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ARTICLE



## Brain Hemisphere Specialization and Neurodiversity as Influencing Factors on the Phenomenology of the Adult Ego State

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### ABSTRACT

The author reviews the development of Adult ego state theories and their applicability to people of different neurotypes. He examines progress in the field of brain hemisphere research and highlights perceptual differences between the right and left brain hemispheres, which actuate the Adult ego state. Applying this research to how the Adult ego state has been modeled in TA, the author questions whether a single model can capture the full functional capacity of the Adult and challenges a valorization of the Adult ego state. Ways in which current Adult ego state models might be adapted are suggested to accommodate the breadth of neurological variance in practitioners and clients. The author then reconceptualizes Adult ego state functioning to inform readers about how the Adult operates differently across neurotypes.

### KEYWORDS

Neurodiversity; autism; divided brain; neuroscience; Adult; hemisphere; transactional analysis; Berne

This article's title captures my experience and questioning of the nature of the Adult ego state. Berne (1961) asserted, "The Adult ego state is characterized by an autonomous set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are adapted to the current reality" (p. 76). This raises three questions. First, the Adult must reference prior experience to construct "current reality," so can it truly operate autonomously? Second, in creating current reality, to what extent does the Adult function as a process or a repository of "facts" about the world? Third, how effectively do TA models of the Adult ego state accommodate neurological variance?

In searching for answers to these questions, I draw on research into the split nature of the human brain (McGilchrist, 2009, 2018, 2021), which reveals differences in brain hemisphere structure correlating to variation in cognitive processing, that is, neuro-variance (Dorothea et al., 2021; Herbert et al., 2005; Postema et al., 2019).

In this article, I use "neurovariance" rather than the more familiar "neurodivergence," just as I introduce this term with clients, supervisees, and trainees. My discomfort with "neurodivergence" is that it might imply a deviation from what is healthy. In contrast, "neurovariance" expresses my view of neurotypes as another facet of the wonderful variation in our species that makes each person unique and endlessly interesting.

Most of my clients are diagnosed or identify as neurovariant, and I identify in myself attributes of dyspraxia, which present as ineffectual integration in social groups and difficulty ordering thoughts. I must focus when communicating to ensure I complete one thought and avoid skipping to concurrently running and associated thinking. When writing this article, I was challenged to prioritize its content and emphasize its central thesis. In my previous work as an interpreter, however, my neurology provided benefit in that I found simultaneous interpreting easy and soothing, whereas it is widely viewed as the most difficult form of interpretation.

Pertaining to this article, I observed how my wife, who is autistic, and I create current realities consistent within the realms of our autistic and dyspraxic subjectivities, yet each reality can be strikingly different. Differences persist when we are psychologically grounded, which in TA is described as “being in Adult.” Current reality, it appears, is a labile construct.

One objective of this article is to illustrate that someone deciding from Adult what is socially attractive must draw on prior experiences and be able to assess how others respond to them, including to their nonverbal responses. This challenges people of neurotypes who make greater use of spoken language because they cannot decode nonverbal communication.

I begin by reviewing the development of Adult ego state theory and brain hemisphere research followed by an explanation of differences in right- and left-hemispheric perception of the world and self with application to Adult ego state theory. I conclude by examining how the nature of the Adult might be different across the range of human neurovariance with a focus on the autistic mind.

## **Development of Eric Berne’s Ideas of the Adult and Their Accommodation of Neurovariance**

Berne developed his ego state definition to provide the nuance and operative breadth now identified with the Adult. “An ego state may be described phenomenologically as a coherent set of feelings, and operationally as a set of coherent behavior patterns; or pragmatically, as a system of feelings which motivates a related set of behavior patterns” (Berne, 1957/1977, p. 123). By 1961, Berne acknowledged that a person can decide in the Adult to adhere to personal values and exhibit socially attractive and responsive behavior. His refined definition of Adult incorporated domains of Ethos and Pathos, expressed in thinking, feeling, and behavior akin to that of Parent or Child ego state, respectively (Berne, 1961).

In TA training, I recall the allure of the simple and perfect circle representing the Adult ego state. I believed that to reside in Adult would mean attaining the uniformity and perfection of that circle, reminiscent of the ouroboros, a halo-like symbol of a snake consuming its tail. Jung interpreted the ouroboros as representative of infinity and wholeness, stating that it expresses “the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process” (Jung, 1955–1956/1963, p. 364). This article describes in TA terms a division within that wholeness, which Jung illuminated in stating, “The Ouroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e., of the shadow” (p. 513).

