

# REDEFINING\*

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The concept of redefining grew out of experiences we had when using the passivity material developed by Aaron Schiff and Jacqui Schiff.<sup>1</sup> The material presented in this paper is an extension of their work and links the "symbiotic basis" of peoples' patterns of thinking, perceiving, feeling and action to their games and script.

Redefining refers to the mechanism people use to maintain their established view of themselves, other people and the world in order to advance their scripts. It is the means by which people defend themselves against stimuli which are inconsistent with their frames of reference, and redefine the stimuli to fit into the frames. Several generalizations about redefinition have emerged from the work so far.

First, it appears that whenever people redefine, their behavior is gamey or scripty;<sup>2</sup> and on the other hand, when people are *not* redefining but are acting and reacting to stimuli as they are in reality, they are likely to be perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting autonomously.

Second, redefining is used with the four passive behaviors<sup>3</sup> to confirm or enforce the type of symbiotic relationship a person requires to advance his or her

script.

Third, when people redefine, their options are limited by the structure of the symbiotic relationships their redefining and behavior establishes; when not redefining people can determine and act on their own options without these restrictions.

Redefinitions are common therapeutically because therapy threatens the person's frame of reference. Under this threat people tend to externalize much of the thinking they would otherwise keep to themselves. For example:

*Therapist:* "You're playing a game with me."

*Client:* "I'm not. I'm sitting here talking to you. You're playing a game!"

With minimal recognition of the issue the therapist raises, the client redefines the issue, first to "talking," and then to the therapist being the game player. If the client is successful, his redefinition will divert the threat onto the therapist who may be tempted to start defending him or herself rather than keeping to the original issue.

Encounters involving redefinitions tend to be characterized by long, directionless, sometimes circular discussions, and by mounting agitation in the therapist and group members; or, alternatively, by exchanges which end with someone reluctantly "taking care of" someone else. Issues which would lead to the resolution of the problem are either not dealt with at all, or attention is

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\*A fuller presentation of this material will appear in Schiff, J. et. al. *The Cathexis Reader: Transactional Analysis Treatment of Psychosis*. Harper and Row, New York, in press.

consistently diverted away from them in subtle ways. Therapeutically the problem is to confront the process in such a way that the individual becomes aware of what he or she is doing and develops an investment in not doing it.

### SYMBIOTIC BASIS

Originally people's survival depends on them getting what they need within symbiotic relationships with their mothers and other significant caretaking people. To some extent survival remains equated in the individual's mind with the unresolved aspects of this symbiosis. To meet the needs which are connected with the symbiotic remnants, people seek out symbiotic partners in later life and behave in much the same way as they did in the original relationship. They see no other options for themselves. However, grown people can best meet their needs by relating autonomously. Other perceptions (whether actual or implicit) are simply a redefinition of this reality. Symbiosis, then, is both the cause and the effect of redefining, while survival or getting needs met is the goal and motivation.

### INTERNAL MECHANISM

There are three components to the redefining mechanism: *discounting*, *grandiosity*, and *thought disorders*. All operate simultaneously to produce a redefined view of ourselves, other people and the world. The appearance of any of these components is a sign that redefining is occurring; any one of them can become the focus of treatment. Discounting involves reducing the impact or significance of some aspect of the self, others, or the reality situation.<sup>4</sup> Grandiosity is the purposeful exaggeration or minimization of some characteristics of the self, others, or of situations.<sup>5</sup> The purpose is to compensate for insecurity or inadequacy the person experiences in response to the

characteristics he distorts. It is related to a threat to symbiosis and, therefore, to survival or meeting needs in the terms already discussed. Grandiosity is also the justification for redefinitions. Thinking disorders take the form of overdetailing, overgeneralizing, or both.<sup>6</sup> An ability to focus on the specific and the general is necessary for people to define problems and options realistically. When people overdetail, the more general issues never get defined. When people overgeneralize, they take such a broad view of the issues concerned that the details they require to define their problems and options realistically are ignored.

