

Impasses:

A Developmental and Structural Understanding

Ken Mellor

Summary

The three degrees of impasse developed by R. and M. Goulding are defined in development terms which relate to such factors as age, verbal and motor skills, discrimination, consciousness, etc. These terms integrate contributions from Primal Therapy, Reichian, and neo-Reichian approaches to the understanding of impasses. A specific locus of resolution for each degree of impasse is suggested. Several advantages are proposed for the employment of this formulation. Examples of clinical applications are included.

—Barton W. Knapp

“This article is a statement of how I now understand impasses.”

This article is a statement of how I now understand impasses. I have tested my ideas for several years after first presenting them very tentatively to my peers at a pre-TM exam weekend in August, 1975. At that time I was much less certain of their validity. Subsequent experience continues to validate both the accuracy of the original notions and the value of the developmental and structural orientation I now use to explain them.

Introduction

Bob and Mary Goulding developed the notion of three degrees of impasses which result from decisions made while people grow up (Goulding & Goulding, 1978). I learned quickly from them the value of helping people resolve their impasses through making redecisions while they re-experienced “in their guts” the scenes involved in their genesis.

The relationship between the three degrees of impasse and the types of conflicts experienced by people impressed me as being as elegant and useful as Berne’s notion of ego states. However, while I had experienced the value of impasse theory for myself and in my work with others right from the beginning, I had a nagging dissatisfaction. The theoretical interpretation I had learned seemed both right and wrong. But just what was right and wrong was, for me, tantalizingly elusive.

Original Development Basis of Impasses

Consistent with the originators of other schools of thought within TA, Bob and Mary Goulding have taken a general developmental orientation to people’s current difficulties. In this context they were responsible for emphasizing the power and active participation of children in their own development by highlighting the decisions made by them as they grew up.

Added to this general orientation, they have given more specific information which is related to each degree of impasse (Goulding & Goulding, 1978). It is not always couched in developmental terms; however, when it is not, it is easy to make the necessary conversions. First degree impasses relate to counter-injunctions; that is, they are developed after the child is old enough to understand language. Second degree impasses relate to injunctions, that is, they usually originate very much earlier than

first degree impasses and the messages are carried by feelings. Third degree impasses relate to primal protocols (Berne, 1972); that is, they originate during very young experiences, perhaps even pre-natal.

“...the tendency is for people to develop third degree impasses first, then second degree impasses and, finally, first degree impasses.”

As explained by the Gouldings, therefore, the tendency is for people to develop third degree impasses first, then second degree impasses and, finally, first degree impasses. As I understand their use of the ideas, however, this is not a rigid progression.

Consolidating the Developmental Basis

My early exposure to these ideas was simultaneous with my training in the developmental orientation of the reparenting school and some reading in Primal therapy theory. I noted a remarkable similarity between them all which involved a three-way developmental division in each.

The reparenting school emphasized the characteristically different learning that takes place in the extended environment after two years of age when the verbal Adult (A₂) becomes fully cathectable; it notes the importance of feelings and the immediate physical environment as major objects of learning up to and a little beyond two years of age; and it highlights the distinctive learning to do with basic survival responses that takes place in babies after their first arrival until they start to learn to move independently of their parents from about four months of age and onwards (Schiff et al., 1975, pps. 32-48). Some of these types of learning were explained using the third-order structural diagram of the Chid ego state and relating each type to first, second and third order structure respectively (Schiff et al., 1975, p. 25).

Primal therapy theory proposed three characteristically different expressions and experiences of primal Pain. First line Pain is the result of unresolved experiences be-

tween conception and one year of age when the spinal cord, brain stem and forebrain are developing and myelinating; second line Pain results from experiences between four months and four years of age when brain areas to do with locomotion, body-wall and sound production are myelinating; and third line Pain results from experiences between two years of age and the end of the myelinating of the cerebral cortex. Related to this formulation, first line trauma is stimulated in connection with the anatomical mid-line and influences basic life processes, such as circulation, digestion and respiration; second line trauma is stimulated in connection with the body wall, facial muscles and voice; and third line trauma is stimulated in connection with extended social reality (Holden, 1973; Janov, 1973a and 1973b).

Noting the similarities, I began to integrate the three sets of ideas by relating them as in Table 1.

| Impasses | Structure | Pain |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| First degree | First order | Third line |
| Second degree | Second order | Second line |
| Third degree | Third order | First line |

Table 1

They seemed to integrate easily. Even so, I persisted in being tentative; there was still something missing.