The Adult, conceptualized as integrated or integrating, is actuated by a profoundly divided brain. Jung regarded the ouroboros as an integrated whole comprising also the shadow self, whereas in TA, a person might be described as identifying what was held out of awareness in archaic ego states (i.e., their shadow), then deciding to integrate those aspects of the self into the Adult. The description provided in this article in the section titled “Interpersonal Operation of the Neurovariant Adult” illustrates how aspects of the self, integrated into the Adult, can promote safety in relationship or, conversely, be deleterious. “Being in Adult” is not a panacea for intrapersonal and interpersonal difficulties. Then follows an exploration of how what is available for integration hinges on a person accessing their recorded history of themselves—their autobiographical memory—which can be limited for autistic people (Wantzen et al., 2021; Westby, 2022).

In relation to the second-order model of the Adult ego state, Berne (1961) wrote, “This remains the most obscure area in structural analysis, so that it is not possible at present to clarify it clinically” (p. 195). This seems prophetic of the many Adult models since proposed by transactional analysts. For example, I find it significant that several authors endeavored to capture in a unified model the differences in how the right- and left-brain hemispheres operate (Hughes, 1978; Kuijt, 1980; Nims, 1981; Parry, 1978).

Considering this history, why is finding a congruent model of the here-and-now ego state so challenging? Not only does each brain hemisphere perceive the world differently and the coordination of their disparate functioning vary within a neurotype population, but structural variation in the hemispheres is observed across different neurotypes. So, how might understanding and applying models of the Adult need to be adapted to accommodate differences in its function across neurotypes?

My clinical work with neurovariant people, and what they teach me about their experience in their here and now, has evoked concern that a therapist of one neurotype could confuse what may be the Adult function of a client of a different neurotype as indicative of archaic ego state functioning. Within the TA community, it is reassuring that increased exploration of this subject is raising awareness of potential harmful outcomes and how clinical practice can be adapted to avoid them (Bowers & Widdowson, 2023; Flowerdew, 2017; Oates, 2021).

Having briefly considered development of Adult ego state theory, I now review the development of research into the operation of the brain hemispheres.

## **A History of Brain Hemisphere Research**

In the mid 19th century, French physician Paul Broca identified the eponymous Broca’s Area when performing postmortems on former patients who suffered aphasia (the inability to understand or formulate language). He noticed a pattern of lesions in a region of the left hemisphere’s frontal lobe (Berker et al., 1986), thus identifying the area implicated in the production of spoken language. Building on this, German neurologist Carl Wernicke discovered that damage to the left temporal lobe (Wernicke’s area) impaired understanding of spoken language rather than its production (Wernicke, 1874/1970).

Later researchers contributed evidence that the right and left hemispheres function differently (Gazzaniga, 1970; Levy, 1974; Sperry, 1961). Their insights eventually captured public attention, and, consequently, the researched discoveries were later presented in an abridged form. From solid science, reductionist and generalized conclusions were obtained. Split-brain myths became embedded, expressed by people in comments such as “I’m not creative, I’m all left brain!” or “I’m hopeless at math, I’m a right brainer!”

It is a misperception that one hemisphere of the brain performs specific tasks to the exclusion of the other. It is also untrue that a person’s creativity is driven only by the right hemisphere; creativity demands the involvement of both hemispheres. Likewise, it is not solely the left hemisphere that is engaged in the creative formulation of language; both hemispheres function inseparably to enable comprehension and effective use of language. And, in everything people do, each hemisphere operates differently from the other. So how do we know the hemispheres function differently and what are those differences?

### **What Is Going on Under the Hood?**

Neuroanatomist Paul Yakovlev identified the anatomical asymmetry of the human brain (LeMay, 1976), thus providing an observable indication that the hemispheres functionally differ. The brain appears twisted (the Yakovlevian torque), with the right hemisphere protruding forward relative to the left and the left hemisphere backward relative to the right. Irrespective of whether someone believes this is our Creator’s design or an evolutionary consequence of natural selection, each possible origin of our species dictates that the brain hemispheres are anatomically different to provide greater functional utility. When considering ways in which the hemispheres differ, it is crucial to remember that the hemispheres operate concurrently, and each is essential in all that a person thinks and does.

