Rebels and Sweethearts: Understanding Adaptive Styles

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Abstract
This article was written in 1991 by the late Emily Hunter Ruppert. Although the ideas in it have never been published before, they have been taught and embraced by many in the transactional analysis community and in the wider world of psychotherapy. Martin Wells submitted this article on behalf of and with the permission of Ruppert's estate and wrote a complementary article in this journal. Wells was a member of one of two transactional analysis training groups of professionals that Emily led in Europe biannually over many years (from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s). She made this article available to group members and trainees in Europe and the United States, where she lived and worked as a Teaching Member of the International Transactional Analysis Association.

Keywords
Rebel, Sweetheart, Spirit, Free Child, Adapted Child, defense, humiliation, humility, shame, boundaries

One dark winter evening, while I was working with a therapy group, I found myself engaged in a classic struggle with a young woman who had been in therapy with me for several years. She was urgently expressing her need to trust someone with the very real pain and terror that was her constant companion. Each attempt by members of the group to form some connection with her was thwarted, and she continually turned to me, the therapist, and away from other members of the group as she stated the hopelessness of her plight. I was to be the solution, and yet, at every turn, I was reminded by her that she could not trust me. Finally, in exhaustion and exasperation I said that it seemed to me that I was verging on being unethical if I continued to treat someone who, after several years, said that the reason she could not progress was because she was sincerely mistrustful of me.

This encounter resulted in rage, as she said, "Why can't you say that you understand that it's hard for me now, and that I'll get through this, and that it is not easy to be in such a hard position?" I pointed out to her that I had given her those responses many times in the past and that this support from my nurturing self seemed not to make the difference that she needed. Through clenched teeth and blazing eyes wet with tears, she said, "Don't you see that I won't give it to you!" (meaning her trust).

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The group ended, and I retreated to my study: "Why do I continue to get hooked into this game?" I berated myself for a while and then took the question seriously. The ideas presented here are an answer to that question.

New voices are being heard from our clients, and often these voices are the muted cries or ringing screams of the abused child who has grown up unable to form relationships that are satisfying in adult life. He or she cannot enter into a place in which power is shared and other people are trusted. Survival for the survivor equals overly controlled access and therefore isolation and pain.

As I reviewed my clients in active treatment, some interesting regularities became evident to me. Approximately 65% of them made strong and mutual contracts of an Adult-Adult ego state quality (in transactional analysis terms) (Berne, 1972, p. 377). The remaining 35% were resistant to that type of engagement and continued to come to therapy seeking "how to" solutions from my Parent ego state or the Parent ego state of members of the group. I realized that the people I made easy connections with had been considered troublemakers in some ways by previous therapists. In functional analysis nomenclature (Berne, 1961, p. 23), they had entered therapy leading with their rebellious Adapted Child ego state (Berne, 1972, p. 412). The people with whom I had the most difficulty often initiated from the compliant Adapted Child ego state (Berne, 1963, pp. 77-8). I began to think of these two groups as *Rebels* and *Sweethearts* (Harris, 1972) and started exploring my contribution to their dynamics in relationships.

Portraits of Rebels and Sweethearts

The Rebels almost universally challenged the rules or the underlying assumption of the ways things were done. On the other hand, the Sweethearts desperately wanted to know the rules so that they could do things right. The Rebels demanded an affective connection and rejected the Parent ego state and advice (Drye, 1974, pp. 23-26); they seemed to want to know whether I would roll with the punches or if I would be frightened by their direct confrontations and respond from a judgmental Parent ego state. The Sweethearts rejected affective connection and considered any introduction of my self or feeling into the therapy as an invasion; they wanted to know if I would nurture and support them with understanding and advice and not act impulsively and violently when stressed.

Beneath each of these primary adaptive styles there is a secondary adaptive style of relating. This is the second line of defense. The tough Rebel (primary adaptation) is a buffer for the tender Sweetheart (secondary adaptation), who believed in authority and was humiliated by that belief and trust in a Parent ego state. The cooperative Sweetheart (primary adaptation) is protecting an enraged and playful Rebel (secondary adaptation), who trusted a connection from the heart and was betrayed by impulsive abuse or neglect from a Child ego state and vowed "never again" with clenched fists and gritted teeth. Shame is the common denominator that keeps the second line of defense in place.

