

## **"Transactional Analysis - What, Where and Who". Psychotherapy in Australia. May, 2002. Page 62 - 64.**

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### **WHERE IT CAME FROM**

Transactional Analysis like many other psychotherapies originated in that mecca of the therapy world, California, USA. It seems that with the dawn of spring each year a new plethora of psychotherapies emerge to take on the world. Some are variations on the preexisting traditional therapies, some are non-traditional and some are just outright unconventional and odd.

Most it seems do not last long and pass by. Perhaps more accurately psychotherapists pick up good bits and pieces from this ever running stream of new therapies and then apply them in the style of psychotherapy in which they are proficient.

Transactional Analysis has however been one of the exceptions to the rule. It has stood the test of time. Developed by Eric Berne in 1957 it remains strong today with world wide membership to either the International Transactional Analysis Association or other similar associations in " Europe, Australia or South America.

Its introduction to the wider community rather than just the professional community came about with Berne's (1964) book "Games People Play", which was on the best seller list for some long period of time in 1964. In fact it set a record for staying on the bestseller list longer than any other nonfictional work in the 1960's

### **THE MAN BEHIND TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS**

A common observation in psychotherapy is that psychotherapists tend to specialize in areas that are their own issues. Paranoid therapists tend to work with paranoid clients, ex-drug addicts tend to work with addicts, those who have been sexually abused can end up working with sexually abused clients.

When we have individuals such as Eric Berne who create a new system of psychotherapy and personality theory it often reflects their own issues. The most comprehensive biography written so far on Eric Berne is titled 'Eric Berne; Master Gamesman', (Jorgensen & Jorgensen(1984)). This is a book about a man who wrote a book about the games people play. From this biography it becomes apparent that he played games at a masterful level at times. His first wife is reported to have said: "...of all the people she ever knew 'Eric was the game player to end all [players].'"[Pxii]

Another reason for the development of Transactional Analysis may come

from Berne's interest in intimacy. Intimacy in this sense means a closeness and an emotional sharing at a deep level. One of Berne's original 'inner circle', a man called Claude Steiner(1974) says, "Berne believed that intimacy was a generally unattainable state, and...[people] could consider themselves lucky if they experienced 15 minutes of intimacy in their lifetimes." [P18]. So here we have a man who created a theory and psychotherapeutic system which allowed many many others to achieve intimacy whilst apparently having a great deal of difficulty with it himself. Indeed he is reported to have said just before his fatal heart attack in 1970. "You'd know, I've spent my whole life teaching people how to achieve intimacy, and I've never been able to get any for myself".

## EFFECTS BERNE HAD ON PSYCHOTHERAPY

Berne 'campaigned' for patient power. In his training and practice as a psychiatrist at various hospitals and in private practice he used the traditional medical model. That is; the patient is sick, the patient comes to the doctor for treatment, the doctor diagnoses the patient and treats him and he gets better. In this way the patient is left out of the equation particularly when the 'sickness' is psychological. It is the doctor who decides what is wrong and what the treatment will be. The patient is not consulted.

Berne reacted against this in a number of ways. Firstly he presented the idea of I'm OK, You're OK. What this meant was that the patient in treatment is just as important and responsible as the doctor. So the doctor [psychotherapist] and patient [client] would decide together if there was a problem and if so what it was. It was a mutually agreed on process. Thus the client had more power in the process

Secondly, he had a particular way of training young psychiatrists. He would have a set up where he would conduct group therapy using Transactional Analysis with the clients on an inside circle. Another outside circle would be made up of the psychotherapists watching him work. At the end of the group the psychotherapists and clients would switch circles. The psychotherapists would sit in the inside circle and question Berne for supervision and the clients would observe them from the outside circle. In other words there were no secrets or a sense of them and us where the psychotherapists had secret information on the client. The playing field is leveled out more. He disliked the idea of case conferences where the psychologist, social worker, psychiatrist and physician would get together, discuss the client and talk about him whilst he were not there and decide what is best for him.

Related to this point was his use of language. Berne was a master at stating the complex in an obvious and appealing way. The language he created is very user friendly. He did to complex psychological constructs what the Apple Macintosh did to computing.

Concepts like Parent, Adult, Child, trading stamps, I'm OK, You're OK, life script, positive and negative strokes have instant appeal and relevance to the

uninitiated public. Transactional Analysis is very user friendly and in my opinion this is one of the principle reasons for its survival over the years.

One of Berne's reasons for doing this was to demystify psychotherapy and allow the client to become an active participant in his treatment. Whilst he remained a strong supporter of psychoanalysis his entire life he did have difficulty with the language and concepts used. He apparently felt one needed a university degree to understand such things as the Oedipus complex, Polymorphous Perversity, Libido and so forth. This puts a boundary between client and therapist. The psychotherapist has special knowledge and about the client that the client cannot understand. Berne set about changing this so that the client could understand what psychotherapists were talking about

Following on from this is the next assumption that Berne made and that was that people could determine their own destiny and change their lives. This of course put him at odds with some of his psychiatric colleagues who saw psychological illness in purely biochemical terms. This is obviously an optimistic outlook on Berne's behalf. And he states that all people are born OK and basically good.