The brain enables people to interact with the world, maintain relationships, formulate ideas, direct their actions to realize those ideas, and assess their thinking and actions. This reveals a separation of functions in a single process. For example, an artist might create a mentalized image they want to share, they act by painting their image on a canvas for others to view, and they hear an inner voice of appraisal of the work. The artist is simultaneously the painter and the painter’s critic. This is possible because each brain hemisphere is engaged in the creative activity in a different way. The question then becomes, what does each hemisphere provide?

### **Right- and Left-Hemisphere Perceptual Focus**

The right hemisphere attends to what is, focusing on immediate contact with the environment, ever vigilant, maintaining constant, broad focus, receptive to all it encounters without preconception. This capacity for sustained attention becomes severely impaired in people who have right hemisphere lesions (Wilkins et al., 1987). Constant, vigilant awareness allows a person to experience the joy of connection with the environment and opens their senses to spontaneous, enriching encounters. When

something enters the individual's broad field of awareness, noradrenaline is released mainly in the right hemisphere and instigates changes in the right hippocampus, not the left (Goldberg, 2001). This keeps the person safe, alerting them when anything new approaches, including potential threats.

Yet people require more than sustained and undifferentiated focus to function effectively. A person must discern what is significant to them on a background of current irrelevancies. The left hemisphere holds a record of what is known and, typically, named. This creates the capacity for recognition (re-cognition) of what is important on the right hemisphere's broad-focus backdrop. The drawback of the left hemisphere's fixed realm is that it can become so narrowly focused that it formulates solutions and perceptions adapted exclusively to what is already known (Tucker & Williamson, 1984), that is, it strives for uniformity.

Readers can experience the operation of their right hemisphere in the absence of prior knowledge held in the left by looking at the image in [Figure 1](#) below (adapted from James, 1965, p. 120) and attempting to identify what it depicts.

Was it possible to see anything meaningful? Many cannot until directed to the Dalmatian on the right-hand side. When the object is named, the left hemisphere isolates the Dalmatian with its narrow focus on what is known. This highlights the utility of the left hemisphere in making sense of a chaotic world. In her book *My Stroke of Insight* and homonymously titled TED Talk, neuroanatomist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor (2009) described how unnavigable the world became when she suffered a left-hemisphere stroke and lost access to its fixed knows.

The left hemisphere's map is simplified, lacking detail of what actually exists, yet it provides adequate detail to isolate what is important to an individual at any given moment. If a person is unaware of the trap of such simplicity, they become reliant on it. For me, the allure of simplicity explains my initial attraction to the plainness



**Figure 1.** An Image Hidden to the Right Hemisphere (adapted from James, 1965, p. 120).

of the perfect circle representing the Adult ego state. Although both hemispheres are essential for healthy human functioning, the right hemisphere is “master” because it is in immediate contact with the world, with the left hemisphere serving this master to make sense of what is perceived (McGilchrist, 2009). In my view, practitioners might become beguiled into false clarity by superimposing TA’s representative models on their clients. I would suggest that TA models—a triangle, a circle, quadrants, and grids—lend themselves well to the left hemisphere’s realm. This highlights the need to balance one’s thinking and perceptual focus with what each hemisphere provides, an example of which follows.

## Interoperability of the Hemispheres

Many animals share the way human brain hemispheres function. The wrybill is unique as the only bird with a laterally hooked bill. Like humans, the forebrain of the wrybill is organized contralaterally, so sensory data received through its right eye is processed in the left hemisphere and vice versa. (In humans, each eye’s right field of view is processed in the left hemisphere of the brain and vice versa.)

