

Ego States and Emotional Development in Adolescence

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Pamela Levin

Abstract

Adolescence is often described by parents, caregivers, and adolescents themselves as a tumultuous time. The author suggests that adolescence is not fundamentally tumultuous but, rather, another systematic, organized life passage similar to other transitions experienced over the course of a lifetime. As in nature, development in adolescence proceeds from the same organizing principle that produces the repeating seasons of the year. Even though each year is different, the fundamental seasonal structure remains constant. The lens of ego state development reveals that the underlying foundation of adolescence has the same cyclical structure as other developmental passages and all of life. The author maintains that the apparent chaos of adolescence can be represented with the model quantum physics uses to represent the order that underlies chaos. That model can be referred to by the term *fractals*. This can be seen as each ego state is reenergized to carry out and integrate the seven developmental tasks of adolescence, three of which are detailed by the author to demonstrate this principle. This perspective on adolescence can be beneficial to adolescents, their caregivers, and any person or organization working through issues from this seemingly confusing age.

Keywords

cycle of development, emotional development, adolescence, adolescent life passage, ego state development

Background

Eric Berne's discoveries reflected his well-developed intuitive function, which not only resulted in his first published work (later collected in the book *Intuition and Ego States*, Berne, 1977), but also gave birth to the entire transactional analysis universe. In contrast, the developmental literature has tended to derive from left-brain, linear models. For example, Erik Erikson (1959) referred to his work on human developmental stages as part of the "life cycle." This implied a cyclical process, yet the stages within it maintained a linear structure. Other models focus on particular aspects of development, such as Kohlberg's (1958, 1981) work on moral development, Piaget's (1982) work on how children learn, and Mahler's (1963) work on how children attach. These are all based on outer observations of behavior.

Corresponding Author:

Pamela Levin, PO Box 1429, Ukiah, CA 95482, USA.
Email: info@nourishingcompany.com

What happens, however, when an intuitive, inner, subjective function is employed, such as Berne used to develop transactional analysis? Using Berne's TA process as a model with people in individual, group, and workshop settings for over 40 years, I have investigated the developmental process with adults doing personal growth work when they were revisiting their own adolescence. Because they were chronological adults, they were able to use their grown-up abilities to describe their subjective, adolescent experience: what was going on, what had gone wrong, what had gone right, what they needed. They found that organizing the tasks, challenges, and issues they faced in terms of ego states provided an effective way to create much needed internal organization. Where they had once experienced psychological chaos, they could now define and complete therapeutic contracts by addressing unresolved issues from adolescence.

The Adolescent Transition

Adolescence is a biologically driven transition that bridges the formative years of childhood and the subsequent years of adulthood. Its greater complexity relative to the passages of childhood derives, in part, from the fact that it incorporates all three ego states, requiring them to become integrated into a coherent whole. In addition, physically the adolescent body is undergoing growth spurts, developing secondary sex characteristics, and becoming biologically capable of reproducing the species through the processes of puberty. Brain activity, too, is undergoing biologically driven changes. For example, the amount of gray matter declines in adolescence, whereas connectivity and integrative processing increase. The centers for emotional and instinctual activities in the amygdala have been shown to become more active, and, as adolescence progresses, frontal lobe activity increases (Giedd, 2008).

However, a great deal more is going on emotionally and psychologically during adolescence. There are essential events that need to take place during this time for the person to become a psychological adult instead of a child. The process through which this takes place is brought to light with the lens of ego states.

When Berne (1957) first posited the existence of ego states, he was referring to their manifestation in grown-ups. In fact, we are not born with three fully functioning, integrated ego states, just the potential to develop them. We only realize that latent capacity as we evolve through adolescence. Evidence of the three ego states (Parent, Adult, and Child) that exist in grown-ups can be seen in children who are 12 and sometimes even younger, even though they are not yet fully functioning adults. What happens during the transition from childhood into adulthood that brings young people into adulthood?

I have concluded that to evolve into a mature adult, the adolescent needs to update old patterns and form a unifying "skin" around the three major ego states formed in childhood (Levin, 2007). This is accomplished through an adolescent developmental process that both repeats and revisits prior stages but at new levels of sophistication. Adolescence reflects a cyclical process similar to the recurring seasons in nature. A visual representation of this cyclical pattern repeated at ever smaller scales would likely be the same as the fractal representation shown in Figure 1.

