

Asperger's in (and outside) the therapy room – 7

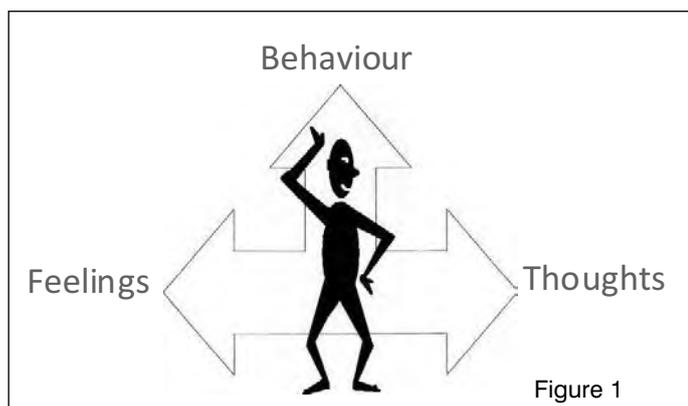
In the seventh of his series about working with clients who have been, or may be, diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, **PETER FLOWERDEW** shows how he uses TA to create understanding, dialogue and to offer the experience of mutuality

RECENTLY I WAS at an EATA summer school and Mark Widdowson was beginning the keynote presentation for the day. As he stepped forward to start talking, he stopped, looked round him in a puzzled sort of way, walked across to the side of the room, and dragged a flipchart stand across to the centre of the floor. Then he turned to the audience and said, 'I just realised that I will probably have a compulsion to draw circles sometime in the next hour; have you noticed how TA people have this deep need to draw circles?'

Not only was that a wonderful 'very Mark' kind of way to get the attention of every person in the room, but it also indicated how central ego state models are to our way of thinking and discussing what goes on in and between people. So, my greatest satisfaction has been in producing two ego state models to help people to understand what goes on inside and between Neurotypicals (NTs) and Aspies.

Introducing the concept of ego state to Aspies

Aspies, especially teenagers and children, often do not understand that thoughts, feelings, and actions are related to each other, until they see it diagrammed out. Avoiding the temptation to draw circles, I like Paxton & Estay's diagram (Paxton & Estay, 2007), because it also indicates that thoughts and feelings can pull us in different directions. (See Fig. 1)



The superimposed person connects the concept to the individual. A photograph of the client's face can be used in this place in the diagram, further connecting the thoughts feelings and actions to the client.

Then this diagram is about how to respond to our awareness of thoughts and feelings.



If we are in the present moment:

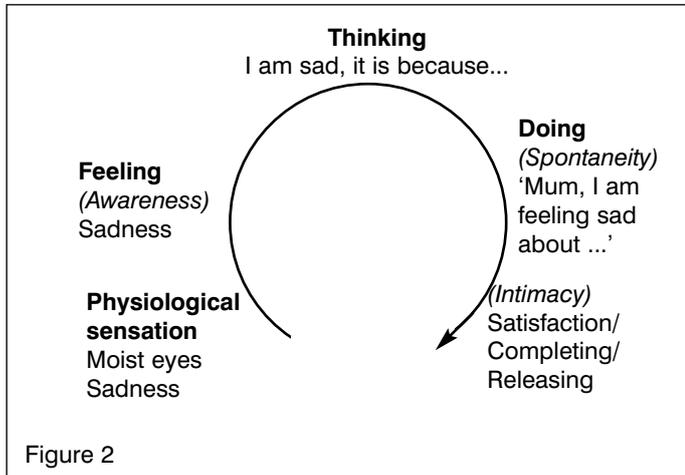
- the cycle begins with awareness of feeling
- then we think about what we want to do about that feeling
- then we decide on an action
- and the outcome of the action affects how we feel.

If we are in a Child place it is more likely that we will be 'imagining' all sorts of 'bad stuff' and create an anxiety, which will influence how we act in this situation: from thought to feeling to actions – the wrong way around the circle!

Just providing such images promotes an exploration, a conversation, that gives us an insight into the client's inner world. The final message of the image is that choosing a different action can change how we feel about ourselves.

Below (Fig. 2) is a version of the diagram I use with adults, based on the Gestalt cycle. It addresses both the translation from physical, somatic, responses, to awareness of a feeling that can be named (the therapist may need to name it) and to how to respond to that awareness. Injunctions can be added to indicate how the

cycle can be broken: Don't Feel; Don't Think; Don't Feel; Don't Succeed; Don't Enjoy.