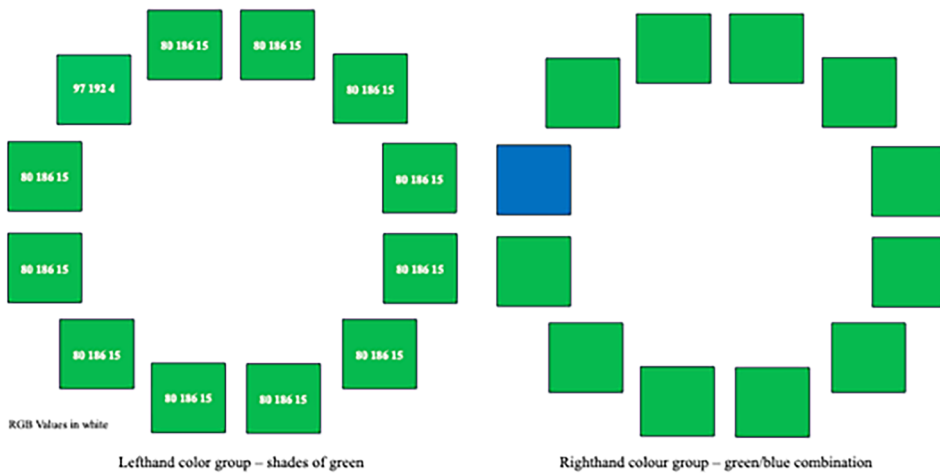
The wrybill’s rightward curved bill requires tilting its right eye toward the ground when foraging, engaging the narrow focus of the left hemisphere with its record of what is known and significant, namely, insect larvae. Its left eye is directed to the wider environment, processed by its right hemisphere and with its broad, constant focus, vigilant for what is new, including predators.

For the left hemisphere to be useful, it must hold a repository of what is significant. The wrybill needs a record of its foods, whereas humans have far greater potential because they possess language representing elements of the world and themselves. How influential is the left hemisphere’s “programming” in human perception? Two examples are provided in the following sections: the role language plays in how a person defines their world and how they record the meaning of permutations of physical sensations comprising their emotions.

## Priming the Left Hemisphere: Language

The Himba tribe of Namibia provides a striking example of how profoundly language influences perception. Their language, Otjiherero, uses one word, buru, for a collection of greens and blues, but two words for differentiating shades of green: dambu for lighter and zuzu for darker shades (Roberson et al., 2006). When a range of green shades is presented to Himba people in a configuration analogous to [Figure 2](#), the left-hand color group, they quickly identify the lighter shade (annotated “RGB value 97 192 4”). When European people encounter this test, the subjects either fail or take a long time to complete the task. This is because the Otjiherero language provides narrow left-hemisphere focus enabling its users quickly to identify lighter and darker shades of green (dambu and zuzu, respectively).

The impact of language becomes more fascinatingly evident when Himba people are presented with a second color group configured analogous to [Figure 2](#), the right-hand color group, and asked to identify the blue tile. They struggle to identify



**Figure 2.** Color Differentiation.

the blue, whereas speakers of European languages quickly find it. Otjherero provides a single name—buru—for a collection of blues and greens, so the left hemisphere identifies the two colors as uniform. This might seem incomprehensible to some whose native tongue is European because their left hemisphere isolates blue according to their linguistic framework. Lacking a single word for a group of blues and greens, the left hemisphere differentiates them. A member of the Himba tribe might find it equally incomprehensible that a European struggles to pick out the lighter shade of green in the left-hand group in Figure 2.

It is interesting to me that the study just described does not describe an accounting for color blindness—another variation in perception. This illustrates the vigilance required of practitioners of psychology and psychotherapy in relation to neurovariance and how easily differences can be overlooked.

Neuroscientist David Eagleman (2020) analogized linguistic priming of perception to mountain peaks and valleys and data received through sensory organs to rain falling on the landscape. Language creates peaks of perceptual differentiation separating data into valleys of awareness. In the example just described from the Himba people, their language does not provide a “peak” differentiating blues from greens viewed in a group. Blue and green data arriving through the optic nerves are funneled into a single buru valley and are perceived as homogeneous.

This experiment implicates Berne’s (1961) definition that “the Adult ego state is characterized by an autonomous set of feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns which are adapted to the current reality” (p. 76) because it demonstrates how prior linguistic priming can determine an individual’s current reality.

### **Programming the Left Hemisphere: Emotions**

As humans acquire language, they learn to isolate and name subjective experiences. Children are taught to identify clusters of physical sensations aroused by objective and subjective stimuli. These clusters are named “happy,” “sad,” “angry,” and so on.



I recall when my 3-year-old daughter approached me crying. She pointed to her tears and said, “Look daddy, I’m crying ... I’m sad.” This revealed that she had learned to correlate internal sensations, observable tears, and the meaning and name of this cluster. Her approaching me confirmed she had learned to anticipate a needed response: comfort.