The gap was filled for me by the theory and practice of Reichian and neo-Reichian bodywork—especially the work of the Radix Institute (Kelly, 1972, 1974, 1978)—coupled with the Gouldings’ principle that redecisions are made when people re-experience their conflict in their “guts” as compared with in their “heads,” a principle espoused by Primal therapy too (Janov, 1973c). During this exposure I noted that my own and other people’s discriminations, awareness and decisions were naturally divisible into three different types as well, types which matched exactly the other three-way divisions.

As a result, I now define the impasses in developmental terms which relate to age,

| Characteristics | First Degree Impasse | Second Degree Impasse | Third Degree Impasse |
|---------------------|---|---|--|
| Ages | two years onwards | four months to four years | conception to one year |
| Verbal Skills | increasing with age | very basic, perhaps non-existent, related to feelings | non-existent |
| Body Skills | substantially complete | under-developed, age-appropriate, concern locomotion, sound production and facial expressions | independent locomotion non-existent until four months, until then basic visceral functions |
| Awareness | | | |
| — time/place | past/present/future, here/there (developing or developed) | minimal or non-existent | organismic rhythms only, timelessness |
| — object | I-Thou-That (extended social and material reality more separated and significant with increasing age) | I-Thou (more separated from others with increasing age) | I-I (little or no experience of separateness—"All is me.") |
| Discrimination | conceptual and increasing in sophistication with age | feeling-related, non-conceptual | states of being and types of energy |
| Communication | words carry messages | feelings carry messages, words only marginally relevant | diffuse energy carries messages, totally non-verbal |
| Feelings | differentiated and labelled | minimal to complete differentiation | no discrimination except between pleasure and pain |
| Stimuli Sensitivity | sensitive to stimuli in extended reality | sensitive to stimuli on body wall and in nearby reality | sensitive to stimuli on and inside body wall |
| Decisions | made with words | feeling-base conclusions, simple words may be involved | organismic shifts influencing visceral functioning |

Table 2
Identifying Characteristics of Impasses

"...I now define the impasses in developmental terms which relate to age, verbal skills, motor skills, awareness...discrimination, communication, consciousness, feelings, sensitivity to stimuli, and decisions."

verbal skills, motor skills, awareness (time/place and object), discrimination, communication, consciousness, feelings, sensitivity to stimuli, and decisions. This may seem like a lot to consider. However, in practice it is not because the developmental dimension inherent in each forms a simple and clear basis for discrimination. Only one or two of the dimensions are needed in most situations to identify the impasse(s)

involved and any of them are useful for doing so.

Developmental Aspects Defining Impasses

The main characteristics I use for identifying impasses are given in Table 2. The columns give the characteristics for recognizing each type of impasse, while the rows give the differences between the characteristics for each impasse.

Diagramming Impasses Structurally

One of the earliest consequences of this thinking was confirmation of my preference for diagramming all degrees of impasse in a similar way.

With this formulation, first degree impasses are between P_2 and C_2 with resolution by redecision from A_2 ; second degree are between P_1 and C_1 with resolution by redecision from A_1 ; and third degree are

between P_0 and C_0 with resolution by re-
decision from A_0 . (See Figure 1.)

material presented indicate a need for this
level of complexity and not to seek it out as
a matter of course.

Examples

Third Degree Impasse

Andrew and his mother and father had a normal pregnancy. But he was due during Christmas week and to suit the doctors and nursing staff, who wanted to be at home for Christmas dinner, he was induced two weeks before Christmas. His reaction (C_0) was one of organismic violation and pain at being ejected. His mother's reaction (P_0), later experienced as very mixed with the ejection, was organismic outrage, which she repressed for the sake of convention, followed by deep post-natal depression. Andrew's organismic shift (A_0), which he verbalized in adulthood, was "It's always too soon, but I have to do it." (See Figure 2.)