The type and mode of discounting indicates the degree of pathology in the redefinition. The amount of distortion produced by the grandiosity is related to the degree of threat the person experiences in response to the stimulus of the redefinition; that is, the threat to the symbiosis. The thinking disorders are related to problem and option definition and, therefore, to the person's action possibilities. For example, Mary, a hebephrenic girl, asked for something to eat. She was told to wait five minutes until the food was ready. She immediately got violent. After the incident she reported, "I thought you wanted to kill me" (grandiosity). "You said I couldn't eat" (discounting the fact that she was told to wait, highly pathological because it was a discount of stimuli in the existence mode). "Now I remember you asked me to wait before and fed me when you said you would; I didn't think of that" (overdetailing on the one incident without attention to her more general experience). Being asked to wait was redefined into a potentially homicidal response.

### REDEFINING TRANSACTIONS

We have found that people use two distinctive types of transactions when they redefine. They are *tangential* and *blocking* transactions. They may be

initiated by any ego state, although if used by the Adult without awareness, the person is in a contamination. In both types of transactions the focus of the stimulus is different from the focus of the response. The respondent discounts some aspect of the stimulus and shifts the issue.

*Tangential transactions* are transactions in which the stimulus and response address different issues, or address the same issue from different perspectives. Conversations involving these transactions are characterized by a constant shifting of focus away from the issue being discussed. The participants appear to "talk past" each other, and their conversations can also move in circles. The actual issue, however, remains unaddressed. Significantly, no one confronts the shifts effectively and most of the people involved are likely to have "forgotten" the original issue. For example:

A: "Who did that?"

B: "It happened before dinner." (Shift from "who" to "when.")

A: "Will you do it?"

B: "I'll be able to (one day perhaps)." (Shift from "intention" to "potential.")

A: "What are you going to do about it?"

B: "I've already tried doing it." (Shift from "future" to "past.")

A: "You wash the car."

B: "I want to wash the dishes." (Shift from "car" to "dishes.")

*Blocking transactions* are transactions in which the purpose of raising an issue is avoided by disagreeing about the definition of the issue. Blocking transactions are frequently the first move in a chain of redefining transactions and are usually competitive. They are often used in a context where there is an accepted definition of the issue. The parties discount this, and the conversation gets bogged down in overdetailed and overgeneralized points of definition instead of

dealing with the issue. For example:

A: "Stop agitating and think."

B: "I wasn't. I was only keeping time to the tune in my head." (Definition of "agitation.")

A: "Are you doing something (being active)?"

B: "Yes, I'm thinking." (Definition of "doing something.")

There are three levels of these transactions: The social level, a psychological level, and a symbiotic level. The basic symbiotic level messages are related to the players' preferred positions in the symbiosis (Child, or Parent/Adult), the psychological level carries the ulterior messages related to the specifics of the symbiosis in the situation the people are in, and the social level contains the actual words being used.

To diagram these transactions clearly we have combined the normal transactional diagram of ulterior transactions with the Schiff's structural diagram of symbiosis<sup>7</sup> and a variation of Ernst's approach to duplex transactions involving contaminations.<sup>8</sup> (See figures 1, 2, 3.) The continuous boundaries around the ego states show each person's preferred position in the symbiosis at a particular point in time. The dotted arrows refer to the psychological level messages specific to the situation, and the continuous arrows refer to the social level messages. (Where exclusions are involved the social and psychological level messages coincide, and the Adult boundaries are dotted.)

## REDEFINING RELATIONSHIPS

Our understanding of redefining transactions highlights three significant types of redefining relationships: symbiotic, Parent-competitive, and Child-competitive relationships. Each has its own dynamics and each calls for specific treatment procedures. To date, we have observed the three relationship types are more or less transitory. In an on-going

relationship between two people, that is, all three ways of relating are likely to come into play at different times.

The particular combinations of the types; the games played within them; when, where, and with whom they are set up; the preferred position in the "symbiosis" — all are determined by, firstly, the nature of the original symbioses and, secondly, the demands of the person's script. Thus, furthering the script and the games played within it are seen as an on-going consequence of symbiotic relationships, or the competitive relationships established with the purpose of securing a symbiotic relationship.

*Symbiotic Type.* The transactional paradigm of this type of redefining relationship is shown in figure 1.