Children learn to decode the meaning of physiological changes, and name them, by social referencing (Keenan et al., 2016). The Visual Cliff Experiment revealed how children in their first year refer to their primary caregiver to define what they feel. The child is placed on a plexiglass tabletop, beneath which a patterned floor drops halfway across the surface, thus creating a visual cliff (Gibson & Walk, 1960).

When the child’s caregiver stands beyond the visual cliff and presents a fearful face, the child stops at the point at which the patterned floor drops (the plexiglass surface makes it safe to proceed). When the caregiver poses an encouraging facial expression rather than a prohibitive one, the child is more likely to cross the visual cliff (Sorce et al., 1985). This suggests that the caregiver defines the meaning of the cluster of physiological sensations for the child. The caregiver’s nonverbal communication is so potent that the child learns to ignore self-protective fear of the perceived drop and pursues a potentially harmful course.

It is in this area of the operation of the left hemisphere—namely, the meaning and record of emotions—that research has revealed significant differences between neurotypes (Bonete et al., 2023). Although the mechanisms at a neurological level are poorly understood, it is clear by way of interview that neurotypical and autistic people access their autobiographical memory differently, as described in the following section.

## **Interoperability of the Right and Left Hemispheres in the Adult Ego State**

The examples just described illustrate how people reference a simplified representation of the world held in the left hemisphere for perception and to understand subjective experience. This raises the question of how someone can square their reliance on the left hemisphere’s archaic representations (re-presentations) to function in the here and now while conceptualizing their Adult ego state as being capable of truly autonomous functioning. This question arises from the fact that the Adult ego state needs to access a repository of prior experience, which somehow contradicts the idea of autonomy, that is, freedom from external influence. The impact of the Otjiherero language on people’s ability to see the color blue among greens underscores how one person’s Adult response can be unimaginably different from another’s.

Transactional analysis (TA) authors describe well how children define the meaning of their feelings and whether to attend to them. This relies on the child drawing on verbal and nonverbal messages and recalling their sense of themselves responding to numerous relational encounters. For example, injunctions are accepted prohibitive nonverbal messages regulating feelings, thought, and behavior (Berne, 1972; Goulding & Goulding, 1979; Steiner, 1971, 1974), and on the acquisition of language they are complemented by counterinjunctions, often fixed in “family mottos” (Steiner, 1971, 1974). For example, the counterinjunction “Put your guests first” will make sense to

someone holding the felt injunction of Don't Have Needs. How these theories might need to be adapted for some neurotypes is considered next.

## Interpersonal Operation of the Neurovariant Adult

So far, a neurological basis has been provided for questions posed about the nature of the Adult. Many Adult models exist, beginning with Berne's quite prescriptive integrated Adult (Berne, 1961, p. 193), to Tudor's (2010) more adaptable integrating Adult, and others as well (Ohlsson, 1988; Stuthridge, 2006; Temple, 1999; Wells, 2012). These hold value in providing different perspectives on Adult ego state operation, and their range supports Berne's statement regarding the challenge of modeling Adult ego state structure. Exploration of brain hemisphere function provides insight into the nature of that challenge, which becomes more complex when accounting for differences in neurotypes.

The right hemisphere creates connection with another person, whereas the left hemisphere stands separate from connection and appraises the other. The left hemisphere provides preconceptions of people along with beliefs and values held in the Adult ego state. A person's capacity for appraisal can be Machiavellian, inasmuch as they might seek to manipulate another for self-gratification, or Erasmian, wherein they seek peace and unanimity with another. For instance, from their Adult ego state, the salesperson persuades the unwitting customer to make an unnecessary purchase, and from Adult the doctor urges their patient to undergo feared painful treatment. The Erasmian Adult rejects what is revealed as malign in the shadow self, whereas the Machiavellian Adult consumes it.

Both the salesperson and the doctor draw on reliable autobiographical memory of their prior encounters with others and how their behaviors impacted others' subjective states. This capacity is limited in the autistic mind because autobiographical memory "is also involved in ToM [theory of mind], the understanding of others' inner world, and thence the prediction of their future behavior" (Wantzen et al., 2021, p. 2). In my clinical work, I often hear stories of autistic clients being exploited because of their transparency in relationship. Although this difference might be viewed as a deficient Adult failing to provide protection, I consider it an attractive attribute of the autistic Adult.