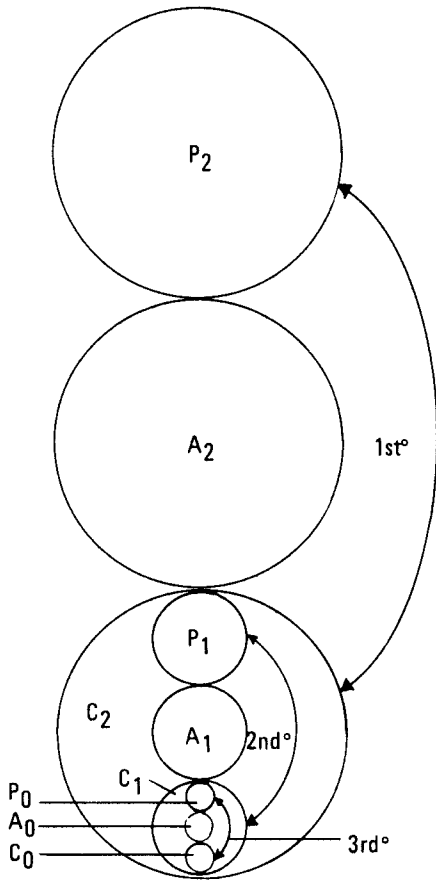


Figure 1
Structural Diagram of Impasses

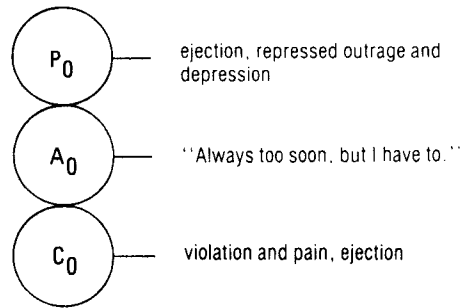


Figure 2
Third Degree Impasse (P_0 , A_0 and C_0)

More detailed understanding of each impasse can be obtained when necessary by using second order and, even third-order structure in the Parent (Berne, 1961.) By selective use of "dotted circles" to indicate discounted ego states and symbiotic relationships (Schiff et al., 1975), even more information can be represented very economically. Such sophistication is especially valuable when impasse resolution is most likely to come from the use of Parent interviews (McNeel, 1978). However, in practice I believe that it is best to let the

Second Degree Impasse

He grew up through his first four years to be a star in his parents' eyes. They were very proud of the way he went through all developmental stages ahead of other babies. His reaction (C_1) was anger mixed with depression and hopelessness. The anger (from C_0) and depression (from P_0) were direct expressions of the third degree impasse; hopelessness was his later contribution. But he quickly learned that this was

no way to get the strokes he liked. His mother would become even more depressed (her P_1) than he did and his father, who generally smiled a lot, would become angry and say things like "Grow up boy, don't worry your mother," his P_2 . When, on the other hand, Andrew looked happy and acted precociously, they both applauded—mother from her C_1 because she felt relief from the unresolved birth violation and father from P_2 because he "grew up" for his father. Andrew's feeling-based conclusion was, "I'll be happy and good (precocious) to please them (and to take care of me)." He used his father's "Happiness" as a model. (See Figure 3.)

First Degree Impasse

His life continued on its "happy way" with the same scripting being consolidated. He went to secondary school a year early and attended college so early that special permission needed to be granted for his entry. His father told him to "work hard and be successful." He was proud when Andrew did but showed distinct signs of fear when he did not. At the same time, whenever he did well his mother would lift her, by then, chronic depression for long enough to say "You're such a good boy." By this time he lived mostly out of his Parent and Adult and wondered why such a successful person should be so plagued by acid stomach and occasional migraine headaches, the only remnants of his Child he allowed himself. With the fixed grin on his face he decided "I'll be the best at everything I do." (See Figure 4.) He came for help in his mid-twenties because the frequency of his migraines was interfering with his drive to succeed ahead of everyone.

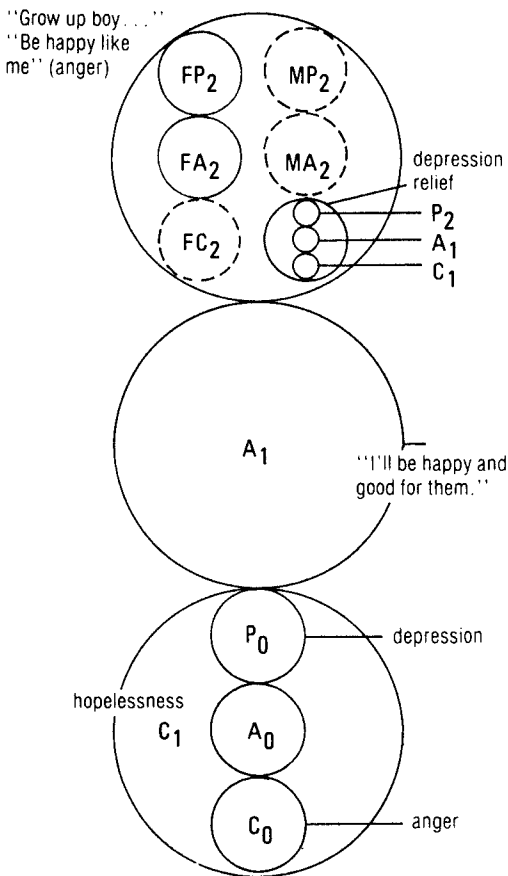


Figure 3
Second Degree Impasse (P_1 , A_1 and C_1)