At the core of both adaptive styles is what I have come to call the *Spirit,* which is the liveliness and healthy exploratory energy of the self. Each adaptive style is an attempt to protect the Spirit by preventing the original type of abuse, trauma, or neglect from recurring. My concept of the Spirit is similar to that of the Free Child (Berne, 1972) but differs in one profound quality. The Free Child is the ego state of spontaneous and impulsive expression without a sense of ethics or limits; the Spirit is spontaneous but respects and responds with reverent regard to other living things as well. The Spirit is the flame that is caught in the flash of an eye, or in resolute determination, or in direct humor and genuine warmth; the spirited animal is the one that is prized and desired for it can be trained but never truly possessed or broken by another. People and animals with a history of abuse, neglect, and/ or trauma have little desire to connect openly or be appealing in a spontaneous way to others if that attractiveness means further encroachment on the Spirit might be encouraged.

In my experience, the Sweethearts have been invasively parented by parents or parent figures who acted out on them from a violent and angry Child ego state. The Rebels received authoritarian

and often violent irrational parenting from a self-righteous Parent ego state that justified itself to the Rebel as acting "for your own good." The Sweethearts develop an adaptive shield (Holloway, 1977, p. 203) against the Child ego state (functional model) and prefer to have one person in Parent at all times in any transaction. The Rebels, on the other hand, wall off any transactions from the Parent ego state; if there has to be a Parent ego state active in the relationship, then it is going to be theirs. Each primary adaptation limits the freedom to have a life that is not dominated by the ghosts of the past and prevents the Spirit from actively participating or growing in healthy relationships.

In forming any satisfactory relationship, the needs of the individual and others must be considered equally. For the individual to have stroking needs met, and to participate to any degree of success in a community, no matter what the values of that particular community, some social contract must be developed and honored. For the Rebel, the social contract is based on personal charisma and power in peer relationships; for the Sweetheart, the social contract is based on cooperation and intuition in avoiding conflict with authority figures. The Rebel and Sweetheart both find success and satisfaction elusive. Often what appears to be success is the compulsivity of a workaholic or Super Mom. When the compulsive behavior begins to overwhelm the person, or the system in which she or he is operating, chaos occurs, and the system itself begins to break down.

The Rebel and Sweetheart adaptations allow for contact and establish clear boundaries that are designed to control internal feeling and prevent encroachment from the outside. Although each primary adaptation served to protect the Spirit in the past, by the time the client arrives in therapy, these adaptive styles have come to dominate present relationships to the degree that the person often presents as a significant complaint that she or he cannot feel or feels dead or numb.

Building the Alliance

Respecting Power

The challenge for the therapist is to understand and activate processes that allow for a therapeutic alliance. A therapeutic alliance means that the client and the therapist are working together toward the goals that they have agreed on as the purpose of the therapy. They are partners in this project, and the mutuality of the partnership is as important to recognize as the goals of the therapy themselves. The alliance is successfully established by the mutual and open exploration of how power can and will be shared in this relationship. Because it was through an early experience of an abuse of power that the client's trust was damaged, it is necessary to establish a relationship in the present that is different. The new relationship honors the efficacy of the client's survival mechanisms in childhood while simultaneously challenging their efficacy in developing satisfactory relationships in adulthood. In other words, it is necessary to make contracts that honor the manner in which the client survived.

For example, if the client survived by compulsively keeping things in order, the therapist must recognize the value of that in the past and also question its value in the present, in this room, right now, while we are talking with each other. If the client used fantasy and myth to escape conditions that were oppressive to the mind and body, I would usually go with him or her into that fantasy and explore the myths about the present relationship. If I as the therapist have been turned into a mythical Merlin, I try to honor that myth but also question the value of continuing it. I find out in the here and now how it helps the client to deal with the material at hand if I as the therapist am cast as a magician or wizard in the relationship. The metaphor itself is the message. The metaphor is played out in the room, in the group, in the present, and the therapeutic alliance is one in which both parties can explore its present value as well as its value from history. This honors the creative Spirit of the client, which built a protective boundary against conditions that were intolerable.

