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An Introduction to Transactional Analysis

What is Transactional Analysis?

Transactional analysis (TA) is a theory of personality and relationships based on the study of specific ego states, a theory of social interaction or interpersonal communication and a system of group and/or individual psychotherapy used as a tool for personal growth and personal change. It involves four methods of analysis – structural, transactional, games and script – and has taken its name from the second of these, though it clearly comprises all four.

TA is a way of inquiring into what goes on between people and inside people in order to help them make changes. The transactional aspect is exactly what it says: a two-way communication, an exchange, a transaction. Although this word can sound unattractively businesslike, the concept actually captures a wealth of understanding and meaning about the way human beings relate. A transaction may be of spoken words, expressed feelings, physical behaviours, shared thoughts, stated opinions or beliefs and so on. A transaction may be a raised eyebrow that is responded to with a smile. It may be a comforting hug when another is crying, or it may be a silence at the other end of the telephone following some unexpected news.

We may look at and analyse what goes on between people in terms of the words that they are using or the gestures they are making or the beliefs they are expressing and learn something of each of these people. But how does this apply ‘inside’ people? How can one person transact? Here is an incident as described by a client:

I was really scared when the lift stopped between floors. I said to myself, ‘Don’t panic whatever you do!’ But this didn’t help much. In fact, I started to panic more. So I said, ‘I’m really scared,’ and I told myself this was all right. I felt a lot better knowing this and got myself thinking about how to deal with the situation. I told myself I could feel scared and still think of what to do. Of course, it was simple, I just pressed the alarm button. A man on the intercom reassured me I’d be out soon. The lift started to move while he was still talking. ‘Well done,’ I said to myself. ‘A year ago you’d have been a gibbering wreck.’

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This person is simply doing what we all do: he is talking to himself. Notice that sometimes he refers to himself as 'I' and sometimes as 'you'. In this way, though he is still one person, he can hold an internal dialogue between different parts of himself. He is transacting internally.

TA provides a model which defines these parts of oneself as different ego states. Whether it is thoughts, feelings or behaviours that are being exchanged externally or internally – usually it is all three, whether we are aware of this or not – they will be coming from one of three types of ego state: the Parent, the Adult or the Child ego state. Early in this book, we will introduce the concept of ego states and will return to the concept many times, as these ego states are the building-blocks of TA theory.

This three-part model is both simple and profound. Unfortunately, like many good ideas which have immediate appeal, the model is open to misuse. It can be seen in a rather simplistic way or used manipulatively for selfish and exploitative ends. Eric Berne, the originator of the model, was astute enough to recognize this possibility and in his catalogue of psychological 'games people play' included one called 'Transactional Analysis', which is when people use TA to belittle themselves or others. The simplicity and immediate usefulness of the TA model lies not only in the colloquial language adopted to describe the various and often complicated concepts, but also in the ease of understanding and identification people tend to show in response to TA theory. It is not uncommon to hear people using ego state language adeptly and creatively within minutes of its introduction. The profundity of the TA model lies in the depth and breadth of its psychological understanding and exploration. The list of contents of this book, including ego states, transactions, functional and behavioural options, life script, and assessment and the process of change, indicates the range to which this three-part model may be applied. We hope this introductory book will show some of the depth and breadth of understanding that TA can bring to many aspects of life, living, relating and communicating.

Since its introduction and development by Eric Berne and others who will be mentioned in this book, many people from varied professional backgrounds have been attracted to TA and found in it something useful and exciting. Clearly, they still do. What is it about TA that has attracted psychotherapists, counsellors, psychologists, doctors, coaches, social workers, nurses, teachers, children and others over the years? Here are some of the reasons we think TA is so popular:

- The basics of TA theory are expressed in simple, colloquial and easily understood language with words like 'games', 'scripts' and 'strokes' (a term that has now been included in several English dictionaries as well as being commonly found in songs and TV programmes).
- Though there is now common reference to the 'inner child' both in popular and in mainstream psychology, counselling and psychotherapy literature, the term 'Child' and the concept of part of oneself remaining phenomenologically alive as a child throughout one's adult life has been a central tenet in TA – a concept that is appealing and experientially validated and validating for many people.
- TA concepts are often shared with clients, so there is a talking *with* rather than talking *at* clients. In this way the content and process of psychotherapy or coaching are demystified and developed into a shared endeavour.

- TA lays stress on personal responsibility for one's experience and in so doing puts the client in a central, proactive and therefore potentially powerful role in his or her situation. In this respect, TA is referred to as a decisional model. If we are personally responsible for our own experience, we must be responsible for the choices and decisions that we make about how we behave, how we feel, how we think and what we believe, even though many of these decisions may not be made in awareness, but at a pre- or non-conscious, somatic and emotional level. Even as children we made such decisions in response to the environments of home, school and society. Clearly, some of these decisions were misinformed, misperceived, skewed by immaturity, but nonetheless the best we could manage in those early circumstances. Hope lies in the fact that as we become aware of the meaning we have made of ourselves and the world, and the patterns we are enacting, new and reparative decisions can be made in the present to replace the now dysfunctional and maladaptive decisions of the past.