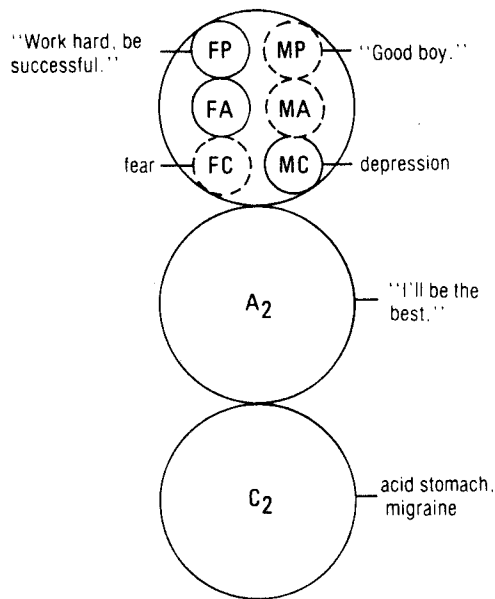


Figure 4
First Degree Impasse (P_2 , A_2 and C_2)

“...people can be so traumatized or otherwise overloaded at the time they develop impasses that their then current levels of functioning give way to earlier levels.”

Non-Sequential Development

As presented, it seems to be implied that the three degrees of impasse develop in strict order, except for the periods of overlap. However, my experience, while supporting this generally, has included exceptions. First, people can be so traumatized or otherwise overloaded at the time they develop impasses that their then current levels of functioning give way to earlier levels. This type of response results in the development of higher levels of impasse at ages when their development would no longer be possible if a strict developmental ordering applied.

Example:

Steve, at age 7, was in a car accident. He was terrified and hurt and screamed for hours in fear and pain, just as a baby would. Rather than a first degree impasse, this resulted in a third degree impasse on the basis of which he defined life as having always been terrifying and painful.

I have encountered both second and third degree impasses which were developed in this fashion.

In fact, were this reactivation not possible, it seems highly unlikely to me that redecisions for positive change would be possible. Unless younger ways of functioning can be reactivated, the re-experiencing so necessary for impasse resolution would also not be possible.

“...because of previous impasses a person may develop a higher degree of impasse than would be expected because of the predisposition created by earlier impasse.”

Second, because of previous impasses a person may develop a higher degree of impasse than would be expected because of the predisposition created by the earlier impasses.

Example:

Danielle's father set her homework assignments from her earliest days at school. They were always well beyond her ability to complete and in response to the impossibility of the task she initially learned to suffer for a short time (response related to second degree impasse). But very quickly she learned to become hopeless and experienced an all-encompassing sense of there being something rotten, evil and inherently weird about her (response related to third degree impasse). And in less than two years, a mere presentation of homework or other tasks was sufficient to stimulate the younger response every time.

It is as if an open channel develops from lower to higher degrees of impasse, so that instead of observing, for example, a seven year old response, perhaps an entrenched two and a half year old or six month old response will be observed.

With this type of development there is frequently a split between the level of sophistication of the Parental processes, awareness etc. and the level of the Child's processes, awareness, etc.

Example:

Danielle was quite clear in her understanding of the situation and the task she was set while in her Parent—age appropriate for a five year old; while in her child she was completely uncomprehending, non-verbal and overwhelmed—age appropriate for a nine month old.

Such exceptions have relevance when assessing the authenticity of the redeciding process in which some people are engaging. (More on this below.)

Advantages

I think that there are several advantages of my formulation. First, it is conceptually uniform for all three degrees of impasse. This is an advantage in itself, especially for trainees. It also clearly acknowledges that similar processes are involved in impasse

development and resolution whether the impasse is first, second or third degree.

Second, and arising out of the first, it emphasizes the need to discriminate between internal (C_0 , C_1 and C_2) and external (P_0 , P_1 and P_2) contributions to the development of all three types of impasse. This helps clarify the nature of the two types of poles of impasses which need to be re-experienced to pave the way for redecisions. Associated with this, it highlights three distinctive types of poles related to the different degrees of impasse involved. They are distinctive both because of age-related issues addressed and because of the brain and body functions involved in each.

Third, it emphasizes the types of discrimination associated with the initial decision (A_2 -conceptual, A_1 -feeling-related, A_0 -being states and energy) and, therefore, the nature of any redecisions needed to be taken.

