exception to this is Nykodym, Longenecker and Ruud's (1991) evaluation of transactional analysis (TA) as an intervention strategy to improve quality of working life. They found that a TA programme resulted in significant improvements in perceived group processes among the staff of a large nationwide US company. Such results support the contention that TA could provide an effective tool for understanding and possibly enhancing communication (Nykodym et al., 1991).

Berne (1964) describes how noticeable changes in posture, viewpoint, voice, vocabulary and other aspects of behaviour are often accompanied by shifts in emotion. According to Berne, 'a certain set of behavior patterns corresponds to one state of mind, while another set is related to a different psychic attitude, often inconsistent with the first' (p. 23). It is these 'states of mind' which Berne refers to as 'ego states', describing them phenomenologically as 'a coherent system of feelings' and operationally as a 'set of coherent behavior patterns'. Berne also described five ego states: two child, one adult and two parent ego states. The critical-parent ego state is characterized by punishing behaviour which elicits feelings of discomfort, anxiety and worthlessness in other people. The supporting (or nurturing) parent, by contrast, praises, soothes and provides stability, producing feelings of creativity, consideration and spontaneity in others. The adult state is characterized by reality testing, engendering adaptable and organized behaviour in other. The frustrated (or adapted) child state is influenced by the expectations of the parent and attempts to avoid or delay parental reprimands. The final ego state, the fun-loving (or natural) child, seeks total freedom, openly displaying love, affection, aggression and rebellion.

Transactional analysis is a theory of communication. It suggests that when people communicate, either verbally or non-verbally, they do so from a particular ego state and the receiver responds from a particular ego state. These ego states can be complementary or 'parallel' as illustrated in Figure 1. This parallelism indicates that each individual is accepting the ego state of the other person. When this is not the case, a 'crossed' transaction occurs. Figure 1 shows that while one individual is conducting a adult-to-adult communication, the other is communicating as a child-to-a-parent. Transactional analysis argues that parallel transactions are more effective than crossed ones are. Consequently, in order to communicate effectively with another person, we should identify and direct our message to their current ego state. In the terminology of TA, we thus 'hook' their ego state.

The ego state which people are in during sexual intercourse is likely to depend upon a number of factors, including the nature of their relationship with their sexual partner (Berne, 1970) as well as the social and environmental context of the intercourse. 'A quickie behind the bicycle sheds' may well involve different ego states from that which transpires after a candle-light dinner for two! A corollary of this is that

high-risk sexual behaviour may, on average, be related to ego states different from those of lower risk sexual behaviour. Research from experimental psychology suggests that a person's recall is influenced by the similarity of his or her present situation to the situation which he or she is attempting to recall.

Bower's (1981) associative network theory predicts that contexts which have a similar 'meaning' encourage the recall of previously encountered material while those with a dissimilar 'meaning' discourage recall. Bower's theory is similar to a number of related suggestions that cognition and affect are interrelated (see Brewin, 1988). Perhaps the best known of these is the 'mood congruence recall' effect. This describes, for instance, how joyful experiences are more easily recalled when people are in a similarly joyful mood and how sad experiences are most accessible when people are in a similarly sad mood. The strongest evidence for mood congruence seems to be in literature relating to depressed mood: here congruent recall can be found in both depressed and non-depressed individuals (see, e.g., Crowson & Cromwell, 1995; Ruiz-Caballero & Gonzalez, 1994). While evidence of congruence-recall is not consistently found in all studies across different mood states,

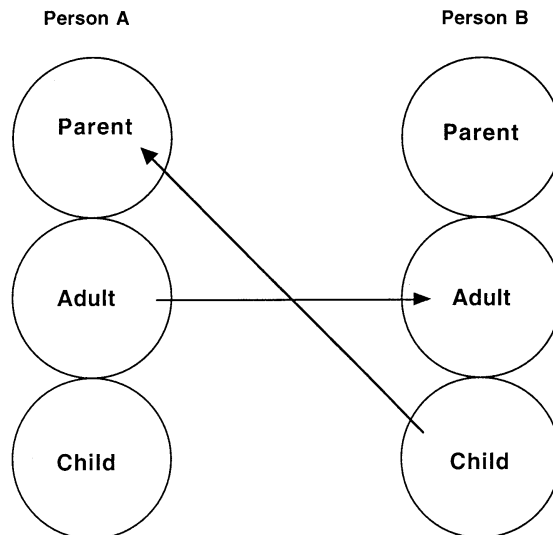


Figure 1. Schematic of a crossed transaction between two people in different ego states; after Harris (1973).

it is found often enough to justify our taking the effect seriously.

