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## Dominant Ego States in Transactional Analysis in the Context of Managers' Stress Coping Strategies

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Submitted 02/10/21, 1st revision 24/10/21, 2nd revision 11/11/21, accepted 30/11/21

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The article aims to grasp the relations between the ego states constituting the personality of a human being (manager) and his/her ways of reacting to stressful situations. Knowledge in this area is fascinating from a cognitive point of view and gives excellent opportunities associated with the optimisation of human resources management in the practice of managing enterprises.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Two research tools were used in the studies presented in this paper, the CISS Questionnaire and the Ego State Scale of Kälin. The CISS Test enables measuring stress coping styles on three scales, task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping, avoidance-oriented coping (SSU). The Ego State Scale refers to the functional model and its authors distinguish the following states, Controlling Parent, Nurturing Parent, Adult, Free Child and Adapted Child.

**Findings:** The paper presents results of studies the purpose of which was to capture the relation between the ego states, comprising an individual's identity, and the mode in which the individual reacts to stressful situations. The knowledge gathered about the correlation between the individual ego states and styles of coping with stress was subjected to a multi-aspect analysis and interpretation, whereas its results offer a good insight into the mechanisms and causes of such relations.

**Practical Implications:** Knowledge about the mutual determinants between the ego states and the preferred styles of coping with stress also offers extensive possibilities of taking practical development steps, aimed at increasing the efficiency of individuals becoming liberated from the adverse impact of stress-inducing stimuli.

**Originality/Value:** The received results have great cognitive and practical significance. They confirm a very close relation between personality and modes in which people handle stress and explain which type of personality features correlate with individual stress coping styles. Increasing interest in Transactional Analysis follows from the fact that it is a theory that delivers a series of practical indications, possible for implementation whilst taking correcting or development actions.

**Keywords:** Stress, stress coping strategies, transactional analysis, ego state.

**JEL classification:** L20, M10.

**Paper Type:** Research study.

**Acknowledgement:** The paper is funded under the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education titled "Regional Initiative of Excellence" in 2019-2022, project number 018/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding PLN 10 788 423.16.

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## **1. Introduction**

E. Berne's personality concept known as the Transactional Analysis was verified by its author and his followers in numerous empirical studies (Berne, 1961; 1962; 1966; 2004; 2013; Elaad, 1993; Ernest, 1971; Hargaden and Sills, 2002; Hariss, 2009; Hys, 2016; James and Jongeward, 2017; Lewis, 1995; Maheshwari *et al.*, 2009; Mellor and Sigmunt, 1975; Mountain and Davidson, 2016; Papathanasis and Vasilopoulos, 1991; Thiagarajan and McKimm, 2019; White, 1994; 1995; Williams, 1983; Woolams, 1980). According to the International Transactional Analysis Association, Transactional Analysis is a theory of personality and a psychotherapy system which focuses on personal development and personal transformation of individuals (Erskine, 1995; Hay, 2010).

The central concept in the theory is the ego state. According to Berne's definition, the ego state is "a consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behaviour" (Berne, 1961; 1962; 1966; 2004; 2013). The personality of every man comprises three ego states, known as Parent, Adult and Child (Sills and Hargarden; 2003). These three states that make up the so-called structural model of personality are called the Controlling Parent and the Nurturing Parent, the Adapted Child and the Free Child in a functional dimension (Rogoll, 2010; Steiner 1974).

The Parent ego state (exteropsyché) comprises behaviours, thoughts and feelings copied from parents or parental figures. In the Parent ego state of a child, everything that a child sees and hears is saved. This state is believed a true copy of thinking, assessments and feelings of parents or other significant others (Berne, 1961; 1966; Erikson, 2000). The Adult ego state contains behaviours, thoughts and feelings which are direct responses to the "here and now" (Berne, 1961; 1966). The Child ego state (archaeopsyché) includes inborn and acquired patterns of desire, primeval and secondary emotional models, impulses, needs and desires. The Child ego state also comprises creativity, dreams, magical thinking, and childish convictions (Berne, 1961; 1966; Williams, 1983).

