

# Injunctions – An Essay

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## Definitions & Diagrams

Berne (1972) wrote that an injunction was a “prohibition or negative command from a parent”, and diagrammed injunctions as coming from Parent in the Child of the parents to Parent in the Child of the Child.

Holtby (1973) pointed out that Berne (1972) had referred to Laing, and suggested that three of Laing’s works were particularly significant (Laing 1961, 1971, Laing & Esterson 1964) because Laing had used the term injunction. Holtby explained that Laing had written of injunctions as coming from attributions; telling a child what he or she is, is much more powerful than telling what to not do. Thus, a Don’t Think injunction might be interpreted from being told we are stupid, or too clever. In this article, Holtby showed an attribution from the C of the parents to AC in the child, being converted into an injunction in PC.

Goulding (1972) also wrote of it coming from a parent, and of it being implanted by strokes, although he also said the child must agree and obey it for it to have any power.

Goulding & Goulding (1976) later clarified that injunctions were “not placed into people’s heads like electrodes” (p.42) but were linked to decisions made by the Little Professor (A1) “even without an injunction from outside. The Child, in this case, creates both the injunction and the decision.” (p.42).

Holtby (1976) challenged the implication that the parents put the injunction into the child, and proposed that we consider it instead as an internal transaction between the Parent, Adult and Child in the Child of the Child. He diagrammed it as ‘Raw Parent Data’ transmitted from PC in each parent to AC in the child, and then showed ‘Needs Data’ from CC to AC and ‘Interpretation of data into an injunction’ from AC to PC. He also explained that A2/Adult was Aristotelean thought processes (A is always A, never B) whereas A1/AC uses paleological thought processes (B may be A, provided B has a quality of A). He gives as an example of paleological thinking: “The Virgin Mary was a virgin; I am a virgin, therefore I am the Virgin Mary” Arieti (1974) (p.375).

Later, Goulding & Goulding (1979) defined an injunction as “messages from the Child Ego State of Parents, given out of the parents’ own pains, unhappiness, anxiety, disappointment, anger, frustration, secret desires.” (p.34).

McNeel (2010) summarised his six previous articles (McNeel 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, and 2 unpublished manuscripts) and suggested injunctions be renamed as injunctive messages, which he defined as “messages emanating from parental figures, often outside their awareness, that are negative in content, often delivered in a context of prohibition, and defeating to the natural life urges of existence, attachment, identity, competence and security.” (p.159). Injunctive message was chosen to imply an ongoing effect, unlike legal injunctions which McNeel pointed out only apply until they are revoked.

## Various Lists and Categorisations

Probably the most referenced material on injunctions is that of Goulding & Goulding (1976), in which they presented a list of 12 (punctuated in original as if 14) injunctions: “Don’t be; Don’t be you (the sex you are); Don’t be a child; Don’t grow; Don’t make it; Don’t; Don’t be important; Don’t be close; Don’t belong; Don’t be well (or sane); Don’t think (don’t think about X forbidden subject); don’t think what you think, think what I think; Don’t feel (don’t feel X (mad, sad, glad, etc.); Don’t feel what you feel, feel what I feel.” They explained that this was an update, and not much changed, from earlier lists they had started developing in 1966 when they had realised they kept hearing the same few examples from clients. For instance, Goulding (1972) had listed 13, which excluded Don’t be You, separated Don’t be well and Don’t be Sane, and included Don’t Enjoy.

Two years before the Gouldings list of 12 appeared, Hartman & Narboe (1974) proposed that there are only two *catastrophic* injunctions – Don’t be and Don’t be Normal – and that the other eight (of the 10 at that time described by Goulding 1972) were *specific* injunctions that offered alternative ways of sidestepping the catastrophic injunctions. They commented that “the relationship between catastrophic injunctions and specific injunctions parallels the relationship between injunctions and counter-injunctions.” (p.11). They warned that resisting counterinjunctions could flip clients into injunctions and stressed the need to deal with the catastrophic injunctions before working on any of the specific injunctions.

McNeel (2010) proposed that there are many more than 12 injunctions and used the natural life urges above as a classification system; he also proposed that the child makes two decisions – a despairing and a defiant one. “The despairing decision represents the conclusion by the child faced with an injunctive message that something is wrong with him or her. The defiant decision is the child’s best attempt at health, a creative way to resist the injunctive message and master the circumstances.” (p.160). Thus, coping behaviours emanate from the defiant decision, are doomed to fail because they are extremes that are impossible to achieve, and can be observed and hence indicate the particular injunctive messages.

McNeel provided several detailed tables of the five categories, showing the injunctive message, the two decisions, the coping behaviour, redecision needed, resolving activity to strengthen the redecision, and the parental stance that heals plus self diagnostic and protective responses. The table overleaf contains a summary of his material, showing category, injunctive message, decisions and responses.