Fractal. A geometric pattern repeated at ever smaller scales to produce irregular shapes and surfaces that cannot be represented by standard geometry. Even the most minute details of a fractal's pattern repeat elements of the overall geometric pattern. Fractals are widely used in computer modeling of irregular patterns and structures in nature, such as the patterns of seasonal weather. They are also considered to be a visual representation of chaos. (*The Free Dictionary*, 2015, entry 3)

Fractals were initially posited by Benoit Mandelbrot (1977/1983) as a model to represent the geometry of nature. Yet if we were going to visually represent cyclical patterns of development

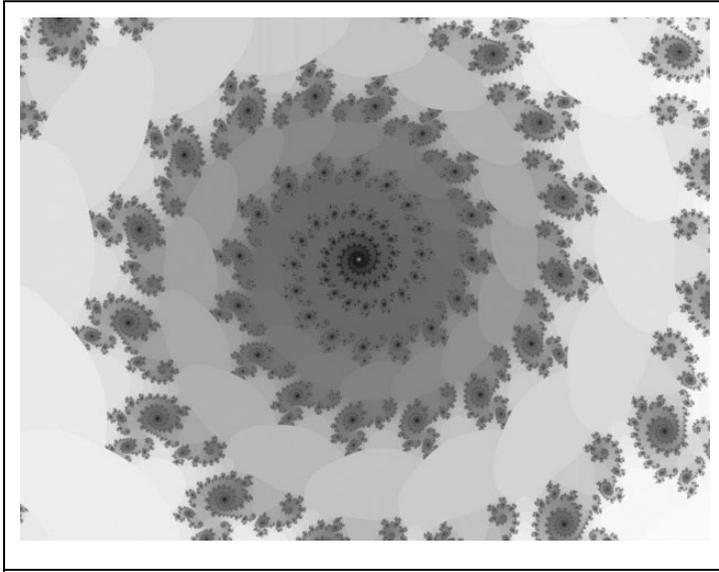


Figure 1. Fractal spiral (© Nilsson, 2005).

repeating at smaller scales, it would likely look quite like the representation of a fractal. These cyclical and fractal concepts help make sense of all the changes that occur during adolescence. They become a way to normalize adolescents' experiences of repeating previous developmental themes and issues in similar ways but on different scales so that these experiences can be welcomed as part of reaching adult maturity rather than as evidence of retrogression and failure.

These patterns are revealed when paying attention to adolescents' inner subjective experiences rather than solely looking at their rapidly changing outer behaviors. An inner focus reveals that all developmental stages are present in any singular developmental stage. As is true of fractals, the cycle of growth can be seen on a larger scale when viewing the adolescent transition as a whole and also on a smaller scale as adolescents complete each developmental task of this transition.

Tracking the adolescent transition through the lens of ego state development turns out to be a way of making visible the commonalities of macro and micro cycles. This invisible growth pattern, which operates at both macro and micro levels in the developmental process, is the same as that in all of nature. Looking at ego state functioning just before the onset of adolescence demonstrates that each of the three ego states is already formed and activated but not yet integrated into one complete personality. The work of integrating the ego states into an adult personality is undertaken during this adolescent transition (Levin, 1974).

Through working with adult clients who have described their adolescent experiences as well as through parenting and years of informal observation of adolescents, I have extrapolated seven primary growth tasks that the adolescent goes through in order to emerge as a psychological adult:

1. Unifying parts of their personality into one cohesive whole
2. Revisiting earlier development and experiences, which are readily available, and updating any patterns as necessary
3. Developing and integrating sexuality, including recalibrating self-image to match physical changes
4. Engaging in preflight behavior (facing fear, testing consequences)
5. Separating from the authority of parents or mentors and replacing it with their own