These kinds of issues may indicate defences, as they would with NTs, and we would be inclined to challenge them. If they are defences they might actually be necessary coping strategies, not to be challenged; and they may be primarily neurobiologically based, not up for editing, simply to be noted. Taking the process slowly, and carefully, is necessary; and draw whenever you can.

The habitual patterns of feeling and thinking, with their associated habitual behavioural responses can be gently identified and a technique, called Cognitive Restructuring – which I will talk about in a later article on discounting – is very useful in this context.

Some will recognise in that sentence a slight reframing of one of Eric Berne's descriptions of an ego state, so that is what I address next.

A structural ego state model that accommodates empathising/systemising neurodiversity.

(Abbreviated to 'the neurodiverse model' in conversations with or about Aspies, but acknowledging that there are other dimensions of neurodiversity.)

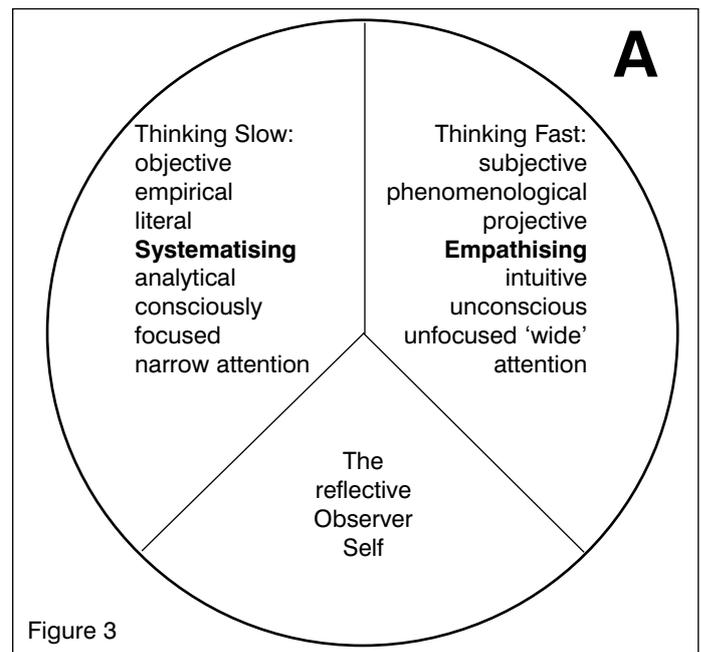
In the fourth article in this series (Flowerdew, 2016, pp23-27) I outlined Baron-Cohen's empathising-systemising theory (Baron-Cohen, 2008) it was only when engaging in the TA compulsion to draw circles during a workshop that I realised that Baron-Cohen was talking about a difference in Adult functioning between NTs and Aspies, and that this could be diagrammed.

The Neurodiverse TA Adult

- Baron-Cohen measures two neurobiologically based parameters:
 - a Systematising Quotient (SQ), and,
 - an Empathising Quotient (EQ)
- He detects a bias away from the balance towards empathising in women and a bias from the balance

towards systematising in men.

- He also identifies two extremes:
 - Very high systematising and very low empathising: Aspies
 - Very high empathising and very low systematising: the intuitive empath; which I identify with a capacity nicknamed 'the little professor' in TA.
- Other elements in this diagram are taken from Kahneman (Thinking Fast and Slow), and from Siegel (The Developing Mind). (See Fig.3)



The Aspie Adult

- Aspies have lower than average EQ
- The functions associated with: Thinking Fast – subjective, phenomenological, projective, and unconscious 'wide' attention – are much reduced compared to NTs.
- They rely heavily on focused slow thinking and focused, detail oriented, attention
- Their emotional regulation depends on being given the space and time for their style of understanding. (See Fig. 4)

I realised that the reflective, observer self seems largely 'intact' in my Aspie clients, and seems to be developed in adolescent years, paralleling the development of the adult cognitive abilities. Part of my current explorations is to discern the nature of differences in the 'feel' of NT and Aspie self-reflective, self-aware processes, once protocol level script is addressed.