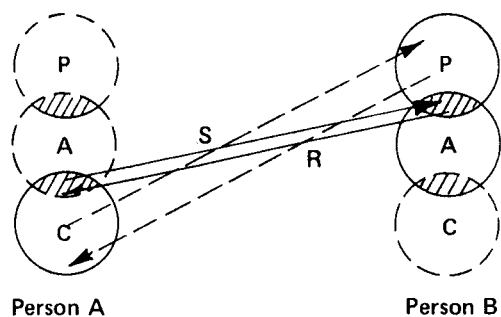


Figure 1. Transactional paradigm of redefining relationship — symbiotic type.

In this type of relationship A and B generally expect B to take care of A, define situations and do the thinking. They also expect A to express feelings, make demands around needs, and take only token responsibility for perceptions, thinking, feeling, behaviors and meeting his or her own needs. B discounts his or her Child needs and feelings; A discounts his or her own Parent and Adult abilities. (Both collect stamps with each transaction involving these discounts. The stroke economy of the relationship may involve

positive and/or negative strokes.) On the Karpman Drama Triangle,<sup>9</sup> A tends to be an actively provocative or passive Victim, while B tends to be a Rescuer or Persecutor. A operates from a Child contamination (exclusion), B from a Parent contamination (exclusion). The protocol is as follows:

*Social level:*

A: "X is the way things are here."

B: "You're wrong. It's Y," or, "Yes you're right. Well done."

*Psychological level:*

A: (C→P) "I can't think for myself (I am not responsible for my feelings, actions, etc.) here. Do it for me." (Say it's OK.)

B: (P→C) "You're right. I can see that's true here. I'll do it for you." (It's OK.)

*Symbiotic level:*

A: In the Child position being "cared for" for "being" not-OK.

B: In the Parent/Adult position "caring" for A because he (or she) "is" not-OK.

It is this type of relationship, or in overt symbioses, that people attempt to re-establish, confirm or enforce by redefining. A perceives this relationship structure as the only way to get his or her needs met in the situation. Similarly, although discounting needs and feelings, B's Child usually erroneously perceives that his or her needs will be met in this situation by attempting to meet A's needs.

*Parent-Competitive Type.* This type of redefining relationship is based on a competition for the Parent/Adult position in the symbiosis (see figure 2). The stakes of the competition are the "survival issue" because the symbiosis is threatened. Each person attempts to get the other to overadapt to his or her definition of the situation, issue or event. Both are discounting feelings and needs, and are collecting stamps to justify the escalations they will use to establish the symbiosis in the Parent/Adult position.

The strokes may be positive or negative. The people may occupy any one of the three positions on the Karpman Drama Triangle; but they usually attempt to occupy the same game position at the same time.

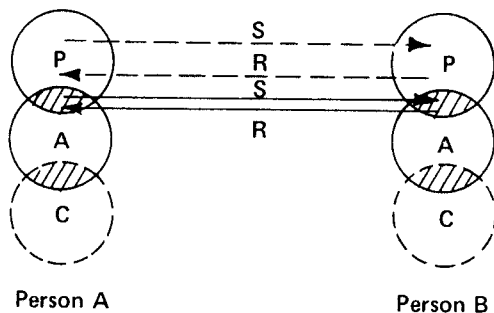


Figure 2. Transactional paradigm of redefining relationships: Parent-competitive type.

The competition ends for a time when A and B part company, or when one of them overadapts to the other and moves into a Child contamination (exclusion), thereby establishing a symbiosis. Because each has collected stamps the stage is set for further competitive encounters in the future. Both people operate from Parent contaminations (exclusions). The protocol is as follows:

*Social level:*

A: "This is what is happening here."

B: "I think you're wrong. It's like this."

*Psychological level:* (usually  $P \rightarrow P$ , sometimes crossed  $P \rightarrow C$ ,  $P \rightarrow C$ ):

A: "X is how things should be here."

B: "Y is how they should be."

*Symbiotic level:*

A: In the Parent/Adult position expecting B to let him or her "take care" of B for "being" not-OK so that A can "take care" of him or herself.

B: In Parent/Adult position expecting the same of A.

The more intensely the "survival issue" is experienced by both parties, the more escalated these encounters are likely to be.