Berne (1972) promoted the notion of "thinking Martian," approaching each encounter with clients without preconception or prejudice, remaining open and receptive to the other's worldview. My experience is that autistic people naturally engage with others in this way, without referring to autobiographical memory to the extent that neurotypical people do. Sadly, repeated experiences of exploitation often result in autistic individuals deciding that isolation is preferable to experiencing repeated harm and pain. Hence, I suggest that the *DSM-V* diagnostic criterion of autism, namely "failure to initiate or respond to social interactions" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 299.00:A.1.), is not a true symptom of autism but a conscious, elective behavioral response to repeated relational trauma.

This is significant because Adult ego state integration of autobiographical memory can hinder people in attaining intimacy (Berne, 1961). What if someone's Ethos (Berne, 1961) includes the ethic that they can steal possessions from those who are wealthier

than they are? Is this not the heroic example of Robin Hood widely taught to children? Is this not the premise on which taxation redistributes wealth from rich to poor? If such a value, adopted into someone's Ethos, strikingly contradicts values held by another, this could create an obstacle to them achieving intimacy, even if they operate from Adult of the same neurotype.

People who share values in Ethos but have different neurotypes can face even greater challenges in their pursuit of relational proximity. What if one person references socially responsive behavior held in Pathos (Berne, 1961) and it contradicts another's Adult expectations? I notice in my clinical work that many autistic clients do not place the same significance on disclosing personal information as do neurotypical people. Without first exchanging nonverbal messages through pastimes to foster mutual trust (Berne, 1972), an autistic person from Adult might share quite personal details. Their neurotypical counterpart infers an expectation that they provide equally personal information and that the autistic person believes sufficient trust has been established. This can overwhelm the neurotypical person, who effects a relational rupture to escape the inferred expectation. Both operate from Adult, yet one person's Adult becomes the other person's nemesis.

Parry's (1978) article "Man Does Not Live by Ego States Alone" provided a useful model for understanding why Adult ego states of different neurotypes might fail effectively to relate. Parry conceptualized the Adult as actuated by the "Responsive Self" and the "Responsible Self" (p. 287), two aspects of the self that transcend discrete ego states. He attributed precepts of the left hemisphere to the Responsible Self and the right hemisphere's immediacy of contact with the environment to the Responsive Self. In the example just mentioned, the autistic mind's attenuated reference to autobiographical history restricts the Responsible Self's capacity to furnish the Adult with responses anticipated by the neurotypical Adult. Conversely, neurotypical reliance on the Responsible Self's conceptions obstructs the Responsive Self in providing their Adult with capacity for attunement to their autistic counterpart.

## **Intrapersonal Operation of the Neurovariant Adult**

The courage and resilience of the neurovariant clients, supervisees, and trainees I meet with has been so valuable as they work to identify differences between their thinking and that of the neurotypical majority. This group's thirst for detailed information about TA models creates a mutually respectful forum in which we adapt models to meet their needs.

I notice autistic clients struggle to derive meaning from physiological changes arising in response to particular stimuli. Some manage their confusion by disavowing feelings, describing themselves as "cut off from the neck down." Early sessions with these people are often psychoeducational, enabling identification of physiological responses to stimuli that they then practice between sessions. Then they formulate a lexicon (emotions) for consistently occurring clusters of sensations (feelings). We then consider neurotypical affective responses they might anticipate beyond the therapy room. This approach to support autistic people in strengthening their sense of self-identity has been proposed by researchers who have looked into the limited

autobiographical memory of this group (Westby, 2022). I view the process as verbalized social referencing, the necessity of which raises questions regarding the applicability of some TA theories, such as the script matrix (Steiner, 1971, 1974).

