The Permission Wheel

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Abstract
In the 1980s, one of the main figures of transactional analysis in France, Gysa Jaoui, designed an elegant way of graphically representing the main limits of a person’s life script. She called it the “permission wheel” (“la roue des permissions”) because the circular shape of the diagram shows how large or small one’s permission or freedom is in various areas of living. This article describes the concepts underlying the permission wheel and how to use the diagram as one way of understanding clients and planning treatment.

The permission wheel (la roue des permissions) was created by Gysa Jaoui in the 1980s. It shows in graphic form the extent and limits of permissions people have in various areas of their lives. I have found it extremely useful in my practice as a therapist as well as in training other psychotherapists. Gysa died before publishing the idea, so to keep it alive I want to share this material with others.

How It Works
Injunctions hold a central role among transactional analysis concepts for understanding script. The list proposed by Goulding and Goulding (1976) and enriched by various authors (Allen & Allen, 1972; Boyce, 1978; Jaoui, 1980) offers us a sort of shorthand for the restrictions in a person’s life. Among transactional analysts, describing clients in terms of their main injunctions provides a basic grasp of their life issues.

This concept can become cumbersome, however, when viewed in dichotomous terms, as all-or-nothing, something we do or do not have. It then becomes a mind-closing, sterilizing definition or description of a person’s functioning, used to justify closing off possibilities. Passivity is likely to result with this sort of “Wooden Leg” thinking (e.g., “How can you expect me to get that done with my Don’t Succeed injunction?”).

Jaoui preferred a relative view: Rather than “having” an injunction, one is more or less affected by it. She made this particularly obvious with Don’t Exist: As she pointed out, clients who really had a Don’t Exist injunction would never live long enough to make it to our offices! Most of us probably have such a relative conception, actually, since we often describe someone not just as having a Don’t Trust injunction, but rather as having a lot of Don’t Trust. So we can postulate that injunctions function as relative prohibitions, virtually never absolute.

Jaoui also liked to consider situations in positive terms. So, rather than look at how much of an injunction a person carries, she advocated evaluating how much of the corresponding permission he or she has (Jaoui, 1979). Thus, we might have, “She doesn’t have much permission to trust.” A comparable view of permissions and injunctions was proposed by Woollams (1980) with his decision scale, which shows a continuum from full injunction to full permission. However, Woollams’s scale refers mainly to how much stress one can withstand and still maintain the positive decision, whereas Jaoui’s scale can be used to indicate different factors. For instance, if a person has developed more permission to trust, that may include broader circumstances or a larger choice of people now trusted as well as the degree of stress bearable without reverting to the old defense of wariness.

For the sake of simplicity, the consequences of injunctions, counterinjunctions, decisions related or not to trauma, and even genetic vulner-
abilities are not distinguished here. I consider the end result of all these influences, with permissions being more or less restricted.

**How It Looks**

The permission wheel is a series of 10 concentric circles, the first of which represents 10% permission, the second 20%, and so on up to 100% (see Figure 1). The whole circular diagram is cut into four main segments, each of which is divided into 4 or 5 subsegments. Each permission is seen as a slice of the pie chart, more or less extended depending on how free one is in that domain. So, if we imagine the person standing in the center of the chart, he or she can turn and look about, seeing how far his or her freedom extends before being blocked by prohibition (resulting from injunctions, decisions, and/or counterinjunctions). Within those walls, one is safe, in the confines of the “enclos scénarique” (literally, a “script enclosure,” something like a corral or pen, close to the playpen the Gouldings described in their 1976 article on injunctions). If it is big, we have lots of wiggle space in which to live freely. If it is small, our script is very limiting. Beyond those confines lies danger: of being rejected, banned, shamed, judged, unloved—or simply of the unknown.

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**Figure 1**
The Permission Wheel (Jaoui, 1988)
Jaoui (1988) saw these particular messages as grouped into four clusters (quadrants on the diagram shown in Figure 1), with people’s relationship to:

- Their feelings: This relates to how freely, appropriately, and effectively people can express four basic emotions (joy, anger, fear, sadness). At the 100% end of the spectrum, they can do so in relationship and with an impact. Common restrictions include being able to show what they feel only with certain special people or only when they are alone. At the lowest end of the diagram, they may not even know what they are feeling or that they are feeling anything at all.

- Their self: This quadrant has to do with being—existing, to begin with, but also being healthy (physically and mentally), of one’s own gender, being oneself (in the sense of knowing what one likes and wants and accomplishing one’s destiny, as described by Bolas [1989]), and having pleasure, without which we are not really alive.