In the functional model of ego states, the Parent model is manifested in behaviours that have a normative or nurturing nature. The Nurturing Parents takes care of others, supports, motivates, instils courage. On the other hand, the Controlling Parent determines the hierarchy of values, sets the standards of conduct, assesses, and expresses opinions about others and the world, assigns duties to others (Szymanowska and Sękowska, 2000). In the functional model, the Child ego state is manifested as the Adapted Child and the Free Child. The Free Child primarily expresses emotions, needs, and desires, experiences the world sensually and intuitively, takes risks and finds creative solutions. On the other hand, the Adapted Child comprises conformist behaviour, testifying to good adjustment to the social expectations and requirements (Joines and Steward, 2016; Pankowska, 2010; Szymanowska and Sękowska, 2000; Stewart, 2001).

The phenomenon of stress has been known since time immemorial and for a very long time it has been a popular and willingly tackled subject of both casual and scientific discussions (Celińska-Nieckarz and Konieczny, 2014; Dewi *et al.*, 2017; Janis, 1958; Kraczla, 2013; Łosiak, 2008; Oleksa-Marewska 2020; Sapolsky, 2012; Strelau, 2007; Terelak 2004). Stress and its level started to be examined as an independent variable in the analysis of such phenomena as chronic fatigue or mental hygiene. In parallel, studies on stress not resulting directly from extremely threatening situations were commenced, but the ones that result from activities present in daily life of individuals (Bartkowiak 2009; Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Chodkiewicz, 2005; Kraczla, 2016; Sęk, 2002).

Modern environmental conditions make stress an inseparable element of man's life (Zimbardo and Ruch, 1999). An important aspect of studies on stress and professional stress is the issue of coping with stress (Christmann *et al.*, 2017; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Litzke and Schuh 2007; Monart *et al.*, 1972; Sapolsky 2012). Therefore, coping with stress is a basic adaptation mechanism, undertaken consciously and requiring effort from the individual to restore a balance in the organism. It performs a regulatory function between the requirements set for the individual and the individual's potential (Heszen-Niejodek, 2000; Heszen, 2012; Hogan and Kaiser, 2010; Ogińska-Bulik, 2006; Wrześniewski, 2000).

The decision about the choice of the mode of coping with stress is conditioned by several variables which include the nature of the situation as such, individual features of the person and scope of his/ her personal resources (Christmann *et al.*, 2017; Ogińska-Bulik and Juczyński, 2008; Uen *et al.*, 2009). Modern concepts try to integrate all these aspects to create holistic models, spanning both situational and personality determinants (Rushton, 2004).

The complexity of Transactional Analysis and very good results obtained from its' implementation in analysis of human behaviour in an organisation have prompted an attempt at using it also for the analysis of reactions to stress and modes of coping with stress. It seems that the structure of personality, measured by the degree of use of provisions of individual ego states should, to a significant degree, determine the mode in which an individual experiences stress, but also the way in which an individual reacts to it and what styles are used to reduce the discomfort resulting from emotional tension.

## 2. Methodology

The results of studies presented below derive from a research project performed on a group of 152 managers between July 2019 and February 2020 in the cities of the Upper Silesia agglomeration. The respondents completed two surveys with the use of the paper-pencil method: Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) of N.S. Endler and J.D.A. Parker and the Ego State Scale of K. Kälin and P. Müri. The mode of study performance had the form of group and individual meetings.

The study was voluntary and anonymous, every respondent completed the same set of tests, which guaranteed reliability of the collected data. 152 persons took part in the study; the group of respondents was diversified with respect to sex, age and education. All respondents were professionally active, even though they held diverse positions. Due to the incomplete return material, 102 compiled test sheets were qualified for final analyses.

Several statistical measures such as arithmetic mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation were used to describe and analyse the collected data. The relationships between the studied variables were measured by the Spearman test for the significance coefficient of  $p < 0.05$  or  $p < 0.01$ . Statistical analyses measured associations between independent variables such as age, gender, and education and ego states and selected styles of handling stress. However, special attention was paid to analysing correlations between I-states and adopted stress coping styles.