When the primary adaptation is from Sweetheart, the Parent ego state of the authority figure is sought out again and again to establish rules and safety (Weiss & Weiss, 1984, pp. 121-123). It is

necessary for the therapist to honor this need by acknowledging it and respecting the client and his or her requirements for structure in a relationship based on rules and regularities. This acknowledgment is achieved by openly outlining expectations. In discussing the expectations in the relationship, the basis for an Adult-Adult ego state (functional model) working relationship can be laid down, often by a reflection on the need for structure. This might be, "I notice that you look to me for direction or approval when you speak; will you notice what's going on when you look to me? Don't change anything yet; let's focus on what this is really about right now." In proposing the possibility that a certain behavior may mean something different to me than it does to the other, an entirely new perspective is available, and the Sweetheart is in a position to develop a contract that honors both self and other.

When the primary adaptation is from Rebel, interventions from the authority figure are fought and rejected, and safety is sought through a Child-Child ego state connection based on honest affective responses. The Rebel is threatened by Parental observation, reflection, or interpretation because it means that someone else is in a position of authority by knowing something that the client had not yet realized or accounted for. Thus, alliance with the Rebel is formed through a kind of "kid explorers" bond in which both therapist and client are entering the unknown on equal footing, and each want and need something from the other. The Rebel demands that his or her gifts and equality be honored and recognized in the therapy.

One dramatic example of this from my experience was when, in the course of a weekend group, a participant refused to abide by one of the primary rules of the group and ragefully fled from the room when confronted. I followed her to her car. She said, "You are not strong enough; I can beat you." I agreed with her and said, with sadness, "If you win this one, though, you lose in the long run. I can't let you participate if you don't follow the basic rules. I know you have needed to do this, and you have said that these weekends help, but you're right, you can beat me. You've won this one many times. I hope you don't have to do it again." The Rebel is the master of the Pyrrhic victory and needs an ally in finding strategies to win the war and lose those battles that are, in the long run, self-destructive. The acknowledgment of this need by the therapist allows the Rebel to stop testing the limits and start accepting a new, healthy Parent ego state structure that sets safe boundaries without threatening the integrity of the Spirit.

Healing deep wounds from the past can only occur in the small and subtle changes that take place in the present relationship. This is particularly true in matters of trusting the whole self with others. We begin by establishing modes of communication in the present that challenge survival strategies from the past. This is a process of opening up all the relationship vectors and allowing the whole person of self and others to have a voice. I have come to believe that in order to open up these relationship vectors, the therapist must be as willing to receive as to give in the relationship and not to interpret every gift from the client as a transferential expression. One of the most damaging parts of the histories of people who have been abused or neglected is that their gifts were not received or valued. A boy who feared his mother would kill the baby, and who expressed that fear, was responded to by his father turning his back to him and pouring another drink. When a bright little girl realized her mother was upset, she sang her a lullaby and was slapped for impertinence; she sang no more. The therapeutic relationship that heals is one of an I-Thou character in which each participant is honored and not seen as an object to be manipulated and controlled. The therapist in such a relationship must be available to receive as well as to give or yet another hierarchy is established in which the gifts of the client are of less worth than the gifts of the therapist.

From Power to Trust

[*Note added by M. Wells, 2017:* Ruppert described the need to work through two defensive boundaries, which she also called *lines of defense,* in order to establish trust with a client. The first

boundary defends against the second. These boundaries arise in response to the child's loss of trust in others, and they defend against shame and fear. The first boundary relates to the power struggles that the client brings to the therapeutic alliance. The second boundary defends against the exposure of the original trauma and against potential shame and humiliation. The therapist encounters the loss of trust as the first boundary to be managed in the relationship.]

Establishing the therapeutic alliance and dealing with the first boundary, which has to do with power and how it is shared, is like climbing up a mountain. Footings are carefully established, the terrain is explored for hazards, and each step is made against the force of gravity. The danger feels real and present. When the summit is reached, when an experience of shared power and mutuality is achieved, often the client and therapist feel a release and an experience of exhilaration and joy that they have made it beyond the relentless power struggles that impeded real communication. Often they overlook the care that is necessary to descend from the summit once the flag is planted announcing the end of armed combat. Descending the mountain is a different experience, and the partners need to be aware of the seduction to move too quickly on the way down. Mountain climbers know that the exhilaration of achieving the summit can lead to false confidence and a lack of awareness of the precision and care needed to descend safely from the heights.