- Others: This involves our relationships, how much we can trust (judiciously), belong to something greater than ourselves (a family, a country, a political leaning, a professional group, etc.), be close to another and let ourselves be seen and known deeply, and be a child (rely on another, let that person take care of us as needed, awareness of our needs, too).

- The world: This is essentially about our ability to make an impact on our environment, first by growing up appropriately and becoming adults, knowing what is going on versus being blind to the real significance of things (Jaoui, 1980), thinking clearly, and allowing ourselves to succeed in our undertakings.

For each permission, the amount of the pie slice available to the person is assessed, often by client and therapist together, or perhaps by a trainee with a supervisor, or maybe by a therapist wondering. Rather than attempt to explain ratings for all of the permissions, I will illustrate the idea with a client’s story.

**Case Example: Marie**

From the beginning, Marie was funny and sunny. We laughed a good deal together, and she paid attention when I brought up the often defensive nature of her humor. Yet she never really let me in, even though very slowly we did get much closer through the years. She listened, reflected, did lots of homework and organizing of thoughts (too much of that, again as a defense), and remained wary of my some-how gaining control over her should she ever let herself really rely on me. Figure 2 shows Marie’s permission wheel. (The darker shadowing shows her level of permission on beginning psychotherapy; the lighter shows results after the years we worked together.)

A bright, energetic, and successful woman, Marie had high permissions mainly in the “me and the world” quadrant. She had been not only allowed but even pressured to Grow up fast, and like many premature grown-ups, had remained somewhat juvenile, a sort of mature twelve-year-old (70–80%; this means she went from 70 percent at the beginning of therapy to 80% by the end). She had no prohibitions with regard to thinking and loved to use her nimble brain (100% or “open”). And from an early age, she had felt free to see things as they are (Know), often with the eerie ruthlessness of a judgmental child (80–100%). (This latter area refers to what Jaoui [1980] called “the 13th injunction”: “Ne sache pas,” meaning “Don’t know” or “Don’t discover.” This injunction particularly concerns families with secrets or who deny huge problems, such as relatives’ war crimes, incest, alcoholism, and so on. It can be expressed openly, as in, “Ask me again when you’re a grown-up” or “You don’t need to know about that.” Or it can be implied through embarrassed looks and silence, tangential answers, or even outright anger). Marie succeeded in most of her undertakings, with the main limit being on her intimate relationships (70–80%).

Marie’s second biggest quadrant was “me and myself.” She had not been suicidal since adolescence (when she left home), although she felt her permission to Exist would be limited should she become dependent (80–90%). Her health was excellent, but it was jeopardized over the long term by overworking (hugely), overeating (slightly), and underexercising, and she was aware of thus endangering herself (70–80%). She had quite a full permission to
be of her own gender and rather enjoyed being a woman. In traditional views, some might find her energy quite masculine, and she was, indeed, always a decider, even a conqueror, and seldom a follower. There was an increase in this permission (to be her gender) when Marie began to want to have children (80-90%). The permission to be herself was less open. She had chosen her profession partly to impress her father (although she was rather passionate about it), and in her interactions with me, it was often difficult to reach her personal, spontaneous desire or reactions (60-70%). Likewise, allowing herself Pleasure was a mixed bag; one of her strongest pleasures lay in working, which meant she seldom basked in natural, bodily pleasures (50-60%). (The injunction from Goulding and Goulding (1976) Don’t Be You refers mainly to being one’s own gender. However, Jaoui felt that it held two aspects: gender and becoming oneself, following one’s aspirations. That is why there are two smaller sub-quadrants labeled “Self” and “Gender” separated by a dotted line. The two together make up the classical “Being Oneself.”)

Marie’s feelings seemed quite free (she had an expressive face and voice and knew how to convey emotions), but limitations became ap-
parent when she discovered in group how much others could express their feelings and about what. For example, expressing feelings of sadness was quite restricted; she could recall crying as a child, always alone, hidden in her room. In therapy, after a while, she would wrestle inside between the old decision never to show any weakness and the new awareness that letting go in the protected setting of the therapy room could help her. I helped her to shed her tears a bit, but not often (20–60%). However, fear was virtually unknown to her (another vulnerable feeling). She felt it particularly with me any time she was about to show me her private self or, in a sense, to put herself in my hands (20–50%). She was not prone to anger but could show it in a powerful way when it seemed necessary (40–70%). As for joy, that was what she showed most often, but for a long time her mirth was more defensive than an actual feeling (40–80%).