### **2.1 Characteristics of Study Sample**

The studied group was diversified with respect to age, sex, and education. As far as the sex variable is concerned, the group of respondents comprised both women and men, with women being the dominant group. The number of women in the group was 60, and there were 43 men, which gives 102 respondents in total. In percentage terms, women make up 59% of the group and men 41%.

Presentation of the distribution of respondents on account of the age variable was made with respect to four age groups. The structure of the sample with respect to age is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of sample with respect to the variable - age*

Age	N	%
Younger than 30	33	32%
31 – 40	36	35%
41 – 50	28	28%
Older than 51	5	5%
Total	102	100%

*Source:* Kraczla, 2020.

Presentation of the distribution of respondents with respect to the education variable was made with the use of all levels of education from basic education to the higher level of education. With respect to education, the structure of the group is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Distribution of sample with respect to the variable - education*

Education	N	%
Basic	1	1%
Basic vocational	4	4%

Secondary	77	75%
Higher	20	20%
Total	102	100%

*Source: Kraczla, 2020.*

## 2.2 Characteristic of Research Tools

Two research tools were used in the studies presented in this paper, the CISS (Strelau *et al.*, 2013) and the Ego State Scale of Kälın (1998).

The CISS examines the stress coping styles, i.e., the individual's permanent disposition with respect to the specific, typical mode of behaviour in diverse stressful situations. The authors of the test, namely N.S. Endler and J.D.A. Parker adopted a theoretical assumption that actions taken by man with the aim of handling a specific stressful situation are the derivative of an interaction between the characteristic features of a situation and the individual's stress coping style, i.e., permanent predisposition to react to various stressors (Endler and Parker, 1990; 1994; Krohne, 1996). The CISS test enables measuring stress coping styles on three scales:

- task-oriented coping (SSZ): measures people's predisposition to cope with stress by acting aimed at solving the problem via cognitive transformation or change of situation.
- emotion-oriented coping (SSE): this style refers to people who tend to focus on themselves and their inner experiences.
- avoidance-oriented coping (SSU): this style is typical for persons who, in stressful situations, do not use their potential resulting from reasoning and experiencing the situation.

The CISS test and its scales are characterised based on "Podręcznik do Testu CISS N.S. Endlera and J.D.A. Parkera", published by Pracownia Testów Psychologicznych of the Polish Psychological Association (PTP) in 2013. The Polish version of the CISS test prepared by J. Strelau, A. Jaworowska, K. Wrześniewski and P. Szczepaniak (2013) has psychometric parameters very similar to the ones accomplished by N.S. Endler and J.D. Parker, constituting an accurate and reliable tool to examine stress coping styles (Wrześniewski, 2000).

The second tool used for the performance of empirical studies is the Ego State Scale (Egogram) proposed by Kälın and Müri (Kälın 1998). The scale refers to the functional model and its authors distinguish the following states: Controlling Parent, Nurturing Parent, Adult, Free Child, and Adapted Child. These ego states are used in a further part of this study (Dusay, 1972).

### 2.3 Analysis of Study Results

The results received in the study utilising the CISS and the Ego State Scale are presented in the subsequent Tables and subjected to an analysis resulting from the research problem adopted in the study. Results received from the CISS test are presented in Table 3. As follows from Table 4, the least diversified is the task-oriented stress coping style (SSZ). This means that results obtained on this scale were, on average, least different from the average obtained in this variable.