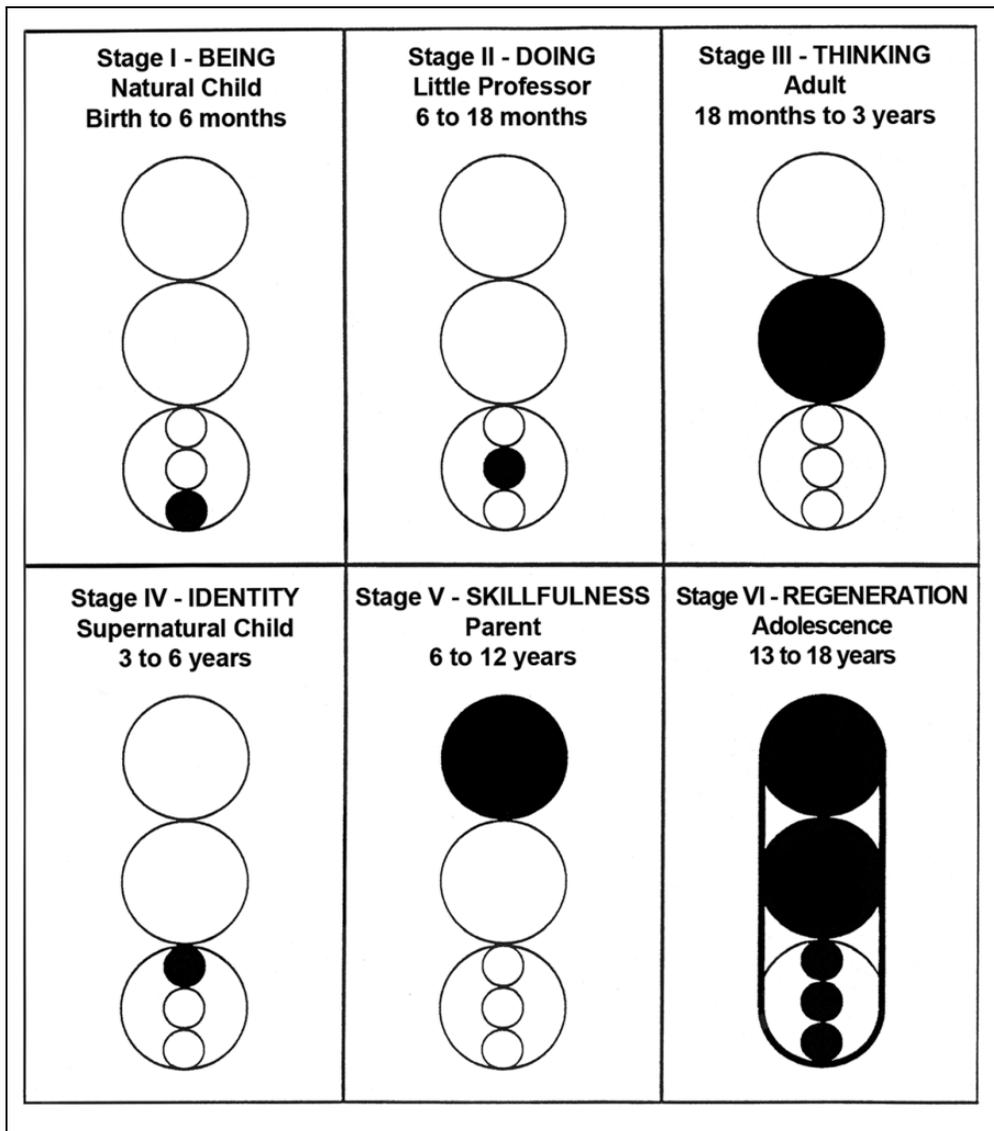


Figure 2. Fundamental stages of ego state development.

6. Pulling up their emotional taproot from parent or mentor relationships that have sustained growth until now
7. Building a bridge between the world of childhood to that of adulthood (Levin, 2009)

I have come to understand that each of these seven tasks is accomplished by reenergizing the ego states that were developed initially in childhood (Levin, 1974) (see Figure 2).

Although the physical changes at the onset of puberty begin and end in a range of ages around this time, certain emotional/developmental changes also seem biologically programmed. For example, some 12-year-olds can be quite grown up, competent, independent, and capable. They are often eager to show their capacities to think, problem solve, and manage themselves. They want to demonstrate

their range of skills as well as their knowledge and abilities and to exhibit their proficiencies. But then, often starting around age 13, almost in the blink of an eye, that all changes and is replaced by what seems like a strange state of reduced mental and physical alertness and activity. It is a condition that stands in sharp contrast to their previous state of comparatively high functioning.