I have left the most problematic quadrant—“me and other people”—for last. This is where I could most easily see Marie’s problems come alive in our relationship. A rational and well-informed person, she had decided to trust me as a professional she had chosen, but this could only go so deep. She trusted that I was trained and competent, not that I could receive her and her deeper self in a decent way. For many years, it seemed terribly dangerous to her to let me see her pain or need; part of her remained convinced that I would abuse this power (30–60%). Marie was not big on Belonging, being part of the “club,” or identifying with her family, her company, her religion, or her country. In group, she was often perceived as being a bit on the outside and was prone to falling asleep during other people’s work (30–60%). Not surprisingly, being close was not a strong suit either, since that would mean showing herself and letting down her defenses. In group, she did become friends with one woman but was rather surprised that it happened (20–70%, with more listening than showing herself). Last-ly, being a child had been shamed early on for this first-born; in group she took on the role of observer, analyzer, or cotherapist more readily than she let others focus on her. And alone with me, it was crucial that I always considered her as an equal partner, not a weak little thing in need of me (40–70%).

Typical Profiles

Personality types tend to go along with typical high or low permissions, although there are no stereotyped profiles for real people. It is more interesting to fill out a person’s wheel and then think about his or her likely diagnosis than to try to fit him or her into a ready-made diagram. What follows are some general tendencies, which might or might not be verified for a given person.

People with paranoid tendencies score very low in the “me and others” quadrant. They hardly trust anyone (or only one person, whom they usually watch like a hawk). They seldom have a sense of belonging, although some may identify with a group (family, religion, profession). They have many limits on being close (even with loved ones, feelings and vulnerability are usually hidden—even from the self—and there is little sharing and listening). And being a child is mostly seen as extremely dangerous, so that position is abandoned as early as possible. The “me and my feelings” quadrant is generally quite reduced as well, except perhaps for anger. Marie was a low-grade example of this profile.

Obsessive-compulsive structures would be fairly similar, with an extended “me and the world” quadrant and a small “feelings” quadrant. Schizoid personalities do not have much permission to feel or show feelings, despite a good deal of (hidden, often unconscious) fear. The “me and others” quadrant is also quite reduced, and the other two are a bit larger (this is often a very limiting personality adaptation). Narcissistic and antisocial personalities also have low permissions in the “me and others” quadrant because it is so dangerous for them to be vulnerable and dependent in any way.

Conversely, hysterical personalities have a well-developed “me and others” quadrant, and most of the feelings are open as well (except for anger, which tends to be covered up by a racket feeling of sadness). The “me and the world” quadrant is the most likely to be limited. Borderline disorders are often quite irregular; for instance, with feelings, they may have a great deal of anger and not much joy. The
“me and myself” quadrant is low (especially being oneself). “Me and others” is mixed (how much belonging and trusting varies wildly, as does being close or being a child). “Me and the world” also reflects such contradictions, since these people tend to have mature areas and immature ones, which results in them thinking well in professional situations and yet losing their thinking in intimate relationships. It is tempting to separate each permission area into subsections to reflect their divided self-functioning.

Naturally, all these tendencies are quite general, and the space allowed is more or less reduced depending on how restrictive the script and personality adaptations are.

**Extending Permissions: How Much and When?**

I agree with Woollams (1980) that when we have been quite limited in any area, we do not gain full permission, even after good therapy, to be/feel/express/do those particular things. We gain increased ability to handle increased stress, yet without reaching that optimal tendency to not even notice stresses and to handle major ones easily. To me it is a bit like having a physical wound: Things can be fairly solidly mended, but the scar tissue is not quite as flexible or alive as natural, healthy skin. Marie-Thérèse Pourtois (personal communication, 23 January 2006) uses the metaphor of a tree: The essence, roots, and big branches do not change. We can trim, water, improve the soil, and nurse the tree to better health, but we do not change it into a different kind of tree or make it into quite the same tree it might have been had it started out with all the best ingredients. Its own unique beauty will bear traces from those early years—often most interesting traces.

One way of characterizing the psychotherapy process is that it increases a person’s permissions. However, I remain uncertain as to how much this can be done. It probably depends on the nature of the limiting circumstances. For instance, with injunctions, it depends on whether they are delivered early on or later, by a terrifying, furious, or crazy parent, or more benignly. It is also worse if natural proclivities coincide with parents’ own problems. Change can also go more or less deep depending on the client’s age on undertaking psychotherapy. One thing seems pretty clear: It is better not to aim first for the smallest areas, thinking, “Aha! That is where the problem lies!” That would be akin to using what Ware (1983) called the “trap door.” Treading there would go so strongly against Parental prohibitions, or so much into unknown territory, that there is likely to be a strong defensive reaction, at best. At worst, a tragic outcome might ensue, as described by Allen and Allen (1998) regarding injunctions with “provisos.” Thus, with Marie, the most dramatic progress was made in the area of allowing herself closeness with chosen others. But it only became a goal for her several years into therapy, and she probably would have quit had I suggested that at the onset.