*Child-Competitive Type.* The competition in this type of redefining relationship is for the Child position in the symbiosis (see figure 3). Again the symbiosis is threatened, and the stakes revolve around the "survival issue." Both are demanding that the other person "take care" of them symbiotically and are discounting their responsibility for themselves. They collect stamps with each transaction involving these discounts to justify the escalation they will use to force the issue. Strokes may be positive or negative. The favored positions on the Karpman Drama Triangle appear to be Victim and Persecutor, and both people usually attempt to occupy the same position simultaneously. The most intense competition tends to develop around the Victim position.

Both A and B operate from Child contaminations (exclusions). The protocol is as follows:

*Social level:*

A: "X is the way things are here."

B: "It's not. It's like Y."

*Psychological level:* (Usually  $C \rightarrow C$ , sometimes crossed  $C \rightarrow P$ ,  $C \rightarrow P$ ):

A: "I want things to be like X here. Or else!" (Watch out!)

B: "I want them to be like Y. You watch out!"

*Symbiotic level:*

A: In Child position attempting to force B to "take care" of A for "being" not-OK.

B: In Child position attempting to force the same from A.

The competition, when intense, quickly becomes a question of who is going to give way first to the Child escalations of the other. The competition stops, at least temporarily, when A and B part company, or when one of them shifts to the Parent/Adult position. The "loser" is

likely to go in search of someone to take care of him or her symbiotically as quickly as possible.

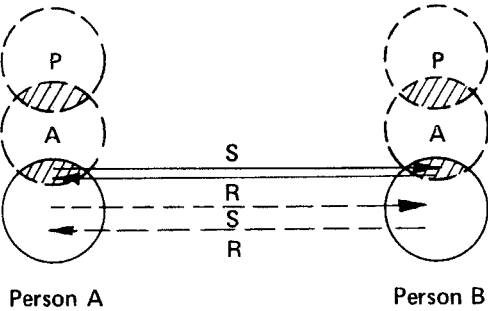


Figure 3. Transactional paradigm of redefining relationships, Child-competitive type.

Redefining transactions occur in all three types of relationships; however, tangential and blocking transactions seem to be much more frequent in the two competitive types. This is because the symbiotic type tends to involve complementary expectations. The competitive types involve conflicting expectations and the redefining is used to “resolve” the conflict by forcing the issue within the relationship or by “forcing” a third party to intervene symbiotically.

**BEHAVIORS**

All three of these relationships are characterized by shifts in responsibility, thinking, feeling and discomfort. The shifts are achieved through the use of the four passive behaviors. We have found that mounting agitation is one of the most reliable signs that redefining is taking place in situations where people appear to be putting equal energy into a discussion. As soon as a shift is made, an unhealthy symbiosis has been established.

**REDEFINING ROLES**

We see people’s games and scripts as

being acted out and defended from six distinctive redefining roles: “Caretaker,” “Hard Worker,” “Angry Righteous,” “Angry Wrongdoer,” “Woeful Righteous,” and “Woeful Wrongdoer.” These roles are adopted and shifted in the service of the script. The characteristics of each can be best described in terms of favored games.

While in one role, a person collects stamps in order to move to another when his or her script calls for it. The roles are related dynamically and, while people can move from one of them into any one of the other five, people seem to move through them in a preferred sequence. Some of the moves can be predicted by focusing on the two levels of game position associated with each role. There is an overt or social level position, and a psychological level position in each role. The former refers to the game position occupied overtly; the latter to either a game position the person intends to occupy, one he or she is defending against, or one he or she is actually occupying covertly at the psychological level. (A person with good social control may act out the social level position at the psychological level, and the psychological level position at the symbiotic level.) The possible shifts between the roles and their associated game positions are shown in the “redefining hexagon” in figure 4.

The favorite game of the “Hard Worker” is often “Look How Hard I’m Trying.” The person presents him or herself as putting a lot of energy into things. At the social level he or she is Rescuing; the group and the therapist (spouse, work associates) are supposedly not going to have to put much energy into helping him or her. However, the issues necessary to solve a problem will be studiously avoided. At the psychological level the “Hard Worker” will be defending against, aiming at, or actually occupying the Victim or Persecutor positions. “Hard Worker” tends to

operate out of a Child contamination or exclusion.

"Caretaker" usually plays, "I'm Only Trying To Help You." Their social level position is Rescuer, while their psychological level positions are Victim or Persecutor. They "take care" of others whether they ask for care or not, and they tend to operate from a Parent contamination or exclusion.