**Table 3.** Results received from the CISS test

Stress coping styles	SSZ	SSE	SSU	ACZ	PKT
Average	62.12	39.62	44.07	18.96	17.07
Standard deviation	7.12	11.00	7.77	5.12	3.54
Coefficient of variation	0.11	0.27	0.17	0.27	0.21

**Source:** Kraczla, 2020.

Second in turn, if the dimension of diversification of the variable is taken into account, is the avoidance-oriented style (SSU), even though its sub-scales manifest greater dispersion. To analyse the relations among variables, a series of analyses with the Spearman test were made between the CISS scales which is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Results of correlation within the CISS test

		SSZ stress	SSE stress	SSU stress	ACZ stress	PKT stress
SSZ	r	1.000	-,255*	-,096	-,233*	,162
stress	p		,011	,344	,022	,107
SSE	r		1.000	,242*	,215*	-,066
stress	p			,016	,035	,516
SSU	r			1.000	,749**	,471**
stress	p				,000	,000
ACZ	r				1.000	,035
stress	p					,732
PKT	r					1.000
stress	p					

**Note:** *r* = Spearman's *rHO* correlation coefficient; *p* = statistical significance; \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01. (Throughout the article, the significance level is indicated by the lower-case letter *p*).

**Source:** Kraczla, 2020.

As shown in Table 5, the analysis of correlation among stress coping styles revealed several dependences. The task-oriented style (SSZ) correlates negatively with the emotion-oriented style (SSE) and the sub-style of the avoidance-oriented style, consisting in engagement in substitute activities (ACZ). On the other hand, the emotion-oriented style (SSE) correlates positively with the avoidance-oriented style (SSU) and activates substitute activities (ACZ). The avoidance-oriented style

(SSU) shows a positive relation to activation of substitute activities (ACZ) and search for social contacts (PKT).

To analyse the relation between the background variables and results of the CISS questionnaire, a series of analyses with the use of Spearman test were carried out, presented in Table 5. According to Table 5, it is very interesting to note that the copying style correlates with sex. The analysis with Spearman test demonstrated that men had significantly lower intensity of results on the SSE scale (emotion-oriented style) than women ( $r = -0.266$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, results on the SSE scale, i.e., the frequency of using the emotion-oriented style, dropped with the respondents' age ( $r = -0.236$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), whereas the SSZ style (task-oriented style) positively correlated with the respondents' education ( $r = 0.213$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

These results seem to corroborate intuitive assumptions about the reaction to stress and the mode of coping with tension caused by stress. In the case of women, the emotional style (SSE) was used much more frequently than others. This may be related to women's greater sensitivity and readiness to experience and manifest emotions. Negative correlation between the respondents' age and intensity of using the SSE style may result from less emotional reactions to stressful situations in more experienced people, who have a greater array of available reactions. Together with age, people acquire greater distance to many issues and may adopt other, more task-oriented modes of reacting to stressful situations.

**Table 5.** Dependence between background variables and measurements with the CISS test

		SSZ	SSE	SSUstress	ACZ	PKT
		stress	stress		stress	stress
Sex	R	-,155	<b>-,266**</b>	,064	-,001	-,069
	P	,124	<b>,007</b>	,532	,991	,493
Age	R	,052	<b>-,236*</b>	-,140	-,167	,039
	P	,611	<b>,018</b>	,168	,102	,699
Education	R	<b>,213*</b>	,025	-,148	-,160	-,087
	P	<b>,034</b>	,803	,143	,118	,387
Level of income	R	,155	-,118	-,086	,039	-,166
	P	,174	,302	,459	,737	,145
Job seniority	R	,106	-,177	-,081	-,116	,091
	P	,302	,083	,432	,267	,374
Size of company	R	,212	-,121	-,040	-,024	,083
	P	,076	,315	,743	,846	,492
HR management	R	-,073	,097	,038	,054	,024
	P	,478	,347	,712	,608	,814

**Note:**  $r$  = Spearman's  $rHO$  correlation coefficient;  $p$  = statistical significance; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Source:** Kraczkla, 2020.

The task-oriented coping style (SSZ) shows a positive relation to the respondents' education ( $r = 0.213$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). It seems that this correlation results from the fact that along with knowledge and specific experiences related to education, people can react to stressors using their cognitive skills and eliminating them by behaviour oriented at specific outcomes. Results received in the study using the Ego State Scale are presented in Table 7.