The second stage of therapy, descending from the summit, has to do with developing realistic trust in oneself and others. The second boundary, established to ward off feelings of shame and humiliation that accompanied the historical trauma, comes into play here. At this juncture, Rebels fear that they will implode, and they feel it in the pit of their stomach; to acknowledge their need for contact is experienced as shameful. Sweethearts believe that they will explode, and they feel that the power of the explosion could wipe the face of the earth clean; to acknowledge their anger is to acknowledge that they care, which is experienced as humiliating. After bridging the first line of defense (the power struggle), the secondary line of defense must be approached, which is a barrier built to ward off shame. This inner sense of shame, which feels intolerable to acknowledge, is the result of being humiliated by others in a way that directly threatened the survival of the Spirit.

For the Rebel, the transactional mode that has been avoided while building the therapeutic relationship is that of Parent to Child. This transactional vector is threatening because it was the mode of the original trauma. If healing is to occur, this risk must eventually be taken. The Rebel experiences needs as shameful. Not knowing everything in advance feels shameful because it means recognizing that he or she may need the insight or observation of someone else, just as a child may need information or guidance from a parent. A typical response from the Rebel at this juncture is a dismissive "Yes, I know that" followed by a rapid change of subject.

One of my clients described this juncture as the "volcano." We first encountered the volcano when I defined some part of her behavior as manipulative. The eruption was immediate, and her heated denial of any possibility of ever being manipulative was passionate and unequivocal. We dealt with the connotations of the word *manipulative* and the implications of my labeling her and defining her behavior in a way that she had not already identified for herself. Time and trust began to heal the shame, and she could begin to accept that there was a valuable kernel of truth in considering some of her behavior manipulative. Much ground was covered in that transaction. We both realized that as insightful and articulate as she was, much of the insight was designed to prevent and block anyone else from surprising her with something that she did not know or realize already. But in any relationship that is spontaneous and open, there are going to be such surprises.

The second line of defense for the Rebel is a boundary of shame that she or he could have believed in those powerful people who took his or her childlike trust and innocence and turned it into revulsion about the self by the child. This point in the therapy is particularly difficult because the concerns over definition and power are simply tests of what will happen if another person is allowed access to the things that have been kept out of sight behind the defensive lines, things that feel shameful and painful to remember. The Rebel fears that if the vulnerable Sweetheart part of himself

or herself is ever revealed, she or he will be tricked by a Parent again. This Sweetheart part of the person has lived in the darkness because, as a child, she or he was shamed by trusting and believing in authority.

At this juncture of revealing the secondary line of defense (the hidden Rebel, the hidden Sweetheart), the therapist needs a light but firm hand in insisting that there is another way to interpret the experiences that seemed so shameful then and that it does not need to be an interpretation of blaming or scapegoating. I often think of this as the transformation of humiliation into true humility. Humility is not the same as humiliation; humility is an acceptance of limits, mistakes, and imperfections without a knee-jerk judgment of right and wrong. Humility is a protection against arrogance, entitlement, and the exploitation or abuse of others in the pursuit of personal goals. The primary and secondary adaptations limit the client's freedom to have a life that is not haunted by the past ghosts of shame and humiliation. Oddly, at this point, the Rebel wants to speak the truth and have it honored and not to have to prove someone wrong in the process. The Sweetheart at this point needs to express the outrage and may need to allow the hidden Rebel to come forth as a vigilante for justice on his or her own behalf.

The Sweetheart also has shame as the motivating force behind the second boundary, and underneath that shame is the humiliation that he or she cared, that is, made an affective, Child-Child connection that was exploited and turned against him or her. The Sweetheart believes that by withholding caring and honest affective connection, he or she is safe from further abuse. In the primary adaptation, the Sweetheart appears to be cooperative but actually does not allow other people to be real in an attached way, warts and all. Rageful shame explodes when the secondary boundary is reached because, despite all attempts to deny it, the Sweetheart knows that others do matter, and count, and make a difference to him or her. This realization feels humiliating to the Sweetheart because the internal vow was never again to trust the Child-Child connection. The issue of most concern to the Sweetheart is whether the therapist will act impulsively once the affective connection is made and be abusive of the client's trust. Will the therapist be unaware of his or her own feelings and ignore and invade the client's boundaries?