"Angry Righteous" people present a social level position easily identifiable as Persecutor. They tend to play "Now I've Got You, You Son Of A Bitch" and usually come from a Parent contamination or exclusion. At the psychological level the position they aim for, defend against, or occupy, is Victim.

"Woeful Righteous" people are martyred and tend to play games like "Look What They're Doing To Me," and "Ain't It Awful." At the social level they are in Victim, while at the psychological level the position is Persecutor. They tend to come from a Child contamination or exclusion.

"Angry Wrongdoers" present the Victim position at the social level but very clearly imply a potential or actual persecution at the psychological level. This type tends to operate from a Child contamination or exclusion. "Angry Wrongdoers" tend to play a variation of "Kick Me," "Kick Me (If You Dare)," and to look for opportunities for "Uproar."

The "Woeful Wrongdoer" characteristically plays "Poor Little Me," "Kick Me (Please!)," and "Don't Kick Me (Please?)." He or she is likely to have been Persecutor at the social or psychological level before moving into this role. The social level may be Victim or appear straight, and the psychological level position is Victim. They almost always operate from a Child contamination or exclusion.

We have noted that relationships are competitive when two people attempt

to relate symbiotically from the same position in the symbiosis, and that this type of competition may be intensified by simultaneous attempts to occupy the same game position. As can be seen from figure 4, the social and psychological level positions in the roles allow for the development and flow of games and scripts within the structure of symbiotic relationships.

## TREATMENT

When an individual redefines, it is a sure sign that something is happening which is a threat to his or her frame of reference. The key issue in treatment is to identify what is under threat. This puts the individual in a position to do what is necessary to resolve the conflict between his or her view of reality and reality itself, and thereby to give up his or her investment in the problem. During this work the individual may continue actively to redefine as the work itself maintains the threat.

In our work, we focus on the five aspects of redefining, discussed above.

1. When an issue is raised or emerges as significant, any attempts to use tangential or blocking transactions to divert attention away from an issue are confronted. Examples of this type of confrontation are:

*Therapist:* "I think you're redefining. I'd like you to answer my question (stay with the original issue)."

*Therapist:* "Yes, I can see how that is important. I'd like to discuss that later after we finish with the first issue."

*Therapist:* "That is not a response to what I said. Will you respond to what I said?"

2. When making an intervention which confronts redefining, we have found that the ego states the therapist uses are extremely important. Apparently very similar interventions can have very different results. The important factor is that the therapist avoid unhealthy

