



states of

EQUILIBRIUM

John Burton, EdD

States of Equilibrium

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Introduction

The Nature of Equilibrium

The dark gray cloud with hues of blue, green and yellow extends in a funnel to the ground, forming a tornado. The spiraling clouds and accompanying torrents of rain within a hurricane move across the ocean onto land, drenching the countryside.

What do these and other acts of nature have in common? They each illustrate nature's innate drive for equilibrium. The tornado funnel provides a pathway for heavier cold air to travel down and take its proper place below while the lighter warm air that was trapped beneath spirals upward. One theory about hurricanes holds that these storms take water from a source where it is plentiful and move it to a location where it is in short supply, restoring greater balance.

In these cases and throughout nature, forces work to create and sustain equilibrium. And since humans are part of nature, we also strive to achieve and maintain equilibrium. This book presents a theory of human personality, that we are driven to achieve and maintain emotional equilibrium.

Equilibrium, as the concept is used here, refers to states of mind at a balance point on a continuum rather than states at an extreme. Equilibrium states include those such as assertiveness rather than the extremes of passivity or aggression. Another example of equilibrium is the state of care versus obsession or indifference. "Interdependent" represents equilibrium on another continuum while "very dependent" and "very independent" represent a loss of equilibrium. Equilibrium is also achieved when a person acts as an ambivert, socially flexible. The person who acts as a pure introvert or extrovert does not reach this balance point. Many states of mind exist within each of us. The states that occupy the midrange on a continuum I refer to as states of equilibrium. Equilibrium states allow flexibility, foresight and patience, which in turn allow a more effective response.

But, more than just existing and generally being more effective, we have a compelling attraction to these states of equilibrium. They are a sort of psychological gravity. Though we may draw on and use states outside the equilibrium range, we are driven to return to center. We start our life free to utilize these balanced states and strive to keep using them. If we experience emotional pain while in a state of equilibrium we shift away from this state to survive the emotional pain associated with the state. All the while our unconscious, instinctive drive is to return to living from these states. How do we come to leave the balanced states and can we overcome the restrictions?

The central concept in this book is that the human personality is organized around achieving states of equilibrium. This drive for balance has been known for some time as it applies to our physiological states, such as body temperature, blood sugar, and heart rate (Cofer and Appley, 1964). The drive theory was originally used to describe the process of our natural drive for physiological equilibrium. I believe this drive for equilibrium can also rightly be applied to our mental states, providing new understandings about how our personality develops and operates. We will also find how personality can evolve by choice to restore equilibrium. In this book I will identify and describe the factors that influence our drive for equilibrium. Four factors combine to determine whether we do or do not function from equilibrium:

1. The existence of mental states within us—we each possess a wide variety of states of mind that operate with certain predictable dynamics;
2. Accessing and utilizing any given state of mind—our willingness to access these equilibrium states freely;
3. Our level of human development;
4. Our cognitive style of processing sensory information.

The concept of mental state will be used very often through this book. By “state” I mean a particular mental or emotional condition such as confusion, curiosity, frustration, relief, or joy. Hundreds of states exist. Each state contains perception, beliefs, emotions, and behavioral responses. We perceive, think, feel, and act one way from a state of discouragement, while very different contents make up the state of joy. States may have a common

name we all use, such as discouragement or joy, but the way the state is represented in each person is unique. States also play a crucial role in one's personality. After all, these states of mind make up our personality. We may be seen as outgoing, shy, aloof or a leader. These states, or whichever ones we display most often, come to be known as our personality.

States exist in three general forms: primary states, Meta-States^R (Hall, 1995, 2000), and gestalt states. Primary states are states of being about an event we directly experience or observe. They include anger, fear, sadness, and joy. Hundreds of primary states exist. A person may feel angry when his friend stands him up for a lunch date. On the other hand he may feel curious, relieved, or even worried by the snub. The state chosen depends greatly on how the person perceives the event. In general, primary states refer to some external event but do include physical sensations.

Meta-States^R are states of mind about another state of mind within us. Meta-States^R are how we feel about our feelings or what we think about our thoughts. After first feeling angry over his friend's standing him up, he may then move to feeling guilty about his anger. In this case, guilt serves as a meta-state. Any state can exist as either a primary state or meta-state. The difference is whether the state is about an event (primary) or about another state of consciousness within the person (meta).