The next insight also occurred in a circle-drawing situation. I find it hard to imagine that there is any reader of this magazine who is not familiar with this diagram. (See Fig. 5)

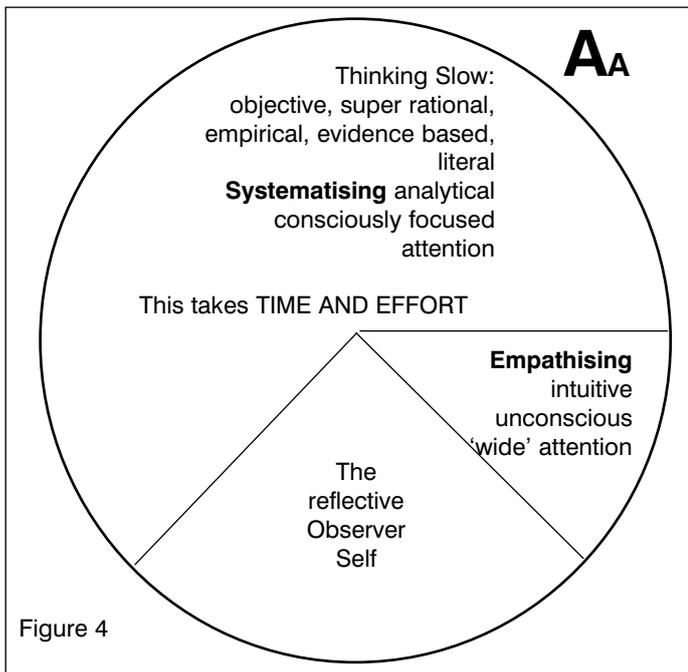


Figure 4

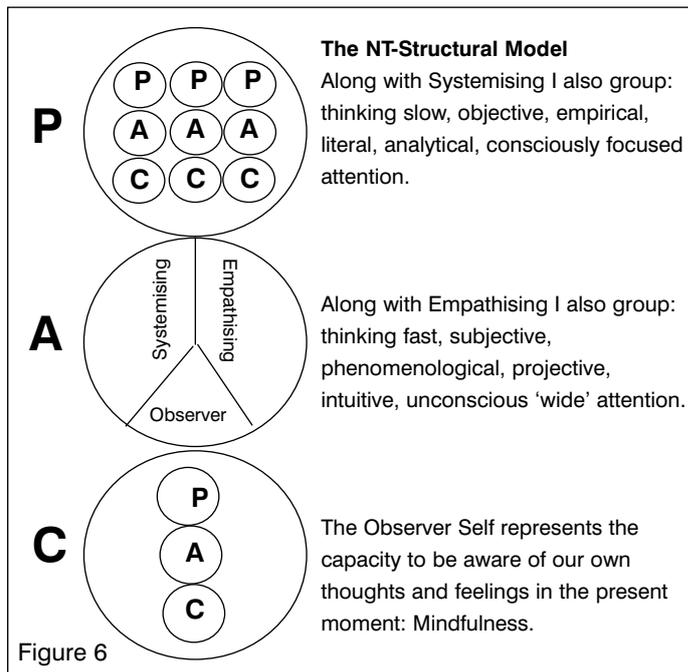


Figure 6

So, if you cannot read the thoughts and feelings of another person, how are you going to internalise those to form a Parent ego state? And if my Adult does process social significance, and is not producing intuitive schemata, then my Child ego states will be very different from those of an NT.

An Aspie Parent, P_A, appears to be a collection of survival strategies based on following the rules imposed by others. It is fundamentally oppressive.

An Aspie Child, C_A, seems to be a collection of more or less effective strategies for avoiding disapproval from NTs without understanding what is disapproved of.

It becomes easy to see how, logically, the Aspie fundamental existential position of I'm not OK; You're not OK is formed.

So, now we can compare the NT version, with the Aspie version. (See Figs 6 and 7)