Interpreting this transitional shift in a left-brain, linear way, it could appear to be a retrogression. After all, the adolescent was high functioning and relatively independent and now seems incapable of doing much at all, especially without a good deal of support. To assume deterioration or decline, however, would be to miss the significance of the shift. These alterations between the relative competencies of a 12-year-old to the more helpless, dependent state of a 13-year-old actually signal the exact opposite of a degenerative process. Instead, a right brain, holistic perspective suggests that these are signs of forward movement in a natural, cyclical process that characterizes development. They are evidence that the natural internal seasons of growth are turning right on time, which reflects a return to the less complex, more primal first stage of development in what appears to be a biologically programmed repetition. Emotionally and psychologically, the adolescent's Natural Child ego state has once again become highly activated and reenergized. This means that he or she is reentering the next level of the Being stage and is now ready to undertake the seven primary growth tasks of adolescence. To complete each task, work is carried out in each ego state.

Task One: Unifying Separate Ego States Into One Coherent Whole

Natural Child Ego State (Being Stage)

The first ego state formed after birth is the Natural Child. Activated at birth, the tasks of healthy development during the first 6 months of life are accomplished through obtaining what is needed for survival: food, strokes, responsive and nurturing connections to caregivers, and so on. This same focus is resumed by adolescents as they return to this stage. Like infants, they share a heightened need for feeding and stroking as well as an eagerness to bond, connect, and be taken care of. Supply issues again become the primary motivators, that is, having *enough*: love, food, sex, money, strokes, time. In other words, adolescents around age 13 experience needs similar to those of an oral infant but through their more sophisticated reality or evolved growth state. Their skin (inside and outside) is highly charged; reflexes are reenergized. They report feeling dependent and needy and often act helpless. They may have digestive sensitivities or even disturbances along with an increased desire for foods that are easily and quickly digested, particularly carbohydrates. Because connections are so important, what captures adolescents' attention is who called, who showed interest, who offers strokes, and who said what, especially about them. They wonder how the connections might affect their OKness, supply of strokes, and need to belong. More than anything, they want to be attended to and are thus likely to direct little activity toward making or doing something. Instead, they want loving, considerate, solicitous care from others, especially those outside their immediate family.

Little Professor (Doing Stage)

When adolescents begin to expand beyond their seeming emotional stupor and reduced sensibility, they begin to explore their sensorimotor world. They add a behavioral component to their Natural Child ego state as developed during their Being stage. They exhibit a short attention span and the typical exploratory, low level of commitment to carrying things through. They are interested in a variety of sensory experiences. Like the toddlers they were the first time around, between 6 and 18 months of age, they are not interested in details. Their cognitive processes are still on the back burner. They look on the world as brand new, with newly heightened senses, high intuition, and little interest in consequences. Just as they did when they were toddlers, their style of relating continues to

be one of emotional dependency because this is still a highly oral time. However, in this cycle, they are transitioning their dependency from parents to peers.

Adult Ego State (Thinking Stage)

The changes that result in the Adult ego state begin initially around age 2. The return to this Thinking Stage can often be seen at about age 14, when the style of adolescents' relating switches to oppositional. Their initial responses to events/demands/changes are likely to be resistant, and actions tend to be stubborn and contrary. Adolescents push, pull, and test like the 2-year-olds they were in this stage the first time. And like 2-year-olds, they use anger as a wedge in the dependency relationships that have sustained them up until now. This time is often referred to as "14 going on anal" because they are busy testing reality and, like 2-year-olds, deciding to think on their own.

SuperNatural Child Ego State (Identity Stage)

This part of the personality has often been referred to as the witch parent or troll father, especially when looking at its role in dysfunctional scripts. Its crucial function in healthy development is linking up all the parts of the brain and ego states in an identity decision. Like their 4-year-old counterparts, adolescents in this phase of their developmental cycle test the consequences of definitions of reality. With their far greater sophistication, however, their experiments may include telling lies, shoplifting, and setting up fights between authority figures (especially one parent against the other). They are testing their personal power on a whole new level to see what they can accomplish. Unfortunately, they may have no interest in the consequences of their behavior, which, at this age can be scary because of the incredible price attached to certain risky behaviors, including driving without a license, driving drunk, getting pregnant, contracting a sexually transmitted disease, or conceiving a child. All these are reasons why this time may be referred to as like the 4-year-old genital stage or "15 going on 4."

Parent Ego State (Skillfulness Stage)

Next, the primary focus of adolescent emotional growth is directed into an interest in values, how the world "ought to be," developing a personal philosophy that will be carried into adult life, and coming to terms with the world as it is relative to one's own ideas about how it should be. This means adolescents return to mechanisms of relating they used to develop their Parent ego state between ages 6 to 12. They argue and exclude others' morals and values, making them not-OK as they develop their own. They may insist that they "won't (do it your way)."