Costello (1976), writing in the same Transactional Analysis Journal issue as the Gouldings’ cited above, also addressed the number of injunctions, as well as questioning the nature of them. He referred to Capers (at a workshop in 1975) proposing key injunctions related to the OK-Corral (Ernst 1971), with: I’m Not OK – You’re Not OK as Don’t Be; I’m Not OK – You’re OK as Don’t Think; I’m OK, You’re Not OK as Don’t Feel. Costello also commented that Don’t Be can be understood as Don’t Exist, or Die, or Don’t Live, with the latter referring only to not enjoying life so equivalent to Don’t Be Normal.

Costello went on to suggest that the most malevolent injunction is Don’t Be (Don’t Exist), with three second level injunctions of Don’t Think, Don’t Feel and Don’t Act (Don’t Do) which run as themes through all other injunctions. He then related these to the Goulding & Goulding list (tentatively) and suggested that his items might be viewed as means and theirs as ends. Finally, he visualised personality as a wheel, which must be well balanced to be functional. He put ‘Act, Feel and Think’ in the centre,

Summary Table based on McNeel (2010)

Injunctive Message	Despairing Decision (what person fears to be the truth)	Defiant Decision (best attempt at health)	Bitter (Self-destructive) Response	Healing (Self protective) Response
<b>Category: Survival</b>				
Don't Exist	I should go away	I will stay here and you won't break me or defeat me	Deep in my heart I hate my life (look what a mess it is)	I know my life is precious and I cherish it
Don't Be Well (don't take care of yourself)	No one ever pays attention to me	I have to be strong	I look tired and exhausted (but don't allow others to take care of me)	There is time for me in my life, and I do what is healthy for me
Don't Trust	I'm terrified and defenceless	I only trust me	Often I feel I am betrayed	I have safe people and places in my life
Don't Be Sane	There is no help in the world (for my feelings of craziness)	I'll be supernormal	Parents (parental figures) make (have made) me feel crazy	I feel love for me and forgiveness for them (parental figures)
Don't Be Important	I'm worthless	I'll be great, bigger than life	I feel I must respond to everything (and with equal energy)	I know to whom I matter and what matters in my life
<b>Category: Attachment</b>				
Don't Be Close	I'm abandoned (and I'll wait your return)	I'll find it (perfect love) out there	In relationships I am watchful and try to leave (physically and/or emotionally) before others leave me	Instead of trying to be invulnerable, I let people love me
Don't Feel Attached	I don't exist (in relation to anyone)	I won't be denied (whatever/whomever I seek)	If I am honest with myself, I know I withhold compassion and understanding	I am protective of the people who have true affection for me (especially myself)
Don't Belong	I can't show how much I care	I don't care (about others)	I feel as if no one likes me	I surround myself with people I love very much
Don't Be A Child	There is no one (I can depend on)	I don't need anyone	I'm always the caretaker, not the one cared for	I am so thankful for those on whom I can depend
Don't Want	I always try to please (but I never can)	I won't want anything from my heart	I give up easily (and adapt to the desires of others)	I am clear: My yes is yet and my no is no, and I am deeply loyal to myself and my principles
Don't Invest	No love is unconditional	I'll keep my distance (from people)	I don't know of anyone for whom I would be willing to die	I would be bereft beyond words if I were to lose certain people
<b>Category: Identity</b>				
Don't Be You	Someone important doesn't like me	I'll be perfect	I fear being exposed as an imposter	I'm fascinated to be discovering myself, warts, gifts and all
Don't Be Separate	I'm not supposed to have a persona of my own	I'll be careful to be just what you want (I'll make <i>you</i> OK)	I feel I exist in the opinions of others and try my best to create a pleasing image	I'm curious to know my own thoughts and values as opposed to those of others