The appeal of TA to some may also be due to its embracing and integrating the three main streams of psychology within its theoretical model: the psychoanalytic, the behavioural and the humanistic/existential. As mentioned earlier, Berne's formative training was in psychoanalysis. TA theory owes much to the psychoanalytic thinking and experience with which Berne was familiar – to Freud, Klein, Fairbairn, Federn and Erikson, to name but a few – and to the concepts belonging to traditional psychoanalysis, ego psychology, social psychology and object relations, particularly intrapsychic phenomenological structures. For example, Parent, Adult and Child ego states are not the Superego, Ego and Id of psychoanalysis, but there is no denying that they are derivatives. It is also clear that the Freudian concept of the repetition compulsion was developed by Berne into one of the central notions of TA: that of the life script and the repetitive games and rackets that support it.

An example of the inclusion of behavioural concepts is the emphasis given in TA to the effect of positive and negative reinforcement (operant conditioning) or 'stroking' as an important element of script formation. Our hunger for strokes influences how we adapt to the perceived wishes of others in terms of the feelings we have or show, the thoughts we have, the beliefs we hold and the behaviours we exhibit. This adaptation will be based particularly upon our experience of our parents when we were little and how they responded to our hunger for strokes. The humanistic/existential component has already been touched upon. TA emphasizes personal responsibility, growth, self-awareness and choice; even when circumstances are not chosen, people can still choose their attitude towards these circumstances in a positive and creative way. Central to the humanistic philosophy also is the intrinsic value of human beings, and this too is a core belief in TA: the concept of 'OKness'. In the twenty-first century, recognize a fourth stream of psychological thought – the transpersonal. Transpersonal approaches (such as mindfulness, Buddhist therapy, psychosynthesis and the like) see the interconnectedness of all creatures to each other and indeed to the universe itself. This fourth strand did not traditionally have a place in TA, which on the contrary has had rather a pragmatic approach. Therefore there are no direct links between it and the original TA concepts. However, recent developments and applications of TA have been influenced by its attitude of acceptance towards the inexplicable

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or the liminal and it contributes to a turn towards a relational perspective in TA, which has grown in popularity in the new century.

Relational Transactional Analysis

Relational TA sees the process of *relating* – to self, to others, to an organization, within the organization or community – as the key channel of self-expression and as the key vehicle for change.

Why this Emphasis on Relationship?

In recent years, a focus on relationship and relating has become a major trend in the world of psychology, philosophy, organizational and management theory, and consulting. Many influences combine to bring this about. Developments in post-modern philosophy and complexity theory highlight the interconnectedness of discourse and the importance of pattern in organizations and communities, which are seen not as entities but as processes of communicative interaction – as Stolorow and Atwood put it, ‘a continual flow of reciprocal mutual influence’ (1992 p. 18).

In the field of psychology, neuroscientific research and infant observation demonstrate the vital importance of early relationship to the development of the human brain and sense of self. What is more, a substantial body of research into successful outcome of therapy and counselling – and more recently coaching – identifies relationship factors as one of the best predictors of effectiveness. Last but not least, psychological theories as well as life experiences tell us that patterns of relating repeat themselves and are often the source of difficulties. Consequently, our clients will need us to help them in this area.

To summarize: relational TA sees relationships of all kinds as central to the work and identifies the relationship between practitioner and client as the chief vehicle for change. It is based on the fact that there are two ‘subjectivities’ in the meeting – each engaged in shaping and being shaped by the other. Relational practice therefore involves:

- First and foremost the provision of a relationship based in mutual respect and empathy, as well as shared agreement about direction and goals.
- Acknowledgement of the ‘bi-directionality’, the mutuality of influence, which co-creates a relationship in which there are a multiplicity of possible responses or ‘selves’ and in which patterns emerge and can be changed.
- Working in collaborative dialogue in the relationship as these selves emerge and meet. In other words, an inquiry into the process of relating will reveal important information about the client’s (and the practitioner’s) ways of meeting the world.
- Use of the practitioner’s subjective experience as a valid source of information and, potentially, as part of the inquiry.
- Change, not just for the client but for the practitioner who will – indeed must – change in the process of the work. We will talk more about this later in the book.

TA is an ideal approach with which to work relationally. Many of its theories focus on understanding the co-created nature of relationships. Within the relationship, it integrates psychoanalysis's careful understanding of unconscious patterns with the authentic here-and-now focus of cognitive and humanistic methods; it recognizes multiple ego states (or 'self states' as they are sometimes called) and it is grounded in a humanistic philosophy that values human experience and trusts people to be responsible to themselves and their community. In recent years that humanistic philosophy has been underlined and emphasized in relational TA to recognize the importance to healing of an authentic, empathic meeting between two people.