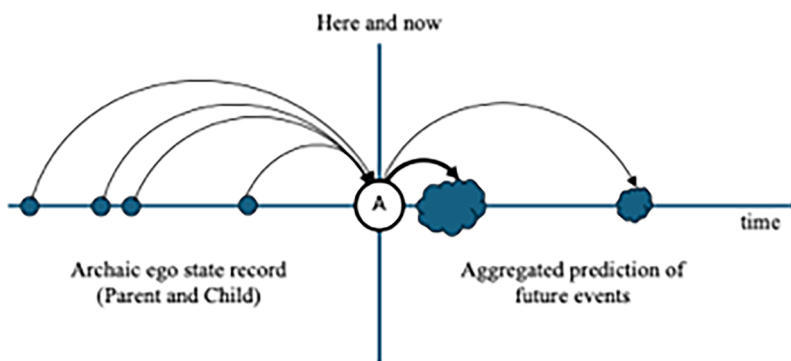
To what extent can an autistic child adopt injunctions if they cannot decode non-verbal messages in early social referencing? If a limited range of injunctions is held at a felt level, how does the autistic child make sense of verbalized counterinjunctions? In contrast, neurotypical children might readily accept counterinjunctions that make intuitive sense when supported by felt injunctions.

An autistic person's rejection of arbitrary counterinjunctions, unsubstantiated by felt injunctions, might be misinterpreted as symptomatic of oppositional defiant disorder (*DSM-V*, 2013, 313.81) or pathological demand avoidance (Newson et al., 2003). Alternatively, an autistic person's unquestioning acceptance of arbitrary counterinjunctions, and similarly arbitrary adherence to them, results in *masking*, thus leaving them vulnerable to manipulation. Their adherence to the rules of counterinjunctions is unmoderated by nonverbal messages from others that could inform them when a counterinjunction is unhelpful. Universal application of counterinjunctions might be misconstrued by a neurotypical transactional analyst as slavish adherence to a rule set from the Child rather than an Adult solution for social interaction created in awareness.

### Ramifications of an Autistic Person's Archaic Ego States

A neurotypical person's ability to enter unfamiliar situations derives from the left hemisphere's narrowed perceptual field, predicated by reference to autobiographical memory. For example, entering a new grocery store feels familiar because the left hemisphere provides simplified representations of similar experiences (Figure 3). This narrowed perceptual focus results in the creation of cognitive biases, which filter out data in the here and now that do not conform to expectations and thereby limit the right hemisphere's breadth of focus.

In this model, the neurotypical Adult integrates prior experiences with expectations of future events to create a narrative, thus furnishing an illusory sense of permanence validated by a relatively stable environment. The neurotypical Adult usefully references



**Figure 3.** Neurotypical Adult Ego State Creating Its Narrative in the Here And Now.

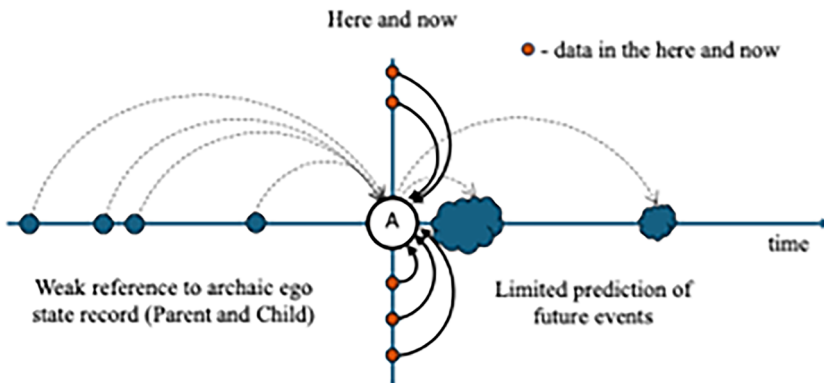
archaic ego states containing information crystallized in language and supported by relevant nonverbal underpinnings. Ken Mellor and Elizabeth Mellor (2004) described how adolescents revisit prepubescent developmental stages, updating them with their recently acquired sophisticated capability emotionally to attune to others. In this period, the neurotypical adolescent expands their ability to hold a mental representation of self over time, and their social interactions are essential for them to accomplish this (Westby, 2022).