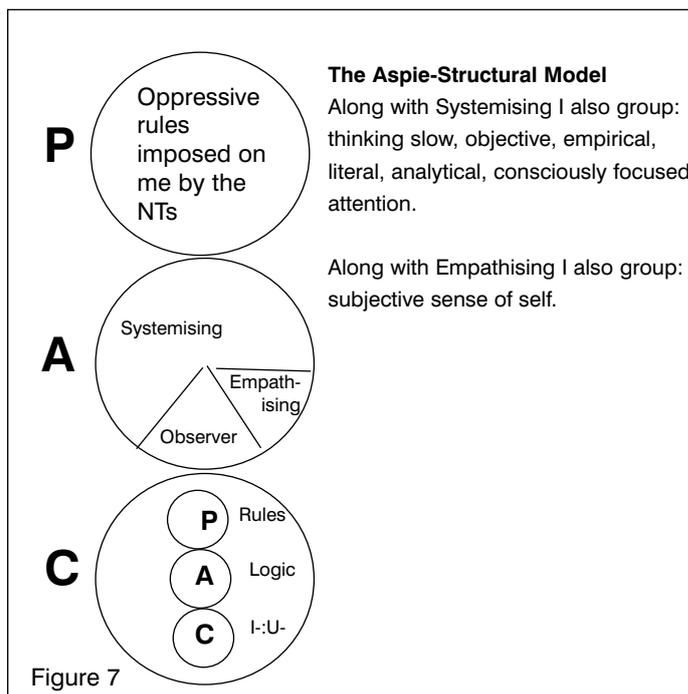


Figure 7

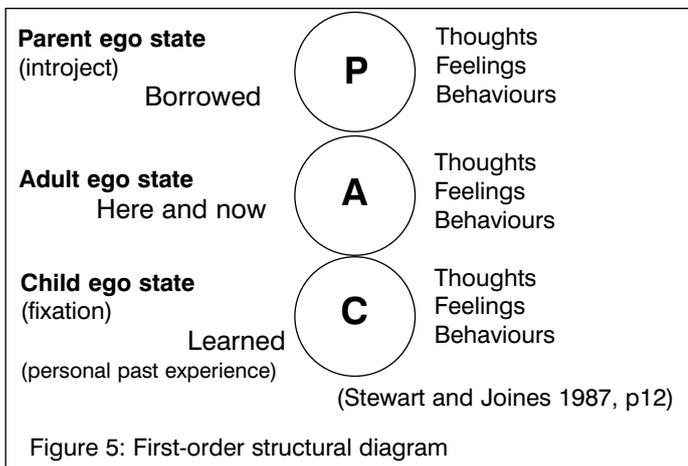


Figure 5: First-order structural diagram

Considerations for therapy

When I am talking to Aspies who have spent their whole lives 'trying to fit in'; 'to look normal'; 'to not bother people' – I hear a relentless 'Don't be You!'

One Aspie said 'I can't please People, I just try hard not to annoy them'. Another said: 'I just try to move on, leaving no wake, not a ripple' – sounds like 'Don't Exist' to me.

For an Aspie the experience of being with someone who understands their way of being in the world – who

will create a space where they are welcome and safe; who is genuinely interested in their subjective reality; who will adapt their style and the environment to meet their needs – is transformational.

'I should pause here, to acknowledge the overwhelming kindness I experienced during this weekend. I would say it was a rare privilege, but that would be incorrect, as I have never experienced the like: A room of people who were genuinely interested in my experience, who were sensitive to my sensitivities and appreciative of my honesty. They called me brave and extraordinary, and made me believe it. They were a special sort of "kind", ... I was truly moved.'

And when that person can provide accurate information that helps them to understand the world around them – that is life transforming. What I have just outlined is the creation of a therapeutic relationship that meets the client's Relational Needs [Erskine et al, 1999], and 'installs' a Nurturing Parent of the kind an Aspie needs to meet. This is the therapy of the Parent, Aspie style.

Providing a framework that allows an Aspie to make sense of the NT world: to understand ulterior transactions, to identify Games, to recognise script in action: to make states of mind visible, this has an impact that NTs can hardly imagine.

'My world is changing. I suppose this simple statement is open to many different interpretations but, I assure you, my world has never shown any signs of changing in the most important way. Until now.'

'I speak of the gradual unveiling of the NT world that is accompanying my deepening foray into Peter Flowerdew's particular brand of TA (Transactional Analysis). The reason why my usual cynicism about the possibility of such change is absent? Because this actually works. It makes sense to Aspie and NT alike. It provides common ground where before, there was none and, unlike other therapies and techniques, it is accessible to everyone.'

'I am experiencing a process of profound revelation, unfolding itself in exquisite slow motion, one realisation at a time. I am using it to shed light on the most inaccessible constructs of my life – places where I have feared to tread, because of their fragility: My sense of self, my professional persona, my relationship with my husband and son.'

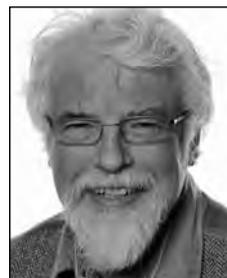
This is the therapy of the Child, Aspie style. What has amazed me, is that it is so fast – and it can be done in a workshop. These quotes are from the blog of a co-presenter at the workshops we ran, and other Aspies have made similar statements after attending workshops. One-to-one therapy then provides the space to process such insights.

My own thinking is that mixed NT Aspie groups with some teaching and some discussion are probably optimal for change. You already know one half of 'TA that is inclusive of Asperger's', and the Asperger's half is what I will share in future articles. We know the power of TA to change lives, but I have discovered that we actually hold a greater gift than we realise. I set out to 'create dialogue between two subjective worlds' – succeeding in that has brought delight where there was only despair or resignation.

Next time: moving out of 'Not OK; Not OK'; one Aspie's journey.

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