According to Table 6, the highest and simultaneously least diversified results were received for the Adult ego state and Nurturing Parent ego state. On the other hand, low results were recorded for both Child states: Free Child and Adapted Child. In these ego states, diversification of results is the highest, which may be interpreted as a fact testifying to high variability of personalities of respondents with respect to these ego states. The Controlling Parent ego state, often dominant in personality structures (e.g., in such professional groups as managers) in the studied sample reached an average level, whereas its diversification was on the level of 30%, which is to be considered moderate.

**Table 6.** *Distribution of variables in the Ego State Scale*

Ego State	Controlling Parent	Nurturing Parent	Adult	Free Child	Adapted Child
Average	14.50	20.62	29.01	8.64	7.82
Standard deviation	4.42	3.76	5.36	3.34	3.43
Coefficient of variation	0.30	0.18	0.18	0.39	0.46

*Source: Kraczla, 2020.*

To analyse the relations among variables, a series of analyses with the Spearman test was carried out between the Ego State Scale, which is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7.** *Results of correlations within the Ego States Scale*

		Controlling Parent EGO	Nurturing Parent EGO	Adult EGO	Free Child EGO	Adapted Child EGO
Controlling Parent EGO	r	1,000	<b>,529**</b>	<b>,295**</b>	<b>,196</b>	,160
	p		<b>,000</b>	<b>,003</b>	<b>,050</b>	,110
Nurturing Parent EGO	r		1,000	,165	,122	<b>,257**</b>
	p			,102	,228	<b>,010</b>
Adult EGO	r			1,000	<b>,242*</b>	<b>-,271**</b>
	p				<b>,015</b>	<b>,006</b>
Free Child EGO	r				1,000	-,011
	p					,911
Adapted Child EGO	r					1,000
	p					

**Note:**  $r$  = Spearman's  $r_{HO}$  correlation coefficient;  $p$  = statistical significance; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

*Source: Kraczla, 2020.*



As follows from Table 8, analysis of correlation of ego states has shown that along with an increase in the Controlling Parent ego state, the measurement of the Nurturing Parent, Adult and Free Child is also growing. Further analysis has shown that the Nurturing Parent ego state correlates positively with the Adapted Child ego state, whereas along with the increase in the measurement of the Adult ego state, the measurements of the Free Child Ego state also grow, whereas results of the Adapted Child measurement go down.

To analyse the relations between coping styles, measured with the CISS questionnaire and ego states, measured with the Ego State Scale, a series of analyses with the Spearman correlation test were carried out. The analyses have shown that there are several strong correlations, both positive and negative, among variables defined in this manner. The results of dependences were presented in the table below (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Dependence between CISS measurements and TA measurements

		Controlling Parent EGO	Nurturing Parent EGO	Adult EGO	Free Child EGO	Adapted Child EGO
SSZ	R	-,131	-,079	,436**	,143	-,231*
stress	P	,194	,437	,000	,158	,021
SSE	R	,218*	,154	-,344**	-,012	,482**
stress	P	,029	,128	,000	,903	,000
SSU	R	,163	,119	-,014	,253*	,096
stress	P	,107	,243	,893	,012	,346
ACZ	R	,115	,016	-,096	,066	,077
stress	P	,260	,875	,350	,524	,455
PKT	R	-,112	,081	-,053	,240*	,041
stress	P	,269	,428	,603	,017	,685

**Note:**  $r$  = Spearman's  $rHO$  correlation coefficient;  $p$  = statistical significance; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Source:** Kraczkla, 2020.

As shown by the performed study presented in Table 9, the task-oriented stress coping style (SSZ) strongly and positively correlates with the Adult ego state ( $r = 0.436$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The situation of stress and tension often causes script reactions which have their source in the Child or Parent ego states. Persons who, in a stressful situation, are able to resist stress reactions and react from the Adult ego state stand a much higher chance of reacting adequately to the situation and solving a specific task (Joines and Stewart, 2016; Mellor and Sigmunt, 1975; Woolams, 1980). High positive correlation coefficient between the Adult ego state and the task-oriented coping style (SSZ) seems quite justified and comprehensible in the light of the above.