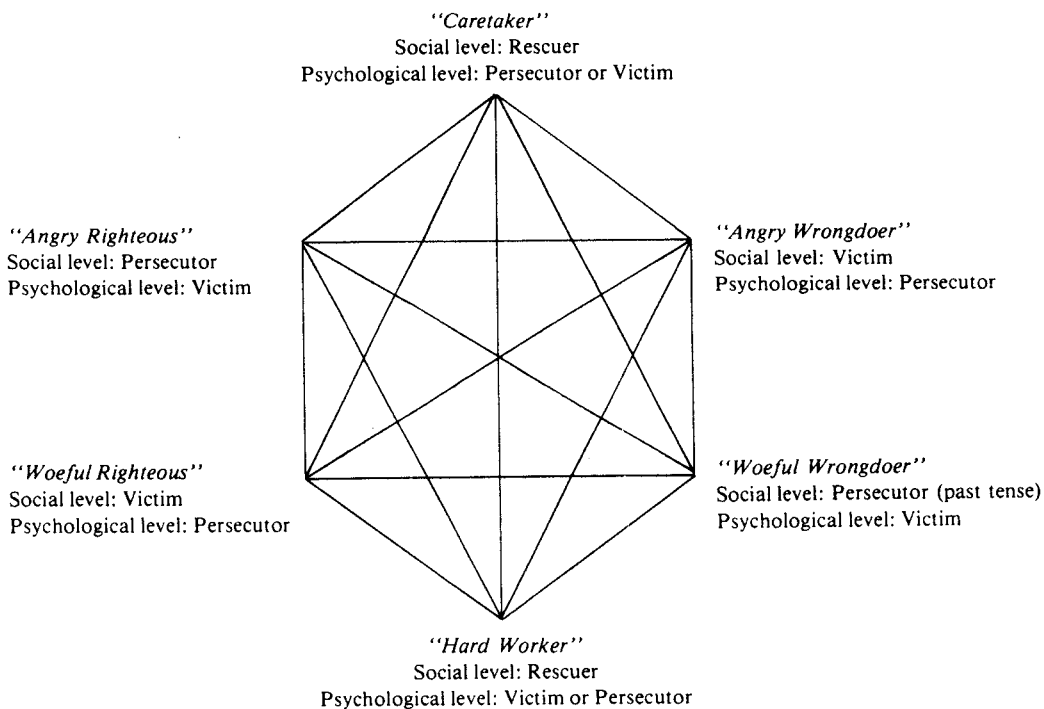


Figure 4.  
Figure 4. Redefining hexagon showing  
redefining roles and positions.\*

symbioses. Thus, people acting from a Parent contamination or exclusion need to be confronted differently than people in a Child contamination or exclusion. An Adult observation, followed by an Adult report about the therapist's ego state which matches the contaminating or excluding ego state of the client (or, alternatively, the therapist directly cathecting that ego state), seems to get optimal results. Examples of such encounters are:

*Client:* Child contamination, exclusion.

*Therapist:* "I think you are doing . . . [Adult] and I am uncomfortable because . . . [Adult, report on Child]," or, "I think you are doing . . . [Adult] and I am angry [scared, sad, happy] because . . .

[Child]."

*Client:* Parental contamination, exclusion.

*Therapist:* "I think you are doing . . . [Adult] and I think you should . . . [Adult report on Parent]," or, "I think you are doing . . . [Adult] and you should (are to) . . . [Parent]."

The more strongly the client cathects Parent or Child, the more strongly the therapist needs to come from the same ego state. The therapist thereby uses the competitive characteristics of symbioses to stimulate the person to shift ego states, think and take responsibility for meeting his or her own needs in straight ways. Because symbiotic competitiveness may lead to escalations, however, the therapist may need to use his or her Parent with people in Child and his or her Child with people in Parent to the degree necessary to contain escalations.

\*Our thanks to Jacqui Schiff for suggesting we arrange the six roles in a circle, which led us directly to the hexagon.



3. When working on redefinitions, attention will need to be given to the discounting, grandiosity and thinking disorders involved. Awareness of these helps the person get in touch with the significant internal issues for him or her in the situation.

4. The passive behaviors are confronted directly in the terms outlined by Aaron and Jacqui Schiff.<sup>10</sup> The aim is to shift discomfort, thinking and responsibility quickly back to the client and to get him or her to solve the problems.

5. Lastly, we have found it very useful to identify people adopting one of the redefining roles. Identifying people in these roles often means identifying redefinitions which would otherwise have been missed. Sometimes a person's redefining role is more obvious than his redefinitions. Having identified the role, people's overt and covert game positions are clear and can be worked on. The nature of the psychological level position — that is, whether the position is the person's objective, is being defended against, or is being acted out — is especially relevant to the client's investment in a particular role at a particular time. Moreover, working on the role often opens a direct route to the script basis of what the person is doing.

## SUMMARY

Redefining is a mechanism used to maintain the frame of reference and to advance scripts. Its origins lie within the symbiotic relationships of childhood. It is directly connected to the unresolved aspects of these symbioses, which are acted out in the present so people can get their needs met in accord with their scripting. Accordingly, symbiosis is the cause and objective of redefining, while the motivation is getting needs met and is equated with survival.

The mechanism has three components: discounting, grandiosity, and thought

disorders. All three contribute to any redefinition of reality. Redefining can be recognized transactionally by the appearance of tangential and/or blocking transactions; behaviorally by the four passive behaviors; structurally through the establishment of symbiotic, Parent-competitive, or Child-competitive relationships; and functionally by the parties adopting one of six redefining roles — "Caretaker," "Hard Worker," "Angry Righteous," "Angry Wrongdoer," "Woeful Righteous," or "Woeful Wrongdoer."

Treatment is most effectively conducted with a simultaneous focus on the internal, transactional, behavioral, structural, and functional aspects in an atmosphere of shared information and autonomous relating.

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