Last, it paves the way for impasse theory to be related to brain development and functioning should current indications be confirmed.

Practical Value

As a result of this formulation of impasse theory I have a clearer understanding of what people are experiencing and what I need to do about it when they are resolving impasses. Also as a result, I can use material from several schools of thought during the work without difficulty. And, there are several other quite specific benefits. (Note that some of these need to be modified when nonsequential development is involved.)

First, in addition to making the classification of impasses easy, it makes possible the precise classification of the level of impasse at which work is being done. For example, any use of words during the re-experiencing of an early scene indicates that the aspect of the work is being done at a first or second degree and not a third degree impasse level; long words and little feeling expression indicate that work is being done at a first degree and not a second degree level at which the words would be little and feelings predominant; and an inability to distinguish between self and others during work indicates that it is

“So third degree impasses are generally not resolvable at second and first degree levels, and second degree impasses are not resolvable at first degree levels.”

not being done at a first degree level but at a third or possibly a second degree level.

Why is this so important? Basically because my own and other people's experience indicates that impasses originating from one of the three degrees are not resolved by work based on skills, awareness, etc. related to lower degrees of impasse. It would be like expecting work on a seven year old scene to resolve issues raised in a two year old scene. So third degree impasses are generally not resolvable at second and first degree levels, and second degree impasses are not resolvable at first degree levels. This may be due to the functional differentiation of the part of the brain involved in each degree of impasse, if the primal therapy formulation is accurate.

Second, because of the first point, it is possible to determine readily whether or not a person has resolved an impasse or is defending against it at an older or younger level. For example, talking about feelings is often an indication of a person holding himself at a first degree level expression of a second or third degree impasse; just as the too rapid “giving up” of feelings is an indication of someone wanting to use first degree level processes to resolve second or third degree impasse experiences without fully experiencing them; while a person who continues to express young feelings (third or second degree level) may be resisting moving into dealing with older conflicts (second or first degree impasses) and so not integrate the younger responses and resolution into later manifestations of the early issues concerned.

Third, knowing the characteristics of each level of impasse, people can be encouraged during their work to move from one level to another as the need arises. The defining characteristics give clear indications both of the types of things the per-

son would do about the issue for each impasse level and the types of situations the person would be capable of understanding.

Examples:

Nathan was working on a two year old (second degree) impasse and kept sounding like a college professor. After his giving up his glasses and with ten minutes of encouragement to use small words, to pout, to stamp and to use voice sound rather than words to give his message, he achieved a full resolution of the second degree impasse.

Sarah kept becoming inarticulate during her work because she kept cathecting a nine month old problem—at times experienced as diffuse and all encompassing (third degree impasse) and at other times being the result of felt paternal rejection (second degree impasse). To resolve both of these she needed to be able to conceptualize them (develop A_2 awareness and processes) and was encouraged to work on later expressions of the issue (five years of age) by using words to do the brunt of the work. This enabled her eventually to hold the experience of the impasse at a first and second degree level, and paved the way for complete resolution at all levels.

Fine Discriminations

Having information on developmental issues and capacities is invaluable for me in this work, both for determining the differences between the different impasses (see earlier) and for determining how well a person is cathecting an age within the age range of each degree of impasse. For example, if people are working on a six year old scene like a teenager, they may still be working on a first degree impasse, but not at the age they think; if they are working on a twelve month old scene and words are a little more than marginally significant, they may be working at three years and on a second degree impasse, but not on the scene on which they intended to work; and if they are working on a pre-four month old scene and they are sitting up or crawling or walking, they may be working on a third degree impasse, but not at the age of the scene.

As presented, third and second degree impasses overlap between four months

and one year of age, and second and first degree impasses overlap between two and four years of age. My experience is that impasses developed during these overlap periods usually involve separate, though related impasses at the two levels concerned. At the beginning of the overlap period the developmentally younger impasse degrees seems to pre-dominate in significance (third and second), at the end of the overlap period the developmentally older impasse degrees seem to predominate in significance (second or first), and between the two extremes the significance of the two degrees of impasse developed seem to be in balance or imbalance according to how far through the overlap period the formative experiences occurred. In my experience, too, both degrees of impasse will need to be dealt with for full resolution to be achieved, regardless of the balance. (Again note the way non-sequential development necessarily modifies these statements.)

Ken Mellor, BA, Dip. Soc. Studs., CTM, is a social worker working in private practice in Clifton Hill, Victoria, Australia.

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