Meta-States^R can continue nearly infinitely—the process is known as *reflexive thinking*. A person could feel angry and then guilty about his anger. He could then take the meta-state process a step further and feel disgusted about feeling guilty about his initial anger. Maybe he believes he has good reason to be angry about his friend's behavior. After all, this friend stood him up the last two times they'd arranged to meet for lunch. This thinking may lead to a meta-state of feeling justified about his initial anger. The key point is that this layering of meta-states can go on almost endlessly.

Gestalt states represent the third type of state and refer to a sort of super state that consists of several other states. Gestalt states very often turn up in the process of helping clients reach a more effective state. For example, when one is working with a client to help

her to ascend her meta-states, she may step into a state she calls "euphoria". Now, for her, this state may consist of several other states such as confidence, calmness, happiness, and strength. You can identify a gestalt state by asking the person to name the state she finds when she combines the previously named states of confidence, calmness, happiness, and strength.

Gestalt states exist in resourceful styles but also as severely limiting types. A person who despises himself may be operating from a gestalt state of despising himself. This state may be made up of other states that include disgust, irritation, incompetence, and several others.

States of mind, primary and meta, operate by certain principles. The first, as we have just illustrated, is that meta-states can go on indefinitely in layers. The second principle is that we each choose, consciously or unconsciously, our own states to experience in life. Third, each meta-state serves to override and dominate any states beneath them. Each time we experience a state of mind and then go out of it to associate into another, the second state will modify or change the original state. The highest meta-state into which the person associates serves as the state from which the person thinks, feels, and behaves. As Gregory Bateson put it (1972), higher states of consciousness always moderate those states beneath them.

We each choose our own states to experience in life.

But how do we end up with the states that we utilize, be they primary or meta-states? Theories of human ego development and cognitive development provide a way of understanding various age-related influences on using or avoiding these states of equilibrium. Developmental levels and cognitive processes act as filters, giving meaning to any life experience, even if the meaning and resulting state limits the person.

When we combine ego-development theories and cognitive development theories and their interaction with our states, a new model of human personality emerges. This model suggests that a person's state utilization determines personality and overall mental health. While we always strive for equilibrium, the states we utilize are determined by which states we perceive as being safe

or unsafe to utilize. Of more significance toward mental health is that a person can overcome an aversion to any given state, choosing states that allow the most resourceful response to any given situation, the ultimate equilibrium.

Chapter Five

The Second Half of Development

In addition to an examination of Loevinger's theory at stage four, we will also look further in this chapter at Erikson's theories, and introduce some other developmental theorists and their concepts about human development.

Loevinger's theory, stage four

Loevinger (1976) calls the phase of development at the age of about nine or ten as the "conformist stage". Once again, the cornerstone emotion known as trust plays a crucial role in successfully negotiating this stage. The trust challenge in this case revolves around people outside the family. However, to reach the conclusion that others are trustworthy, children first have to determine whether their own family is trustworthy. Loevinger states that in healthy families children receive special status. This special status encourages children to decide that others can be trusted to treat them well. Parents doting on the child help to establish this generalization.

The conformist stage is characterized by black and white thinking about rules and the crucial decisions made during this stage. Loevinger believes that, during this age, the child can now consider thoughts about both his own welfare and the welfare of others. It is no longer an either or perspective. Complying with rules occupies this stage. Where the previous stage may have been typified by the sentiment, "How can I please myself?", this phase may have as its theme, "How can I please you?"

Acceptance into the peer group outside the family becomes of highest importance. Obeying group's and society's rules is done

At the upper levels of development, we use our highest purpose as a driving force, so that comparisons involve the individual and his movement toward his purpose.

Each developmental stage replays later in life within different content. This stage of industry versus inferiority plays out each time we start a new task. Early on we test our beliefs in our ability to learn. We use our sense of industry to reach higher levels of accomplishment. We also tend to compare ourselves to others as we pursue our goals. Only at the highest levels of development do comparisons with others stop.

The roots of a workaholic?

It may be at this industry-versus-inferiority stage that the child first develops an affinity for or an aversion to the state we will call “satisfied” or “content”. When effectively accomplishing a task, she may receive excessive criticism from a parent or significant other. The parent may point out only the part of the performance that came up short of perfection. Or the parent may silently withhold all judgment. This latter method often makes for an *obsessive-compulsive* person, driven to endless empty accomplishments. The child gets the impression that whatever she achieves it is never quite enough to get approval. As a result, she feels it is no longer safe to occupy the state known as “satisfied” or “content”. Competence comes to equal failure. From that point she may increase or decrease her productivity.