Most often the lowest permissions will remain the lowest, but all of them will probably be higher after psychotherapy. Trying artificially to extend a weak area makes me think of stretching out a small amount of clay: It may become long, but it will be thin. In any event, psychotherapy was never meant to homogenize people, to make them all at 100% for all permissions! We are all different and will keep lower areas that reflect our personality, and that is fine.

**How Do Permissions Grow in Therapy?**

Although we have a “permission transaction” (Crossman, 1966; revised in Crossman, 2002; Steiner, 1971) in transactional analysis, I believe most of this work is done through the therapeutic relationship. For instance, if a person has learned never to express anger (he or she has a Please driver, or his or her parents would have shunned him or her, or his or her culture frowns on such demonstrations), it will seldom be effective to say, “You have the right to get mad” (the person might panic at having the forbidden emotion labeled outright). It can help, at times, even if the person merely tucks it away in his or her memory for future use. But what will really make anger (or anything else) possible is regular interaction with a person whose attitude and sometimes words express, “I am interested in whatever you might be feeling and why.”

This presents a dilemma for me. Being explicit fits with the contractual approach that is...
characteristic of transactional analysis and suits me personally (as in, “This is what I am doing, is that all right with you and will you cooperate?”). But using a more implicit form of communication, an ulterior transaction of sorts, or even appearing to discount what is going on, can be more effective. For instance, if someone has little permission to show sadness, calling attention to a tear in the eye may cause him or her to cut off the feeling, perhaps in shame. Lankton (2005) expressed this in describing the “psychological level,” which psychotherapists need to remain aware of without necessarily verbalizing the awareness lest the process become blocked and the Child run into hiding. Permissions are often (perhaps most often) gained unconsciously through the unspoken level of communication. That was one of the reasons for my tango workshops (Hawkes, 2003), in which the pretext of a few steps to learn can take attention away from what is happening on an implicit level.

**Relationships and Other Consequences**

It seems to me some people are drawn to partners who are similar, others to partners who are different and complementary. People choose (unconsciously) the comfortable relationship without much novelty or the challenge. The latter holds the potential of affording more growth since the person is invited into unfamiliar territory. Often there is hope that the other’s abilities will somehow rub off and influence the person. But if the differences are too great, or in very prohibited areas, the relationship can become impossible.

Likewise, we may be attracted to jobs, activities, and hobbies that challenge and open us or allow us to remain in our comfort zone. One can only hypothesize about the reasons for such different inclinations: to accept the limitation and live in it as comfortably as possible, or to go against it at all costs. English (1996) offers one perspective with her own drive theory. A person motivated mostly by the quiescent drive will likely prefer to remain within the comfortable known. In contrast, if the expressive drive is most active, the person will tend to seek out adventure, no matter how destabilizing it may be. Of course, that raises the question of why someone has more of one drive than another. English ties this to development, which can then be linked to permissions acquired or not at various stages in childhood. For instance, the expressive drive requires curiosity and feeling safe with the exploration of new situations, which goes with permission to grow up on a foundation of safety within a relationship (permissions to trust, belong, be a child). But I have known people who grew up in unsafe homes and still are drawn to the outside and adventure. There must be more at work here, for instance, a genetic predisposition.

In simple terms, personal inclinations aside, it is largely a matter of degree: challenging a bit is useful, too much challenge risks reinforcing the prohibition. The Child becomes scared or the Parent reacts harshly to that much trespassing. Or else, when people find they cannot rise to the challenge, they are likely to criticize themselves for being unable to be comfortable in that new way of being and wind up shamed or more shut down than before.

**Conclusion**

The permission wheel offers an elegant way of diagramming permissions and summing up a person’s “script enclosure.” It holds many possibilities, which users can expand as they go. In Jaoui’s spirit of permission, one can tailor the wheel to one’s preferences as a therapist, changing wording or adding permissions that one finds relevant for a particular person. Even without actually filling out a chart, I often think of clients’ script restrictions and openings with the image of the largest and smallest areas. It is also interesting to fill out the permission wheel diagram with clients at various times in therapy (in particular around termination, if they want to have a sort of panoramic look at how far they have come). Every time I have explained it to other therapists, they too have been enthusiastic about this simple, yet sophisticated tool.

Gysa Jaoui taught this material generously, handing out copies of the diagram to trainees and colleagues, yet never expecting them to follow her ideas in particular. Her aim was always to open up thinking, just as the wheel symbolizes the possible opening up of permission areas.
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REFERENCES