

## They Are OK – Are You? ITA Conference Delegates run a Simulated World

### About the Author:

Mary Dees is a Director of [pixelfountain \(games-ED\)](#) and can be found on [LinkedIn](#). She is an experienced trainer and has delivered hundreds of learning simulation based workshops. She also offers [coaching](#) and counselling.

She has been training and facilitating individuals and groups in collaboration, communication, resolving conflict and problem solving/decision making for 20 years. This has been in schools, public sector, private sector and community groups. I also have experience of mentoring young people.

She also provides counselling and psychotherapy (Imagine Counselling) located in Mellor, Stockport and close to Marple, Marple Bridge, Romiley, New Mills, Glossop, High Peak, Stockport, South Manchester and Tameside.

She is a counsellor and psychotherapist (in advanced training at Psyche Institute, ITA Registered Training Establishment, affiliated to UKCP), my main modality is Transactional Analysis but I also borrow from other techniques such as body psychotherapy, gestalt, eco therapy, mindfulness and others. I am a member of the Institute of Transactional Analysis (ITA) and abide by their code of ethics and professional practice.

See <http://www.imaginecounselling.co.uk>

And Blog <http://www.counselling-journal.com>

### Introduction

This paper will examine the theory of life positions and their use in exploring collaboration and conflict. This includes a description and exploration of existential and behavioural life positions in both 2 and 3 dimensions. I then relate this theory to the experience of running a workshop on life positions, conflict and collaboration at the ITA National Conference 2011.

### Life Positions

The underlying philosophy of TA is that of life positions and the concept of I'm Ok, You're Ok, which is a belief system that each of us is of value. This is a moral position where I see myself and others as equal with equal rights. Not to be confused with our relative ability, capacity or behaviour.

There has been a lot of literature on the subject and some disagreement about the subtlety of life positions (White 1994, 1995a, 1995b, English 1995, Erskine 1995). My interest is to use a simple pragmatic understanding to help people work together and understanding their social interactions.

I take Steiner's (1974) position that we all start life with the sense of Okness, a somatic sense in a new born child that predates any beliefs or decisions. I believe that most of us keep some element (or hope) of this fundamental core Okness into adulthood.

Berne (1975) talks about our existential life position that we develop in early childhood linked to our beliefs and the decisions we make about ourselves and others. This is best illustrated in the OK Corral (Ernst 1971) see diagram below. Berne said we all have a favourite position that we tend to adopt in times of stress.

**Figure 1: OK Corral (Ernst 1987)**

<b>I - U+</b> <b>Depressive</b>	<b>I+ U+</b> <b>Healthy</b>
<b>I - U-</b> <b>Futile</b>	<b>I+ U-</b> <b>Paranoid</b>