The stress coping style oriented at tasks (SSZ) is also correlated with the Adapted Child ego state. However, this correlation is negative, which means that along with

the growth of the SSZ measurements, the level of measurement of the Adapted Child ego state decreases. On the other hand, the Adapted Child ego state correlates strongly and positively with the emotion-oriented coping style (SSE) ( $r = 0.482$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The manifested correlation means that the more often a given person functions in the Adapted Child ego state, the more probable it is that in stressful situations, such a person is going to use the emotion-oriented coping style (SSE). In turn, a person with a high level of the Controlling Parent ego state is going to focus on other emotions than the Adapted Child and is going to solve stressful situations differently, because this state also correlates with the emotion-oriented style of coping with stress (SSE) ( $r = 0.218$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The Adult ego state is also correlated with the SSE style ( $r = -0.344$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, in this case, it is a negative correlation manifesting that with the increase of results of measurement of the Adult ego state, the result of measurement of the SSE scale decreases. This means that a person with a high level of Adult ego state, rarely reverts to the SSE style in stressful situations. Thence, low preference for the emotion-oriented coping style (SSE) and high for the task-oriented coping style (SSZ), as mentioned before.

Very interesting tendencies pertaining to the coping styles were detected in persons who function in the Free Child ego state. These persons make willing use of the avoidance-oriented coping style: along with an increase of the measurement of the Free Child state, the level of the SSU style grew ( $r = 0.253$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Persons activating their Free Child act in compliance with their inner impulses and needs. In a stressful situation, they release themselves from its unpleasant consequences by avoiding confrontation with stressors.

A statistically significant correlation has been observed between the Free Child state and the search for social contacts scale (PKT) ( $r = 0.240$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, looking for support and assistance in others (even if only psychological, having nothing in common with actions to solve a stressful situation) or engaging in social activities as time structuring activities in a situation of tension resulting from the experienced stress seems to be consistent with the determinants of the Free Child ego state (Jagiela 2012; Joines and Stewart, 2016).

### **3. Conclusions**

The aim of the study was to capture the relationship between ego states and preferred coping stress styles. The performed studies enabled capturing several very interesting relations that have a practical application between the ego states, i.e., the psychical organs set off in various life situations and the stress coping styles. These results may be an important contribution to the development of management sciences, in the business approach. They allow for understanding, but also for making practical managerial decisions related to recruitment and selection of employees, planning of career paths, building integrated employee teams or

efficient motivation schemes. Thus, it can be said that the research objectives have been fully achieved, and the results can be regarded as cognitively extremely interesting and applied in practice.

The primary conclusion following from the studies is that the individual ego states of the personality determine different styles of coping with stress: the Controlling Parent ego state substantiates the emotion-oriented stress coping style (SSE), the Adult ego state - the task-oriented stress coping style (SSZ), the Free Child ego state - the avoidance-oriented stress coping style (SSU) and activation of substitute activities (ACP), whereas the Adapted Child ego state - the emotion-oriented coping style (SSE). Only the Nurturing Parent ego state did not show any relation with any of the stress coping styles.

On the other hand, the studies allowed for showing statistically significant negative correlations between the Adult ego state and the emotion-oriented (SSE) coping style and the Adapted Child ego state and the task-oriented coping style (SSZ). Thanks to this, it is possible to understand why people with certain dominant ego states fail to apply in practice the coping style which, in specific circumstances, is the most adequate and/or efficient.

The received results have great cognitive and practical significance. They confirm a very close relation between personality and modes in which people handle stress and explain which type of personality features correlate with individual stress coping styles. Their practical significance is related to the possibility of using them during the conduct of practical interventions with persons who do not cope with stress or who react inadequately to situational determinants. Thanks to the results of performed studies, the relation between the individual's personality and the modes in which such individual reacts to stressful situations becomes more comprehensible and thus easier to change, if such necessity arises.

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