However, he like Freud saw the dark side of the human nature. That is we all have a life instinct and a death instinct or constructive and destructive sides. This led to some inconsistencies in Berne's writings. At times he viewed people and the human race optimistically but at other times he was less optimistic. This is probably better reflected in his last chapter of "Games People Play" where he summarizes how many people spend much of their lives playing these painful games rather than engaging in emotional intimacy. As a result in his last sentence he states: "This may mean that there is no hope for the human race, but there is hope for individual members of it"[P184].

Berne also searched for the idea of cure. He had great difficulty with the concept of 'making progress' which is another point at which he saw himself depart from psychoanalysis. He wanted to shorten treatment down instead of the endless years of continuous treatment. So he developed another cornerstone of Transactional Analysis which is the contract. This is a statement by the client which is clear in its behavioral and observable goals. Similar to goals that are set in cognitive-behavioural therapy but more flexible. The advantage of this is the client and the therapist know when they have cured that part or 'bit'. Making progress has the disadvantage of being able to go on for ever. In this sense Transactional Analysis has similarities to cognitive-behavioural therapy, and yet in many ways Transactional Analysis has similarities to psychoanalysis. For example the super ego, ego and id with the Parent, Adult and Child ego states, the unconscious, repetition compulsion With games and the life script. Transactional Analysis in some ways bridges that gap between the structured and at times rigid quality of behaviorism with the flexibility and at times nebulous quality of psychoanalysis

To summarize Berne wanted the playing field of psychotherapy to be

evened up. He believed that for too long psychotherapists had held too much power in the therapeutic relationship. By a variety of means, some of which are mentioned above he endeavored to alter this such that clients became more responsible for their psychotherapy and own destinies.

### TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS IS SIMPLISTIC ?

Humans and their personalities are not simple. Indeed one could say that they are very complex, multidimensional and amazingly intertwined with their various bits and pieces. Eric Berne presented a theory of this very complex thing in a user friendly, easily understandable and pragmatic way. This has led to the criticism that Transactional Analysis is too simple. This criticism is both correct and incorrect .

A story is told about Eric Berne taking a flight from San Francisco to New York one day. On this flight he sat next to a man and they began talking. The stranger finally asked Berne what he did and Berne mentioned Transactional Analysis to which the stranger replied: "Oh yes, I know all about that - I'm OK, You're OK". Berne responded with the question as to what the stranger did, to which he was told that he was an astronomer. Berne replied: "Oh yes, I know all about that - Twinkle, twinkle little star". Many have just read *Games People Play* and believe they know Transactional Analysis. For some reason this seems more than for other psychotherapeutic approaches.

Transactional Analysis is simple in the basic understanding of its theoretical constructs. This quite clearly is misrepresenting human behavior and personality in the way that the cognitive-behavioural approach does. However Berne trained extensively in psychoanalysis and remained loyal to it for his lifetime. So there is an inherent complexity in the theory in the same way as there is in psychoanalysis. This has particularly become evident since 1984 when the Transactional Analysis Journal began examining Transactional Analysis and its connections to the more complicated theories of where Berne came from. For example, recent writings have noted that to understand Transactional Analysis in a real sense one must have the understanding of ego psychology and object relations theories, the intrapsychic phenomenological interests of Federn and the social-developmental emphases of Erikson: [Clarkson(1992)]. Hardly simple constructs like "Twinkle, twinkle little star".

This new approach to Transactional Analysis over the past 15 years has added an extra and positive dimension to Transactional Analysis. To see the personality as just three parts - Parent, Adult and Child - is simplistic theoretically, but most useful clinically. Now there exists a more comprehensive and complicated theoretical explanation of human personality within Transactional Analysis. Whilst harder to understand is probably more accurate in its representation of what we are.

It should be noted however that in doing this, the 'intellectuals' in the movement who subscribe to this integrated approach to Transactional Analysis

have brought politics into the debate in Transactional Analysis circles. This has been most unfortunate as there is now considerable conjecture from both sides - the integrated Adult side and the three ego state model side. Whilst the theoretical arguments contain a good deal of huff and puff and have other agendas of power and control, I think the debate is good. It is leading to more discussion about theory and thus leads to the advancement of that theory. So whilst the client is sidelined somewhat in the current ongoing argument, in the long run they will benefit from the theory development.

## CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the originator of Transactional Analysis, Eric Berne. Like so many of us involved in the field of psychotherapy, we are partly here in an attempt to resolve our own archaic issues. It appears Berne was no exception to this.

In my view one of his main philosophical contributions to psychotherapy was his desire for patient power. Many psychotherapies allow the therapist to maintain an elitist stand point. They use words and constructs the client does not understand, have case meetings or supervision about the client which excludes him/hemr, and so forth. Berne sought to reduce this elitism.

Transactional Analysis is now 44 years old (the same age as me). If one judges life in terms of passion then there is a good deal of life currently in Transactional Analysis. The ongoing debate between the intellectuals and the clinicians, at times is very passionate. So often humans seem to have this desire to create and destroy in the same single act. But we always get there in the end, or have done so at least so far. Transactional Analysis currently is no exception to this truism.

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