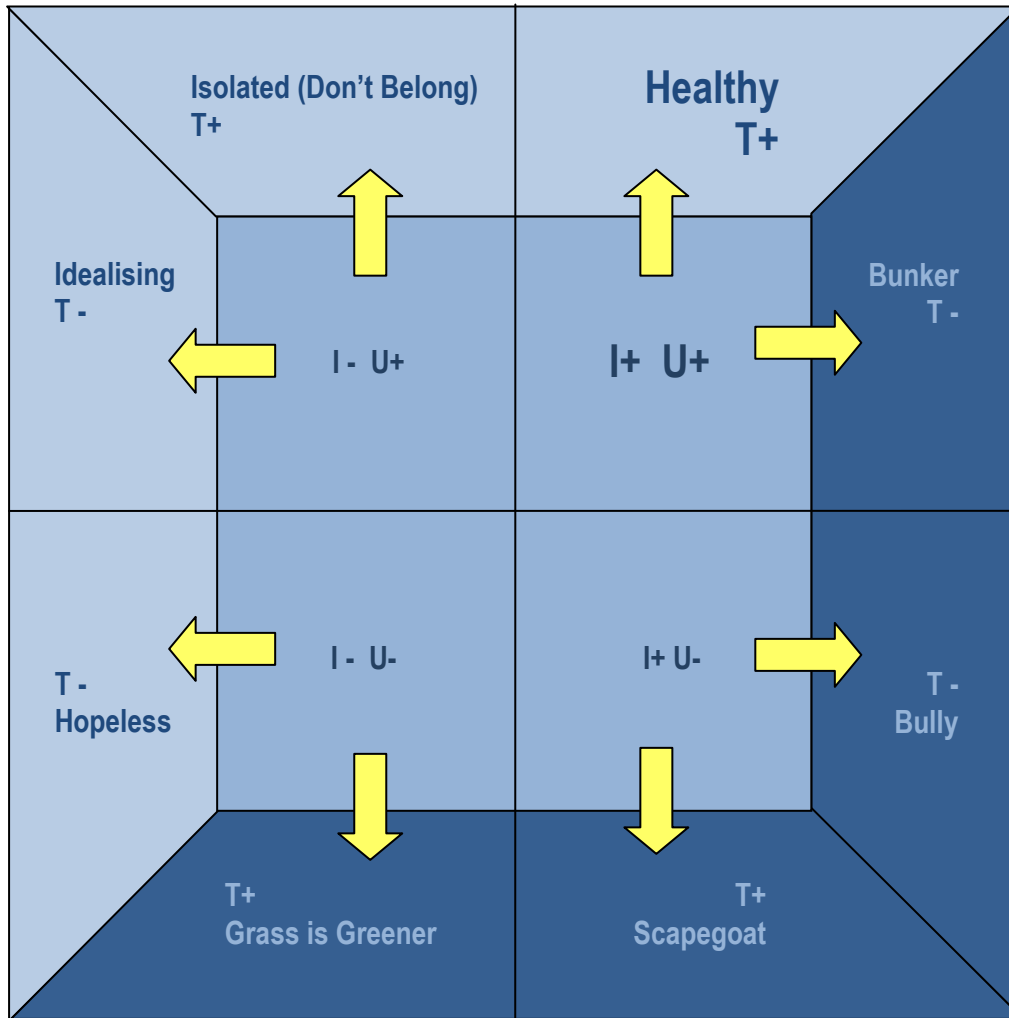
Although we might all have a basic life position, I believe that our positions and behaviours are quite complex and can be different depending on circumstances and sometimes change moment to moment. This is what Anita Mountain (2009) calls the OK mix “That is the dynamic interplay between any group of people moment to moment. All our transactions can be seen as invitations to other people to join us in our current (behavioural or existential) position.”

This becomes even more complex if we look at what Berne (1975) called three handed Okness and Anita Mountain (2009) called 3 dimensional Okness.

If we consider the third dimension of THEY, then the social interaction of groups, families, organisations and teams becomes open to analysis.

In 3 dimensional Okness suddenly there are eight positions rather than the traditional four.

**Figure 2: 3 Dimensional Okness [adapted from Mountain(2009)]**



### Conflict

In terms of conflict, people often mistake conflict for not Okness but I see the healthy position as one where people are open and honest where dissent and disagreement is encouraged, discussed and sorted out. As Jacobs (1987, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1997) illustrates the suppression of dissent, rigid rules and dogma can create destructive group culture and societies.

During conflict many of us take up a position where we try to avoid being blamed often protesting our innocence or righteousness, maybe not wanting to move into futile or hopeless position (I-U-T-). But to sort out problems and remain in the healthy position (I+U+T+) it is essential to keep your integrity and take responsibility for your actions.

### Planetary Okness

Another aspect of life positions is taken up by Pearl Drego (2008) is the issue of Planetary Okness which for me is about the valuing of future generations and other species.

Pearl Drego(2008) in her Keynote Speech to the TA World Conference talked about the environmental crisis affecting the earth as "scripty and suicidal". It is a position of the extreme antisocial (I+ U-T-) or hopelessness (I-U-T-). Issues such as climate change, water shortages, marine pollution etc. are all global problems – that can overwhelm us with their scale and complexity. But it is at the small group level that we can create and maintain

healthy life positions including other groups, nations and importantly future generations. Then maybe we can step back from the hopelessly suicidal and antisocially homicidal positions.

### **The ITA Conference workshop and feedback**

I ran a workshop for the ITA Conference on life positions, conflict and collaboration in the context of running a sustainable community.