As they develop their own personal values and philosophy, they gradually shift allegiance to their own inner Parent ego state as the authority rather than an external authority such as a parent or teacher. That is why this phase is often called 16 going on 6 (latency stage). As they complete this reactivated phase, adolescents have carried out the tasks of unifying their ego states into one coherent personality. However, that does not end the process because as this repetition is completed, the cycle naturally returns to the first stage, only to begin the round again.

This process describes how the natural turning of the inborn seasons of growth takes place during the repetition of the developmental cycle. Other growth tasks are accomplished in the same way. Although task two is described in the next paragraph in a linear fashion, as if undertaken separately, when looked at holistically, adolescents typically activate this and the other six tasks simultaneously. All the tasks are carried out through each ego state. Thus the adolescent may be in the Being phase with one task and the Thinking phase in another, which is partly why their growth can appear to be chaotic.

Task Two: Updating Earlier Developmental Patterns

Another adolescent task involves revisiting earlier developmental experiences, completing those that have remained unfinished, and updating any outmoded childhood conclusions. Because adolescence is the first complete, biological repetition of the cycle after birth, this material is still close to the surface. This brings forth a fundamental question for adolescents to address: “What has been set in motion, and what do I want to change about that?” Carrying out this internal housekeeping during adolescence greatly reduces the emotional load carried into grown-up life. In later adult stages, the experienced life problems that result from these incomplete growth tasks are much less likely to be consciously linked to their earlier developmental causes. During task two, adolescents have the opportunity to revisit and rework the issues described in the following paragraphs.

Natural Child Ego State (Being Decisions)

Is it OK for me to be here? Are all my needs and feelings OK? Do I have enough to satisfy my needs not only for maintenance so far, but for completing my growth?

Little Professor (Exploratory Conclusions)

Can I move out into the world, explore, and still be taken care of? What happens to my fundamental needs for connection and affection as I begin to build a bridge out of dependency relating?

Adult Ego State (Thinking Choices)

Can I be independent and still connected? Can I think for myself, or do I have to take care of other people by thinking for them? Is it safe to become independent, or had I better not develop my own capacity to think and have my own way of reasoning about things, my own thoughts to ponder, my own ideas, and my own inferences that are different from yours?

SuperNatural Child (Identity Conclusions)

Adolescents reconsider who they are and who they want to become through exploring and trying on a wide range of possible identities. One crucial update is putting aside the myth that “it will never happen to me.” Their safety and success in life depends on ending the mistaken idea that they are immune from the negative consequences of their behavior.

Parent Ego State (Updating Skills, Morals, and Values)

This is where the culmination of all their development takes place. They are like baby birds that were accustomed to the safety of the nest and are now old enough to fly. Before doing so, they must make sure everything is in order, that everything will work, that they have the skills and abilities they need. They are making certain that their incorporated Parent structures will work (Levin, 1988).

Task Three: Developing and Integrating Sexuality

As adolescents transition from childhood to adult maturity, they also need to complete the task of integrating sexuality. Although the physical and emotional changes that characterize puberty begin at various ages, they always affect every aspect of adolescents’ lives. These changes require them both to redefine themselves and to reconfigure all important interpersonal relationships, whether with peers, parents, or friends. Again, the use of an ego state lens sheds light on how this is carried out (Levin-Landheer, 1982).

Natural Child Ego State (Being)

The need to connect, bond, and meet basic survival needs is impacted and forever altered by the advent of sexual changes. Adolescents want to connect and be taken care of, but sexual feelings and sexual maturation are underway, and incest taboos are in operation. Adolescents become preoccupied with themes such as sexual adequacy, sexual attractiveness, and sexual virility.

Little Professor Ego State (Exploratory)

The onset of sexuality means a whole world of new sensations. Urges to explore and experience sexual sensations are being dealt with and integrated as adolescents develop into mature sexual beings.

Adult Ego State (Thinking and Independence)

Becoming a separate person involves deciding to think about sex, sexuality, and sexual impulses, whereas in the previous two stages, interest was mainly in sexual feelings and impulses. Adolescents need to test and obtain information about sex, sexuality, managing sexual impulses, and appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Becoming a sexual person means revisiting how to establish one's personal boundaries in terms of sexuality and learning to set limits on one's own and others' behavior regarding sexuality. Peer pressure and pressure from others seeking sexual encounters or relationships call forth the need to become skillful at creating one's boundaries around sexuality.