Transactional Analysis Philosophy

Much of what has been written above touches upon the philosophical underpinnings of TA. The first of the three central philosophical beliefs is the notion that people are born 'OK'; in other words, free from original sin and with an innate 'drive' to grow and be healthy. The second is that people with emotional difficulties are nevertheless full human beings who can think and take responsibility for themselves. The third is that all emotional or behavioural problems, given adequate knowledge and resources, are changeable. These beliefs mean that all people have a fundamental worth and as such should be valued and respected. This does not mean that we accept and approve of a person's behaviour, if for example it is cruel and damaging, but that beneath the behaviour we try to see the person and value that person's humanity. This involves working with the person from a position described by Carl Rogers, the grandfather of humanistic therapy (1951), as 'unconditional positive regard'. We need to hold ourselves in the same regard if we are to approach another person with human equality. Thus the position of I'M OK – YOU'RE OK, a well known shibboleth of TA, existentially acknowledges your and my being in the world – separate yet connected – along with the value statement that humans are 'OK'. This tenet is paramount in TA. As practitioners (and people), if we are coming from a position of I'M OK – YOU'RE NOT OK or I'M NOT OK – YOU ARE OK or I'M NOT OK – YOU'RE NOT OK, we are coming from a position of inequality (or, in the last instance, equal hopelessness) which cannot be conducive to growth and change.

Implicit within the I'M OK – YOU'RE OK philosophical position is the belief that our core selves are lovable and creative and that our intentions are normally positive and constructive, even when our behaviour is undesirable, misguided or destructive. We think the following anonymous quotation with which we end this chapter expresses well this essential philosophical attitude towards ourselves and others:

Every single human being,
 when the entire situation is taken into account,
 has always, at every moment of the past,
 done the very best that he or she could do,
 and so deserves neither blame nor reproach
 from anyone, including self.
 This, in particular, is true of you.

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A Brief History

Eric Berne (1910–70), the originator of transactional analysis, was a Canadian-born psychiatrist who began his psychoanalytic training in 1941 at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. His analyst was Paul Federn, a student of Freud's. Before he came to write about TA, his writing was more psychoanalytic in nature, as in *The Mind in Action* (1949).

In 1943, Berne's studies were interrupted by service in the army. It was here that he began practising group psychotherapy and developing his intuitive and observational skills which were later to appear as observations and definitions of ego states. Between 1949 and 1962, he developed these ideas and presented them in several journals: these articles were later to be compiled as *Intuition and Ego States* (1977). It was in 1958 that his ideas were first published in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy* under the title 'Transactional analysis: a new and effective method of group therapy'. He went on to publish eight books and numerous articles on the subject of TA. His final book *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?*, rated by some as his most erudite and comprehensive work, was published posthumously in 1972. It certainly combines the creativity, originality, wit and wisdom of the author into a book of enormous appeal.

After his work in the army, Berne pursued his psychoanalytic training at the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute and went into analysis with Erik Erikson but, perhaps because of his unorthodox and innovative – even, on occasion, confrontational – ideas and manner, he never gained recognition as a member of the psychoanalytic establishment. Clearly, Berne was attracted to psychoanalysis – much of his work testifies to the respect and esteem he held for psychoanalytic thought – yet he found the psychoanalysis of his day too rigid, too cumbersome, too complicated, too precious; above all, too slow. In response, he devoted his energy to combining individual and social psychiatry into a unified system he was to call Transactional Analysis. The theories he developed, therefore, include the rigour of psychoanalytic attention to unconscious processes, transference dynamics and relational repetitions. They also integrate the pragmatic results-orientated attitude of the behavioural school and its cognitive behavioural approaches that were emerging during this time. These are contained within a humanistic philosophy that trusts in the healthy process of the human organism and empowerment through self and social responsibility.

Around the time of his first TA publication in 1958, Berne began to hold seminars to discuss and develop transactional analytic ideas. They were called the San Francisco Social Psychiatry Seminars. Six people attended the first meeting. By the end of the first year, attendance and TA theory had grown so much that there was both an introductory course – known as 'the 101', which continues to this day as the official introductory course – and an advanced seminar known as a '202'. By 1962, the first quarterly *Transactional Analysis Bulletin (TAB)*, later to become the *Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ)*, was published and in the following year the first annual summer conference was held. In the mid-1960s, the San Francisco Seminar was renamed the International Transactional Analysis Association (ITAA). The word 'International' was to honour the membership of one Canadian! Throughout this time and until his death in 1970, Berne continued to develop TA theory.

The ITAA swiftly developed a worldwide membership. It was complemented in 1976 by the European Association for Transactional Analysis (EATA) and in 1982 by the Western Pacific Association for TA (WPATA). Both ITAA and EATA have their own respective and mutually recognizing examining bodies and are dedicated to the enhancement of TA theory and practice in psychotherapy, counselling, organizational and educational development through the maintenance of standards of training and accreditation as well as journals and conferences.

Today more than 90 countries have regional or national organizations, each associated with one or other of the larger organizations. In the UK the major organizations are the Institute of Transactional Analysis (ITA) and the Institute of Developmental Transactional Analysis (IDTA). The UK was also the founding site of the International Association of Relational Transactional Analysis (IARTA), which now has members worldwide.