To explore individual, group and cultural life positions I used an interactive, experiential workshop using a computer based learning simulation followed by a group discussion to reflect and draw out the learning.

The simulation I used was [Sustainaville](#) developed by [pixelfountain \(games-ED\)](#) where the delegates have three years to make the community sustainable in terms of social, environmental and economic issues. They were divided up into eight teams in order to control each of the eight buildings in the virtual community. The eight buildings are Housing & Regeneration, Education, Health, Third Sector, Local Council, Utilities, Development Partnership, and Transport. The teams have limited resources and both common and conflicting priorities. As the learning-simulation progresses, the learners must explore the interrelationships between the different stakeholders in the community. They have the means of making improvements but the timing of some improvements can cause other areas of the community to suffer.

The simulation is a situated learning device to provide the delegates with an opportunity to explore their interrelations with each other: one to one, inside their teams, between teams and as a whole community. What life positions do they adopt? Do they avoid conflict? Do they manage to stay ok /keep others ok whilst resolving conflict? How do they respond to stress? How well do they collaborate and work together for the good of the whole community?

### **The Experiences**

All the delegates started the [Sustainaville](#) simulation from the healthy position (I+ U+ T+) but quickly two delegates reported that they moved to the (I- U+ T+) isolated position because everyone else (except them) seemed to understand the rules. This initial response to the overload of information is common in my workshops and an important part of the learning. Usually, at this point, it is the role of facilitator to recognize which delegates need support. However in this workshop others in the group immediately supported those that felt overwhelmed enabling them to move quickly back to a healthy position.

In Round 2, I attempted to inject conflict and differential positions by announcing that some teams were priority services (education and health) and others were getting a significant budget cut. Some in the group moved into the (I+ U+ T-) bunker position where the Government were seen as the common enemy responsible for the arbitrary budget cuts. However they were able to keep each other Ok. The budget cuts meant some very difficult decisions, robust dialogue and even conflict, but the delegates were able to keep each other Ok. The exception was the team playing the Third Sector. The Third Sector in the game is able to offer voluntary and community sector services for the good of the whole community but they need to get money transferred to them from other teams. They have the additional pressure of having to ask for money and report back to other teams on their progress. This team moved between different positions from (I- U- T+) grass is greener position where they felt they were not Ok, the team with a budget cut was not Ok but other teams were Ok. They also felt the need to grovel and adapt to other teams and not express their own needs and wants falling into the (I- U+ T+) isolated position. But also because of their importance in delivering vital services sometimes they felt (I+ U- T-) in the antisocial position because their importance wasn't recognized by the other teams or the Government.

I have run this exercise with 400 other groups and the ITA Conference group were the most collaborative and supportive to each other and consequently gained a very high score. Often groups with very competitive delegates e.g. aspiring leaders, have most destructive conflict often acting from the (I+ U- T-) anti-social position. But this can quickly turn around when they realise they will 'win' by working together. Sometimes existing hierarchies can cause problems as a leader attempts to impose their ideas, and others feel unable to express their thoughts acting from an (I-U+T+) idealising position or sometimes hopeless (I-U-T-) if they think the leader is wrong. Often teams form their own personality and silo mentality occurs where they forget the whole and focus only on their own problems (I+ U+ T-) bunker position.

The simulation exercise allows these scenarios to arise and be challenged by incidents that occur, by the facilitator or from within the group. Over many rounds in the game the positions can be challenged, changed and

understood. This often leads to an understanding of individual and group mentality, stronger partnership working and open constructive conflict and collaboration.

## Conclusion

Life positions both in 2 and 3 dimensions are useful theoretical ideas to help individuals and groups firstly understand how and why they interact in certain ways and also to help to move into more constructive ways of working.

When looking at the issue of conflict and collaboration, a learning-simulation such as [Sustainaville](#) provides an excellent situated learning framework giving a group the opportunity to explore how they think, feel and behave under certain circumstances. The simulation also included the context of protecting the planet enabling us to look at our life positions in relationship to future generations and species. This aligned with the concepts outlined by Anita Mountain in the 3 dimensional model provide us with a toolkit to analyse and label our modus operandi and transform our ways of working and being with others. Looking at 3D OKness can help in counselling, psychotherapy, group work and organisational development.

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