SuperNatural Child (Identity)

The process of sexual development means redefining one's identity from child to developing teenager on the way to adulthood. The identity forged in childhood is now integrated with sexual identity. This includes testing power, especially finding out one's attractiveness as a sexual being. Learning about the consequences of sexual activity is paramount. The adolescent's fantasy life, especially with sexual themes, can become especially active. Becoming sexually mature means not only learning how to deal with one's burgeoning sexuality but also adjusting to being seen as a sex object by others. This requires that every previous aspect of identity, including self-image, be recalibrated to deal with the physical changes taking place.

Parent Ego State (Skills, Morals, and Values)

Adolescents engage in developing their own morals and values around their sexuality. Becoming sexually mature requires that they create structures for how to take care of themselves around sexuality, including what behaviors to engage in or not, how to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and how to manage others who pressure the adolescent to engage in or not engage in sexual behavior.

Each of the aforementioned examples of growth tasks was presented separately in this article so as to highlight the developmental process in each task. However, different aspects of all of these tasks are being carried out at different stages during the adolescent transition from childhood to adulthood. The image of the fractal, showing smaller cycles within the larger biological cycle, helps clarify this cyclical phenomenon.

Conclusion

Biologically, the growth pattern that begins in the formative years of childhood is continued in adolescence so that we can, as biological adults, fully use the integrated ego states Berne observed.

Adolescence is the time when all the basic ego states are in place and the instruction to “repeat yourself similarly” is activated. This same “repeat similarly” instruction on a genetic level results in the replication of DNA.

The three examples of ego state growth tasks tracked during adolescence and described here demonstrate how that inner growth process unfolds. It is clear that this growth process involves both linear and intuitive brain functions and development. The apparent retrogression observed in the outer world of adolescents in fact represents forward movement in their inner world. Using ego states to follow the remaining four of the seven adolescent tasks would bring to light the same structural design. This architecture not only mirrors the sequence of the stages of growth in childhood, it also foreshadows the themes and issues repeating at rhythmic intervals throughout adulthood.

Implications

Thus, the idea of cycles within cycles can be seen not merely as a convenient way of representing growth in life but as evidence of a basic law of nature as it operates in human development. In other words, no matter where one looks in life’s processes, this fundamentally cyclical, fractal pattern composed of repeating stages can be seen.

This article has explored emotional development primarily in adolescence. Throughout our lives, however, we repeat this geometric pattern as we develop ever-increasing levels of emotional maturity in the same way that each year is composed of the same seasons. Whether in counseling, the classroom, the boardroom, or a family, there are six basic areas to consider, which we have just viewed in adolescence:

1. Natural Child ego state/being: The ground of our existence
2. Little Professor ego state/doing: The world of senses and action
3. Adult ego state/thinking: The conceptual realm
4. SuperNatural Child ego state/identity: Our ever-evolving self
5. Parent ego state/skillfulness: The how-to’s of our lives
6. Unifying ego states/adolescence: Creation and procreation (Levin, 2009, p. 87)

Deciding at which point in the ego state cycle a person or organization is functioning, or is having difficulty functioning, creates a lens through which we can decipher unmet needs and solutions. Chronological adults, not just adolescents, continually cycle through these fundamental phases in every aspect of their lives.

Apparently this view has been observed before. As someone who was both a psychologist and a physicist, Lewis F. Richardson communicated it in poetry:

Big whorls have little whorls
Which feed on their velocity
And little whorls have lesser whorls
And so on to viscosity.

(Richardson as cited in Gleick, 1987, p. 402)

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Author Biography

Pamela Levin, RN, is a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (psychotherapy) who studied with Eric Berne from 1966–1970. She is the first nurse, the first woman, and the first person to earn Clinical Membership and Teaching Membership in the ITAA. She is past president of the Eric Berne Seminars of San Francisco, served on the ITAA Board of Trustees, cofounded the ITAA's women's caucus, is a past editor of *The Script*, and received the 1984 Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award for her work on the cycle of development. She is the author of numerous books, articles, and the online course titled "Emotional Development 101." For 42 years she has maintained a private TA practice offering physical and emotional health improvement services. She can be reached at PO Box 1429, Ukiah, CA 95482, USA; email: info@nourishingcompany.com. The author wishes to thank Fanita English, MSW, TSTA (psychotherapy), for her help with theory review and editing.