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<b>Category: Identity - continued</b>				
Don't Be Visible	I'm ashamed of me (or my family)	I'll hide in plain sight	Other people don't really know me at all (only my public self)	I allow others to see my private (vulnerable) self and know I am worthy of this attention
Don't (be engaged in your own life)	Whatever I do seems wrong	I won't move until it (the world) feels safe	There are many things in life I won't do (but would like to do)	Characteristically, if something makes me anxious (but is actually safe), I do it
<b>Category: Competence</b>				
Don't Make It	I'm sorry (guilty) and I'm not good enough	I'll show you and I'll prove myself better than everyone else (arrogant)	(Secretly) I feel a failure about my life	It's remarkable how much I've achieved
Don't Grow Up	I don't know what to do	I have to fend for myself in the world	While growing up, no one told me (or showed me) what to do	There are many people I admire and from whom I continue to learn
Don't Think	I'm not very smart and feel inferior (ignorant)	I can/must impose my beliefs on others (be dominant)	My way is (and has to be) the only right way, for I possess the truth	Change is inevitable (including my view of life) and ambiguity is my friend
Don't Feel Successful	I always feel blamed	I must take care of (fix) everyone (and everything)	If only I had been different or done differently, I wouldn't feel so burdened by regret	I love the effort I put into my life
<b>Category: Security</b>				
Don't Enjoy	I feel empty	I'll do more than everyone (and become legend)	I comfort myself with being busy and often in a hurry toward the future	When alone I enjoy my own company (without chemical assistance or hectic activity)
Don't Be Thankful	I (we) have nothing	I'll have everything	It is difficult for me to reflect on what may be my blessings	I am thankful for what is in my life, especially what I may have taken for granted
Don't Feel	No one cares (what I feel)	I will defend myself (by hiding my feelings)	I feel envious of those who are well cared for	I am well cared for
Don't Relax (don't feel safe)	I'm overwhelmed and afraid	I must be vigilant (to keep bad things from happening)	I strive to be constantly proactive (to never fail, let down, or allow bad things to happen)	I know suffering is part of life and so is being comforted
Don't Share Your Life	There is something wrong with (inferior about) me	I'll emphasize and/or enact my vast superiority	I tend to feel either inferior or superior to others and often superior	I feel a common humanity with people
Don't Touch	There is no protection in the world	I'll be bullet proof	I feel proud of the harshness I endured during my childhood	I feel great empathy for my young self

with segments for 'Act', 'Feel', 'Think' and between them 'Act and Feel', 'Think and Feel', and 'Act and Think'. This might have been better visualised as three main spokes that operate in unison.

Two authors have addressed the way in which injunctions can seem to be positive messages. Boulton (1977) wrote of Witch Messages masquerading as Nurturing Parent, such as when a parent encourages children to be overly reliant on being cared for. She suggests that such messages can be identified because: they don't solve the child's problem; remembered sympathy causes discomfort; and the message prohibits normal functioning. Examples are how men are treated like children when they are sick, and women continue their work even when they are sick.

Alden (1988) writes of the concept of *gossamer injunctions* (a term she attributes to McNeel but does not reference) suggesting that injunctions and permissions are not opposites but lie on a continuum (Woollams 1979) within which some so-called positive messages are actually concealed constraints. Thus, gossamer injunctions come from a place of well-meaning but become disguised injunctions, such as the happy racket where a client who recalls her parents wanting her to be happy has become caught in an injunction of Don't Be Unhappy as a variant of Don't Feel. Alden illustrates a number of sequences, such as from Don't Exist – injunction, live – permission, Don't Die – gossamer, don't do anything dangerous – deeper gossamer, Don't – inherent injunction. Other examples are: find a mate – don't be alone; be proud of your sex, race, etc – don't try to be anything else; be cute, cuddly, etc – don't act older than your age; do the best you can – don't do anything if you can't do it well.

### **Working with Injunctions**

Holtby (1974) gave an example of how he had charted the sequence of parental injunctions, precipitating events, through to outcome and hence reaffirming parental attributions and predictions. Thus several injunctions were triggered for the client by a mix of coinciding stressful events, leading to not OK feelings, and hence through anger to depression to drinking to argument with wife, into psychotic break and self destructive behaviour that was similar to his father's behaviour and resulted in the client being hospitalised.

Cole (1993) linked injunctions to chronic back pain, describing how Don't Be, Don't Make It, Don't Grow Up and Don't Be Well can produce behaviours that may be perceived as malingering, and how Don't Feel (what you feel) and Don't Be a Child may greatly increase the stress.

McClendon & Kadis (1994) propose that the power of injunctions is created through shame affect (Tomkins 1962, 1963, 1991) where 'shame' refers to disruption of a positive state and not as commonly associated to being shamed. They describe the four defensive patterns (Nathanson 1992) of withdrawal, attack self, attack other, and avoidance (as in suppress awareness). Hence, they recommend addressing the defensive pattern so the client can redecide.

Ramond (1994) suggests an additional injunction – Don't Change – as the basis for a script that prevents the children of immigrant families from integrating into the culture when they are the first generation born in a host country. This might be considered as a form of gossamer injunction, with an apparently positive maintenance of culture of the parents' origin leading to an 'inability' to integrate.

Lammers (1994) reviews previous literature on injunctions and suggests a geometric model adapted from Groder's (1977) octahedron. This has a vertical I–Thou (Buber 1947/1758) axis with Identity at the top and Relationships at the base. This axis is intersected by a horizontal contact plane which is how the

person meets the world. This contact plane has four corners: perceptions, of the world through the senses; cognitions, as hypotheses on the basis of earlier experiences; emotions, as how we react and engage; and behaviours. For healthy functioning, all are in balance so a diamond shape is created within the diagram; unhealthy functioning is represented by a skewed shape. Lammers links Ware's (1983) doors to the points on the contact plane (i.e. thinking, feeling, behaviour) and also suggests the I-Thou axis is related to individuality versus social life.

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