The workaholic person may fear the state of “satisfied” or “content” as it stands for failure due to parental judgement.

Therefore, the child believes she must achieve beyond a level of competence in order to avoid failure. The bar has been continually and excessively raised. Anything less than extreme productivity is nothing short of incompetence. And the moment extreme productivity is reached she must go beyond this or feel like a failure. Black and white thinking, as we can see, limits choice.

Little wonder the workaholic comes to dislike the person who finds ways to not work or drop out of society. This dropout person

is his shadow. The dropout and the workaholic embody each other's worst fears, yet both are reacting to the very same internal conflict. They just choose the opposite way to respond to the problem. In general, the same root issue can have two opposite manifestations.

Interestingly, the same behavior can also have two opposite roots. Think about a person who is highly successful. This person may have two very different motivations at work: one may be to strive for success to avoid deeply rooted fears about competence—fearing failure, another may be to strive for success in order to utilize skills and find just how much can be achieved.

Interestingly, the same behavior can also have two opposite roots.

How can you tell the difference between the two very different motives with similar outward manifestations? One difference shows in the reaction to success. The fear-based person finds no joy in success: "So what? You were *supposed* to succeed. Anything less is incompetent." The achievement-oriented person finds great joy in success. Another difference may come in the form of who benefits from the success. The fear-based person often designs her effort for self-gain. The achievement-oriented person more often designs her efforts for *all* to gain. Notice the two different developmental levels at work: the fearful one works from a self-protective level, the achievement one works from a conscientious level or higher.

To help us to understand better the way this single issue has two ways of manifesting, think about a person who used to work in a very productive way. She gradually drops out of society and is no longer a productive member. This dropping out may just result from a particular behavioral strategy. When a person who uses a style that tries to avoid mistakes makes a mistake, she maybe just attempts to do less the next time to avoid additional criticism. Is it possible that even those who are injured on the job and can't seem to recover sufficiently to work again are actually just displaying this strategy? I agree that some people do malingering, but this is a very small proportion of the population, less than 5 percent. The legitimately injured person may view her injury as just another

In *States of Equilibrium*, John Burton makes a significant contribution to our understandings of the psychology of human learning and development and the structure of personality. In a scholarly and engaging manner Burton integrates the major schools of psychological thought—psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, humanism, and behaviorism—to present a unified theory of personality development and personality disorders. He helps even lay readers to understand the developmental antecedents and underlying dynamics of depression, anxiety, obsessions, and pessimism, as well as those traits that comprise optimism, hope, inner peace, and resilience. He makes excellent use of metaphor and case studies to promote clarity and understanding. His is a coherent theory about how we evolve as conscious beings exercising free will over our emotions. This is a book that should be included in every university psychology curriculum in ‘theories of personality’ courses.

Judith E Pearson, PhD

John has done it again! With his background in Developmental Psychology, he has used Meta-States to write a book that integrates in a most extensive way the best of Piaget, drive theory, Kohlberg, Maslow, Rogers, Skinner, Erickson, Jung, and Cognitive-Behavioral therapy to create one of the most extensive descriptions and applications of Meta-States as applied to personality, therapy, and change. It is the most extensive presentation of Meta-States outside of anything I’ve written. And it offers numerous new applications of Meta-States, applications new to me!

If you are a therapist, this is a must read. This book makes an excellent follow-up to *The Structure of Personality: Personality Ordering and Disorder with NLP and Neuro-Semantics (2000)* that I wrote a couple of years ago with Bob Bodenhamer, Richard Bolstad and Margott Hamblett. John has filled the book with case studies and lots of practical suggestions. For therapists you will find fascinating descriptions and case studies around addiction, learning dysfunctions, obsessive-compulsive states, depression, fight/flight responses, anxiety, fear, and much, much more. John’s analysis of fear is absolutely brilliant.

It’s a must read for anyone who coaches people, that is, facilitates bringing out the best in people.

Are you interested in balance, focus, mental and emotional health, emotional intelligence, running your own brain, eliminating stuck and limited states, getting on top of anything internal that might sabotage you? Get *States of Equilibrium*!

L Michael Hall, PhD

Psychotherapy



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