TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS; An elegant theory and practice.

By Claude Steiner PhD TM

Abstract: Transactional analysis can serve as a sophisticated, elegant and effective system on which to base the practical activities of professionals in psychotherapy, counseling, education and organizational consultation.

Introduction

Transactional Analysis was founded in the 1950's by San Francisco psychiatrist Eric Berne MD. Transactional Analysis has become a world-wide movement with upward of 10 000 adherents. It is a sophisticated theory of personality, motivation and problem solving which can be of great use to psychotherapists, counselors, educators and business consultants.

Transactional Analysis can be divided into five theoretical and practical conceptual clusters. These five concept clusters enjoy varying degrees of recognition in the behavioral sciences. Below I list these conceptual clusters along with , between quotes, concepts that parallel them in the behavioral sciences:

1. The OK Cluster which finds correlates in existing theories of "positive psychology", "flow," "human potential," "resiliency," "excellence," "optimism," "subjective well being," "positive self-concept," as well as "spontaneous healing," "nature's helping hand," "*vis medicatrix naturae*," "the healing power of the mind."

2. The Strokes Cluster which finds correlates in existing theories of "attachment," "intimacy," "warmth," "tender loving care," "need to belong," "contact," "closeness," "relationships," "social support" and yes, love.

3. The Script and Games Cluster which finds correlates in existing theories of "narratives," "maladaptive schemas," "self-narratives," "story schemas," "story grammars," "personal myths," "personal event memories," "self-defining memories," "nuclear scenes," "gendered narratives," "narrative coherence," "narrative complexity," "core self-beliefs," "self-concept."

4. The Ego States and Transactions Cluster. The three egos states and the transactional interactions between them are the most distinctive feature of transactional analysis and yet have the least amount of resonance in the literature. However, the utility of this concept is the principal reason why people become interested and maintain their interest in transactional analysis.

5. The Transactional Theory of Change Cluster. Transactional Analysis is essentially a cognitive behavioral theory of personality and change, which nevertheless retains an interest in the psychodynamic aspect of the personality.

Echoes of every one of these clusters of concepts can be found in writings in the fields of psychology, social psychology and psychotherapy where they exist independently of any awareness of their possible Transactional Analysis origins. Transactional Analysis includes all five in a sophisticated, interconnected theory of personality and change.

From the social sciences literature we have collected a portfolio of method, theory and research that corroborates each of the five theoretical clusters.

Findings.

The OK Cluster

In the process of developing an identity, people define for themselves, early in life, what the meaning and significance of their life is. Some people see life as a basically benign and positive experience and themselves as basically acceptable. This positive experience of self, Berne called "being OK." Others decide they are not acceptable (not OK) as human beings and that they will fail in some way. These expectations, based on a decision of how life will be, become a person's existential position. People can feel accepting or not accepting about themselves and others (OK or Not-OK). This leads to four main existential positions: "I'm OK; you're OK," "I'm OK; you're not OK," "I'm not OK; you're OK" and finally, "I'm not OK; you're not OK."

The concept referred to as the OK existential position in Transactional Analysis is represented in the wider behavioral culture by the concepts of "positive psychology", "flow," "human potential," "resiliency," "excellence," "optimism," "subjective well being," "positive self-concept," as well as "spontaneous healing," "nature's helping hand," "*vis medicatrix naturae*," "the healing power of the mind." These concepts, until recently deemed unfashionable and "soft-headed," have taken center stage in psychological research. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have reviewed the field in a special issue on positive psychology of the *American Psychologist* (2000).

In Transactional Analysis the OK existential position is also called the universal position because Berne assumed that "people are born OK" that is to say that people, in their innate state tend to health, healing, and a benign expectation and trust of others. This position about self and others is either maintained or lost to a "Not OK" position about self, others or both.

It has been shown through hundreds of studies (For an excellent review see Matlin and Stange 1978) that human beings strongly tend to be selectively positive in their language, thought, and memory and that people who are psychologically healthy show a higher level of positive bias. The research also indicates that people with a OK/OK attitude are likely to be healthier and live longer. Tiger (1979) postulates that optimism has driven human evolution and is an innate adaptive characteristic of the species and a part of evolutionary developed survival mechanisms, a view that coincides with Berne's.

The not OK position has been widely researched in studies about depression, low self esteem, psychopathology, and in the construction of diagnostic manuals and tests,

When lost, according to Berne, the OK position can be regained because it is innate while the not OK position is tied to a script and therefore to the arbitrary narrative or schemas on which people can base their whole lives. Arguably, *prima facie* evidence over the last centuries is that the human social condition-- barring an ecological catastrophe--is steadily progressing in the positive direction of equality, cooperation, democracy and humanitarianism which would tend to support the view that this is an innate trend of the species.

The Stroke Cluster

Berne postulated that recognition is a basic, biological need with profound motivational implications. He called the unit of interpersonal recognition a "stroke." Contact and recognition with and from others is an essential part of human relationships.