Berne's suggestion that 'every individual . . . is capable of objective data processing if the appropriate [Adult] ego state can be activated' (1964, p. 24) resonates with the subsequently developed information-processing paradigm of cognitive psychology. However, his conceptualization of the child ego state (that we carry 'fixed relics from earlier years which will be activated under certain circumstances' [p. 24]), and of the parent ego state (that we 'reproduce the ego states of . . . [our] parents' [p. 24]) also clearly grounds the theory of transactional analysis in the psychodynamic domain. Thus transactional analysis appears to have elements of information processing as described in cognitive psychology as well as the notion of past experiences reaching forward to influence present functioning, as described in psychodynamic psychology.

Our preliminary investigation of the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS health-promotion messages was therefore conducted by considering the possible interplay among television advertising, transactional analysis and recall congruence. Based on this theoretical synthesis we set out to test the following hypotheses:

1. That there would be a non-random distribution of the ego states which participants rated television advertisements to be 'hooking'. This would imply some association between transactional analysis and HIV/AIDS advertising on television.
2. That the relationship between participants' predicted ego state during sexual intercourse and their perception of the ego state 'hooked' during a television advertisement, would be associated with their effectiveness ratings for the advertisement.

## Method

### *Participants*

To ensure a relatively sexually active sample we excluded people over the age of 30 (see Creig & Raphael, 1989). Participants were a convenience sample of 83 first-year undergraduates who attended an introductory psychology course at the University of Newcastle. There were 55 female and 28 males students, with a mean age of 19.8 years. Participation occurred on the basis

of informed consent and complete anonymity/confidentiality.

### *Apparatus and procedure*

After a brief introduction to TA terminology, participants viewed two television advertisements widely used by Australian networks to promote safer sexual practices. These were the 'Grim Reaper' and 'Multiple Beds' advertisements, first screened in the late 1980s and early 1990s respectively. The 'Grim Reaper' personifies AIDS as the figure of death. The 'Multiple Beds' advertisement depicts a couple in bed, panning out to reveal previous partners in bed with their partners. Following consecutive viewing of these two advertisements, participants completed a short questionnaire asking them to (1) identify the ego state of the narrator (child, adult or parent) and (2) the apparent ego state of the audience which the narrator was trying to 'hook'; (3) estimate their own most probable ego state in relation to having sexual intercourse with a partner; and (4) rate the perceived effectiveness of the advertisement (using a 4-point Likert-type scale) in communicating the need for safe sex practices.

The information obtained from items (1), (2) and (3), when combined, enabled us to code the perceived communication between the narrator and the implied audience, and the predicted ego state during sexual intercourse, in terms of whether it was a 'parallel' or 'crossed' transaction.

## Results

Table 1 gives a breakdown of ratings of the 'Grim Reaper' advertisement. Eighty-nine percent of them identified the narrator in the advert as adopting the critical-parent ego state. However, there was less agreement on the ego state which the speaker was trying to 'hook' in the audience. Twenty percent chose the adult state and 77 percent a child state, which was evenly split between the fun-loving (40 percent) and frustrated (36 percent) child states. The majority of participants therefore rated communication in the 'Grim Reaper' advertisement as emanating from a critical parent to a fun-loving child or frustrated child audience. Chi-squared tests of goodness of fit revealed that the distributions of ratings in Table 1 depart considerably from chance (speaker  $\chi^2(4, N = 83) = 248.99$ ; audience  $\chi^2(4, N = 83) = 58.39$ ; both  $p < .001$ ).

Table 1 also shows ratings for the ‘Multiple Beds’ advertisement. Seventy-one percent identified the speaker in a parent ego state, with 56 percent choosing the critical-parent and 15 percent the supporting parent state. The remaining 29 percent identified the speaker to be in an adult ego state. The audience which the speaker was attempting to ‘hook’ was judged to be in either an adult (49 percent) or a child (fun-loving, 33 percent and frustrated, 18 percent) ego state. The majority of participants in the ‘Multiple Beds’ advert thus saw the communication to be from a parent or adult speaker to an adult or a child audience. Again chi-squared analysis showed that the distributions in Table 1 depart considerably from chance ( $\chi^2(4, N = 80) = 88.63$  and  $\chi^2(4, N = 80) = 69.63$ , for speaker and audience respectively, both  $p < .001$ ).