An important concept to communicate to the Sweetheart is that two different feelings or thoughts can be true at the same time. In other words, it is possible to be angry and still care for someone; it is possible to make mistakes and still be reliable; it is possible to have strong feelings without acting on them. Impulsive, acting-out parenting from the Child has left the Sweetheart with little trust in any expression of feelings from another person. In working out a constructive relationship with the Sweetheart, paradox is the key. The therapist will be tested regularly on either/or positions. Shame is covered by anger in the Sweetheart because uncovering the shame means unmasking the fact that the Sweetheart cared for someone who would suddenly change from disinterested to invasive, from placid to violent.

The Sweetheart's ultimate weapon is to reject or ignore the other person. When the therapist becomes committed or attached, the Sweetheart will often reject the therapist's right to have feelings. This is a window of opportunity for trust to be built if the therapist insists that his or her feelings cannot be legislated out of existence and that it is a lie to pretend that as a therapist you must somehow check your own feelings at the door. To pretend to be unaffected by accusations or rejections simply maintains the myth of hierarchy in relationships; that is physically impossible. The therapist can and must agree to acknowledge and be responsible for the expression of those feelings. One client illustrated this belief in the nonfeeling therapist by saying, "Don't care for me, help me!" I agreed to help and care at the same time because that is the way that I am wired. For the Sweetheart, caring and connection has come to equate the catastrophic loss of rights and boundaries.

As the shame from the past is encountered and acknowledged in the present, the client seems to begin to feel satisfied or "full" in the relationship. One representation of this is that as the boundaries around contact need to be less rigid, both the Rebel and the Sweetheart are free to make their inner

Spirit and spiritedness more available in daily encounters and contacts. They allow more space for their own growth while maintaining realistic boundaries that are genuinely protective in the present. Trust for a little child is blind. Trust for adults is something that is informed by knowledge of the self and others, and actualizing this informed trust is what the course of therapy is about. Seeing what is going on, naming and acknowledging it openly, allows for trust that is not blind but is earned and dependable.

To describe the building of trust in relationships, I have proposed five relationship options that are necessary for mutual relationships:

1. You are Me, I am You: This option is about merging and symbiosis and the kind of closeness that is the ideal of romantic love and the healthy bonding of infant and parent. When balanced, it is empathy; when dysfunctional, it is enmeshment and invasion.
2. You or Me: This option establishes boundaries and priorities. In relationships that are balanced, sometimes I come first, and sometimes you come first. Often with dysfunction there is a set priority: Either I always come first or you always come first.
3. You for Me, Me for You: This option allows for giving and receiving, and in balanced relationships, both giving and receiving occur freely and fluidly. In dysfunctional relationships, only one of these options is available: Either I always give or you always give.
4. You with Me, Me with You: This option has to do with leadership. When the relationship is balanced, each person can follow the lead of the other, and the role of leader is passed between the two. When dysfunctional, a person is only a leader or only a follower.
5. You and I: This option has to do with negotiation and sharing from an equal footing. Each person recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of the other without abusing knowledge or power. Each person can risk that his or her subjective experience will be respected and responded to.

A satisfying and enhancing relationship has each of the five options available depending on the context and the stage of the relationship. Both Sweethearts and Rebels fear the merger of "You are Me, I am You" and opt for the either/or solution of "You or Me, Me or You." Steps 3 through 5 ("for," "with," "and") describe a process of learning how to be in contact with another person without either becoming obliterated oneself or subsuming the other person. Steps 3 and 4 ("for," "with") are dealt with in approaching the first line of defense, and Step 5 ("You and I") is what occurs when the shame that prohibits openness is dealt with honestly and healed.

In this paper I have shared a process and series of observations about the function of certain defensive styles in relationships. I have described the steps necessary in making an alliance of trust and some of the barriers to achieving that alliance. The client's resistance is valuable because it is the best guide to the process that she or he requires for opening up and healing old wounds. As the therapist, the most important skill I can offer is to stay in the present with the client and help him or her learn that interactions in the here and now trigger old patterns and from there to begin to make changes.

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