My autistic clients' description of their thinking suggests that they do not reference past experiences in this way. On entering a new grocery store, the autistic individual experiences apprehension and a sense that "anything could happen." Why? Caregivers' nonverbal messages may be invisible to some neurovariant children, making observable behavior and speech confusing. Consequently, I suggest the Adult ego state of some neurovariant individuals does not reference seemingly arbitrary data held in archaic ego states to predict future events. My observations in working with autistic clients is supported by recent research:

Individuals with ASD [autism spectrum disorder] typically have impaired AM [autobiographical memory]. They have frequently been reported to have difficulties recalling past events of their lives. Studies show that individuals with ASD tend to recall significantly fewer autobiographical memories and take longer to do so than a control group. (Westby, 2022, p. 2283)

A neurotypical therapist might view an autistic client's apprehension as Adult dysfunction. Yet the autistic mind, less constrained by prior experiences, remains unfettered by cognitive biases to the extent that the neurotypical Adult is. Since the autistic Adult experiences the left hemisphere's record as inconsistent, it relies on the right hemisphere's broad focus to gather as much data as possible about what currently is. I hear from autistic clients that in Adult they focus intensely on current information to form a picture of the here and now (Figure 4).

This openness to what is can result in overwhelm by stimuli in the here and now, leading to meltdowns or shutdowns as the autistic mind seeks to shield itself from environmental stimulation. I also wonder whether limited reference to autobiographical memory and a diminished sense of the value of past experiences are factors in my



**Figure 4.** Autistic Adult Ego State Creating Its Picture of the Here And Now.

autistic clients freely sharing personal information, which their neurotypical counterparts might consider “intimate” as described earlier.

Neurovariant clients, who are acutely aware of their difference and difficulty in “fitting in” with the neurotypical majority and culture, are often reassured by Martin Wells’s (2012) Adult model. In contrast to the structured Adult ego state models previously cited, Wells proposed an Adult model that manifests a philosophy of unconditional mutual belonging. Wells represented the Adult as unbounded by a circle, equating it to a person’s immutable stillness and awareness, without expectation or definitions, “like an infinite blank canvas on which we project our lives and worlds. Our ego states and our scripts are the stories and events we project there” (p. 148). His thesis was expressively supported by the lived experience of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor (2009) referenced earlier.

Across various fields of study, a drive toward uniformity is often encountered in understanding aspects of the self and the world. In refreshing contrast, Keith Tudor’s (2010) comparative treatise on ego state models, “The State of the Ego: Then and Now,” concluded, “I do not wish to argue for the primacy of one model or set of models over another” (p. 275). Instead, Tudor emphasized the significance of the transactional analyst’s congruence between their philosophy of psychotherapy and the models they draw on in practice.

I concur with Tudor’s (2010) assertion regarding the practitioner’s congruence between their philosophy of psychotherapy and the ego state models they apply. Given that differential hemispheric functions are essential for effective Adult operation, and coordination of these functions varies across neurotypes, I would add that it is undesirable to attempt to capture all aspects of the Adult in a single model. Were I to distill such complexity into a single, uniform Adult model, this might indicate my seduction by the left hemisphere’s simplified representations. Such thinking would raise McGilchrist’s (2009) warning about what happens when the left hemisphere gains perceptual supremacy, usurping the functional position of its “master”: the right hemisphere.

## Conclusion

The way the brain hemispheres operate and perceive the world suggests to me that the Adult takes many forms. To function effectively, the Adult ego state accesses archaic content, provided by the left hemisphere’s static, simplified re-presentations of my environment and aspects of self. This is essential to utilize the right hemisphere’s process of broad and undifferentiated focus. Sometimes, Adult operation relies on content, such as when changing a car tire. At other times, the Adult requires the right hemisphere’s immediacy of contact, as when exploring relational connection with another person.

My reconceptualization of Adult function illustrates one way I observe it operating differently across neurotypes. A transactional analyst, uninformed of such difference, might misconstrue autistic Adult operation as that of Child or Parent, with harmful therapeutic outcomes. I view the Adult as a dynamic ego state, adapting structure, process, and content to suit the here and now. It might be inferred from the oft-encountered phrase “to be in Adult” that there exists a single way of Adult being

at any particular moment. Yet the Adult draws on two disparate worldviews (left and right hemispheres), so a person may have other equally useful Adults available at any time.

Perhaps the Adult is more enigmatic than dynamic, remaining “the most obscure area in structural analysis, so that it is not possible at present to clarify it clinically” (Berne, 1961, p. 195). The challenge is to resist a compulsion for uniformity of the Adult as a fixed image. As a transactional analyst working with neurotypical and neurovariant clients, supervisees, and trainees, I seek to learn from them about their kind of Adult and how it can metamorphose at any moment.

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