The final data in Table 1 relate to participants’ rating of their own expected ego state during sexual interaction with a partner. The majority of subjects expected to be in an adult ego state (76 percent). However, 22 percent anticipated being in a fun-loving child state. In a goodness-of-fit test, the ratings in Table 1 represent a considerable departure from chance ( $\chi^2(4, N = 83) = 161.04, p < .001$ ).

The next stage of our analysis sought to relate the ego states implied by the advertisement, the predicted ego state during sexual intercourse and participants’ ratings of the effectiveness of each advertisement. We defined a crossed transaction to occur when a participant’s rating of ego states for an advertisement did not correspond to the rating of his or her own predicted ego state during sexual intercourse. For instance, a participant might

rate the communication in the advertisement to be from critical parent to fun-loving child and his or her own state during sexual intercourse to be adult. As this adult state could not be ‘hooked’ by their understanding of the advertisement, we describe it as a ‘crossed transaction’. A ‘parallel transaction’ would be one where the ego state during sexual intercourse was rated the same as that of the implied audience in the advertisement.

In response to the ‘Grim Reaper’ advertisement, the relationship between transactional analysis (crossed versus parallel) and ratings of advertisement effectiveness (poor or satisfactory versus good or excellent) was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1, N = 83) = 2.78, p < .05$ , one-tailed). Parallel transactions were associated with significantly higher ratings of effectiveness than were crossed transactions. For the ‘Multiple Beds’ advertisement, the same analysis produced a weaker result which only verged on conventional levels of statistical significance ( $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 2.47$ , critical value = 2.71, one-tailed,  $p < .05$ ). Nonetheless the trend of effect for the second advertisement was in the same direction as the first advertisement.

Finally, we compared the effectiveness of the two advertisements. On a scale from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent) the effectiveness ratings for the ‘Grim Reaper’ and ‘Multiple Beds’ advertisements were 2.08 (SD = 0.86) and 2.73 (SD = 0.77) respectively. A paired *t*-test revealed that this difference was statistically highly significant ( $t = 5.00, p < .001$ ). The lower ratings for the ‘Grim Reaper’ advertisement may be due to the greater number of crossed transactions—76 percent for the ‘Grim Reaper’ and 49 percent for the ‘Multiple Beds’—resulting from it.

Table 1. Ego-state ratings of speaker and audience for advertisements and sexual interaction

<i>Ego state</i>	<i>Criticizing parent</i>	<i>Supporting parent</i>	<i>Adult</i>	<i>Fun-loving child</i>	<i>Frustrated child</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Chi-square statistic</i>
<i>‘Grim Reaper’ advertisement</i>							
Speaker	74	3	5	0	1	83	$\chi^2 = 248.99$
Audience	1	1	17	34	30	83	$\chi^2 = 58.386$
<i>‘Beds’ advertisement</i>							
Speaker	45	12	23	0	0	80	$\chi^2 = 88.625$
Audience	0	1	39	26	14	80	$\chi^2 = 69.625$
Sexual interaction	1	1	61	18	2	83	$\chi^2 = 161.04$

## Discussion

To our knowledge, television advertising for health promotion has not previously been investigated in terms of transactional analysis. Participants' ratings of the speaker and audience ego states were not randomly distributed. In fact, there were highly distinctive perceptions of ego states for each of the advertisements and for own anticipated sexual behaviour. This implies that TA is indeed a salient form of analysis, at least in relation to AIDS/HIV health promotion on television.

Further evidence of the relevance of transactional analysis to advertising campaigns of this nature is found in the association between transaction ratings and ratings of the effectiveness of the advertisements. While our results did not show particularly strong effects, they were nevertheless in the same direction for each advertisement. In the context of TA theory, they support the plausibility of parallel transactions being more effective than crossed transactions are. In so doing, they highlight the possible value of television advertising taking into account the ego state of the audience on which it seeks to have an impact. With regard to HIV/AIDS, there are at least two periods for advertisers to consider. First, there is the viewing period. What is the likely ego state of the target audience while they are viewing the advertisement? Second, what is the likely ego state of the target audience when planning, or actually engaging in, sexual intercourse?

