

Fourth-Degree Impasse

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Impasse simply means to be stuck. It is a term from Gestalt therapy that implies that a person is experiencing conflict and is having difficulty resolving the conflict. Robert Goulding (1974), in combining both transactional analysis and Gestalt therapy frames of reference, identified three major stuck places that seemed to be prevalent in the patients with whom he worked.

The first-degree impasse is a conflict between the introjected Parent messages and the needs of the Natural Child. It often takes the form of a You-Me dialogue. The person may say from his or her Parent ego state about himself or herself, "You should work hard," while his or her Child ego state says, "I don't want to work hard." This can be simply resolved through the use of two-chair work that allows for the dialogue between Parent and Child to emerge with the Adult making the decision to work a reasonable amount of time.

The second-degree impasse is a survival impasse. The conflict is between the introjected P_1 and the person's A_1 . If the injunction was "Don't Be You," the result may be the person's shutting himself or herself down physiologically so that instead of being spontaneous and expansive he or she becomes tight and inhibited. Resolution can occur through the person affectively regressing to the early scene in which he or she decided to inhibit himself or herself and making a redecision to "Be myself," with all the emotional release of the original traumatic experience.

The third-degree impasse is an identity impasse. The conflict is between the Adapted Child, which is seen as Me, and the Natural Child, which is seen as Not Me. The Adapted Child may say "I can't have a career, I'm only a girl," while the Natural Child, which is experienced as Not Me, may say, "I can do anything I set my mind to." Through the use of two-chair dialogue the Natural Child becomes stronger and stronger and is eventually experienced as Me.

My contribution is the fourth-degree impasse. The fourth-degree impasse is an emotional conflict. The conflict occurs between the introjected emotions of the parents and the person's own affective response to the situation. According to Berne (1964), the Parent ego state is a consistent pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that we introject from our parents. If the parents are experiencing strong affect in a given situation the child will introject that affect as part of his or her Parent ego state. The impasse occurs between the introjected feelings in the Parent and the person's own feelings in Child. This impasse is at the affective level only and does not involve Parent messages as in the first-degree impasse. Resolution involves the distinction between one's own feeling and the introjected feelings from parents.

Author's Note: The ego state nomenclature Natural and Adapted Child (P_1 and A_1) used in describing the first three impasses follows Robert Goulding's usage in his article cited

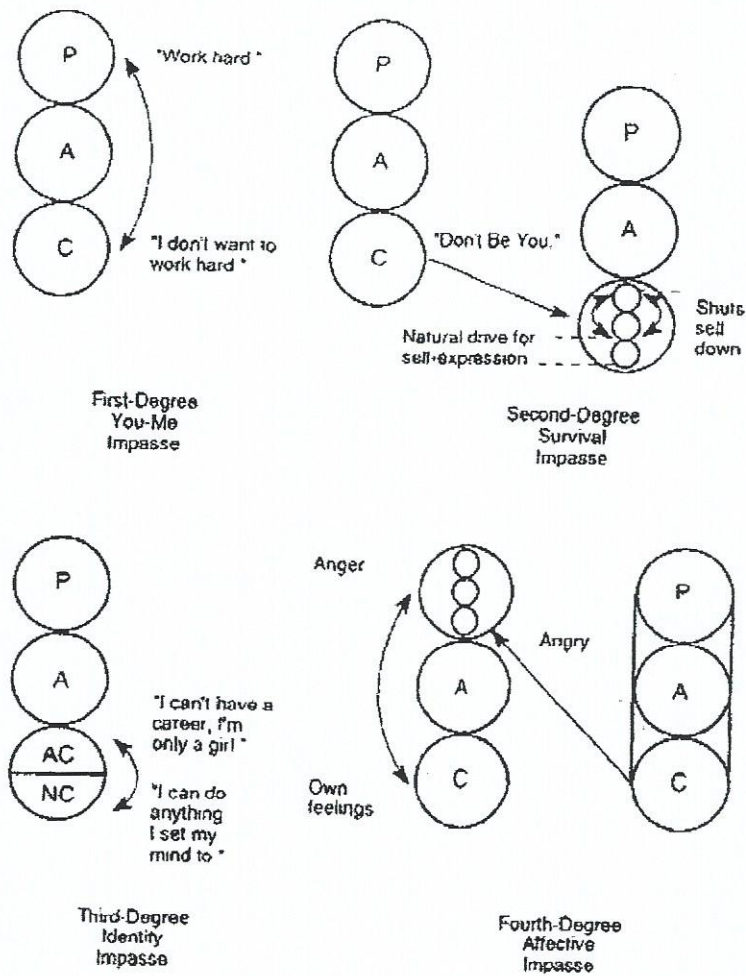


Figure 1
Impasses

in the following references. These impasses may also be explained through the use of Berne's original concept of ego states (see Erskine, 1988).

REFERENCES

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