The answer to the first question is to some degree beyond the advertiser's control. However, this does not mean that it is uncontrollable. Let us imagine an advertisement which has been developed to 'hook' an adult ego state. The likelihood of the audience actually being in this ego state is surely going to be influenced by the other advertisements and programmes they have been watching immediately prior to the health-promotion advertisement. For instance, the likely success of the advertisement may well be influenced by whether it is shown in the middle of a political documentary (adult ego state) or a animated cartoon comedy (child ego state). Thus the 'programming context' of the advertisement may have the potential to enhance or to diminish the effectiveness of a health-promotion advertising campaign. TA could also be used to monitor

campaigns or to review old ones. Reviewing the form of communication employed in previous advertising campaigns and relating this to evaluation data for them may allow for new insights regarding their effectiveness or lack of effectiveness.

The ego state of the target audience during intercourse is also likely to be important. What is not clear, however, is how the ego state while viewing an advertisement and the ego state during sexual intercourse are related. We may speculate, on the rationale of Bower's (1981) associative network theory, that an advertisement which is directed at the same ego state experienced during intercourse is more likely to be effective than one which is not. The reason for this is that an individual is more likely to recall mood congruent, rather than mood incongruent, material (see Brewin, 1988).

The notions of mood congruence and of ego states suggest rather static and exclusive states of mind. It may, for instance, be possible for a person to occupy more than one ego state at a time. Furthermore, during the viewing of an advertisement or during sexual intercourse, ego states may shift. As an alternative to transactional analysis our results could also be interpreted in terms of positioning theory. Positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991) has its origins in marketing where products are 'positioned' in relation to their competitors. A key aspect of positioning is therefore the placing of a product (or person) relative to another product (or person). In the course of a conversation between two people each takes up a position relative to the other. Harré and Van Langenhove describe the discursive practice of positioning thus:

within a conversation each of the participants always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself. Whenever somebody positions him/herself, this discursive act always implies the positioning of the one who is addressed. And similarly, when somebody positions somebody else, that always implies the positioning of the person him/herself. In any discursive practice, positioning constitutes the Self and the others in certain ways and at the same time it is a resource through which all persons involved can negotiate new positions. (1991, p. 398)

The concept of positioning thus allows for a more fluid and dynamic relationship between the participants in a communication. While it may be argued that a 'one-way' communication (such as the television advertisements viewed here) prohibits any negotiation of positions, there is still the possibility that an individual will reflect on his or her response to (or position relative to) the message sender. Whether ego states or discursive positions or some other concept offer a more valid account of the effects reported here is an empirical question which justifies further research.

Prior to rating the advertisements, participants were given a brief introduction to TA terminology. This was necessary because not all of them were familiar with the theory of transactional analysis. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the briefing in TA which participants received prior to rating the advertisements may have primed them to give responses in one direction or another. While we deliberately avoided explaining our definition of a crossed transaction or outlining our hypotheses, it is nonetheless possible that some participants guessed these and that 'demand characteristics' contributed to the results. Future research may wish to ascertain ratings of effectiveness prior to considering TA states. However, if such transfer effects are operating here, it is not clear whether they might be symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Participants were asked to estimate their most probable ego state during sexual intercourse. However, this estimation needs to be unpacked by further research. While individuals may adopt one ego state more frequently than others, it is likely that they will not adopt the same state during every episode of sexual intercourse. In reality, different partners, different situations and different sexual practices may be associated with different ego states.

Also regarding ego state during intercourse, it was found that a majority of participants rated their anticipated ego state as adult. This result may reflect Australian social and cultural values suggesting that only adults should engage in sexual intercourse. However, participants may also have reasoned that if one is having sexual intercourse then one is acting in an adult way and that it is therefore appropriate for this ego state to dominate during sexual intercourse.

This initial investigation of transactional analysis as a tool for improving the effectiveness of advertising concerning HIV/AIDS has produced some encouraging results. Our small and rather select sample suggests caution in generalizing from the results of this study. It is recognized that a stronger test of the value of TA for health promotion would be to investigate its effectiveness in terms of actual behaviour change, rather than its relationship to predicted ego state during sexual intercourse. It would also seem germane to investigate the ego states which are common during high-risk and low-risk behaviors of all kinds. This sort of information could facilitate a more psychologically sophisticated form of audience segmentation. Transactional analysis could be applied to many media used to channel health-promoting messages. We have attempted to outline some of the important issues which need to be addressed in order to evaluate the potential of transactional analysis as a tool for promoting health.

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