A stroke has been defined as a unit of contact or recognition. Contact or strokes are essential to a person's life. Without them, Berne said, the "spinal cord will shrivel up." This classic Bernian aphorism refers to the research that has demonstrated that a very young child needs actual physical strokes in order to remain alive and that early development of the human brain is greatly affected by the kinds of contact that the child receives (Siegel, 1999). People of all ages require adequate levels of contact. The exchange of strokes is one of the most important activities that people engage in their daily lives.

Berne based his theory on the hospitalism studies by Spitz (1945) and on Harlow's "monkey studies" with wire and cloth mothers (1976)

Spitz established that in a foundling home where the children are deprived of maternal care and affection, motor and intellectual types of development are markedly depressed, mortality is high and physical growth is retarded.

Harlow showed that baby monkeys clearly preferred cuddling with the softer cloth model, especially if they were scared. Harlow found that young monkeys reared with live mothers and young peers without difficulty learned to play and socialize with other young monkeys. Babies raised with real mothers but no playmates were often fearful or inappropriately aggressive. Baby monkeys without playmates or real mothers became socially incompetent, and when older, were often unsuccessful at mating and those that did have babies were neglectful of them. Harlow concluded that normal sexual and parental behavior depended on a wide array of affection ties with peers and family early in life

The concepts that we, in Transactional Analysis, refer to as strokes have been written about and studied as "contact," "attachment," "intimacy," "warmth,"

"tender loving care," "need to belong," "closeness," "relationships," "social support" and yes, love.

That the procurement of stokes--need to belong"--is a fundamental human motivation has been investigated by Buameister and Leary (1995) in an excellent and exhaustive review of the literature from which they conclude that "existing evidence supports the hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation."

That nurturing physical strokes are needed to maintain physical and psychological health has been investigated in innumerable research studies. An excellent review of these studies, showing the pervasive relationship between stroking and health, is provided by Lynch (1977) and Ornish (2000).

These concepts are also embedded in the all-important series of attachment studies by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) which also support the view that secure reliable contact with a caretaker is essential for positive development.

Berne proposed that not just positive stimulation but also negative painful stimulation might be instrumental in maintaining health. This hypothesis is essential to the theory of games that postulates that people will accept and seek negative stimulation even if the prefer positive stimulation. Berne quotes Levine's research on infant stimulation (1960) in support of that view.

The Scripts and Games Cluster.

There has been an upsurge of interest among theorists and researchers in autobiographical recollections, life stories, and narrative approaches to understanding human experience and behavior. The concepts that we in Transactional Analysis refer to as "life scripts," "script decisions" and "redecisions" are represented in the wider psychological culture by the concepts of "narratives," "maladaptive schemas," "self-narratives," "story schemas," "story grammars," "personal myths," "personal event memories," "self-defining memories," "nuclear scenes," "gendered narratives," "narrative coherence," "narrative complexity," "core self-beliefs," "self-concept," highlighting life stories, myths, plots, episodes, characters and so on.

Berne postulated that people make decisions in childhood which shape the rest of their life's "script." Script theory hypothesizes that people can choose life-long tragic scripts like suicide, murder or alcoholism in childhood. These choices are supported by routinely recurring games and the roles that people habitually play in them.

A compelling example of the manner in which Berne has either contributed to or anticipated major trends in behavioral science can be seen in the evolution of the concept of scripts. A thorough review of the literature on the psychology of "life stories" by McAdams (2001) contains *circa* 200 references

the majority of which were written well after Berne's introduction of the concept in 1995. Sadly, Berne is not recognized as a pioneer in these reviews. Most of the relatively few research articles in this trend have their focus on the scripts inherent in short term events such as friendships, sicknesses, transitional periods, (from school to work, as an example), gender, sexual and abuse scripting, picking sexual partners and habitual ways of dealing with emotions such as anger. The narrative literature includes the notion that people are bound to follow certain pre-conceived behavioral paths and that some of these are harmful to the person. The notion of an internalized life story or script ties together a number of important theoretical and empirical trends in developmental, cognitive, personality, and cultural psychology.

Schema, according to Young (1999), are deep cognitive structures that enable an individual to interpret his or her experiences in a meaningful way. He assumes that, because schema are formed in response to life experiences over a lifetime, they can be restructured. This is the basis of Redecision Therapy (Goulding, 1997) a transactional analytic practice that focuses on a "redecision" of the early decisions which are the foundation of scripts.

Young expands on this theme with his concept of "maladaptive schemas." The notion that such "life scripts" can be redecided plays an important part in the *American Psychological Association Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Manual* for depression. "Schema Change Methods" are outlined as strategies designed to "restructure maladaptive core beliefs" responsible for depression.

There are of course, a number of tragic life scripts documented by clinicians and in fiction and non fiction literature such as mental illness, depression/suicide, criminality and alcoholism and other chemical dependencies. (Steiner, 1971)

Regarding games, Berne postulated that they are the building blocks of scripts without the continuous playing of which, scripts cannot advance. Berne assigned roles to the players in games and postulated that they are interchangeable. Karpman (1968) narrowed the roles that are essential to any one game, to three: The Rescuer, The Victim and the Persecutor. The familiar Rescue-Persecutor-Victim cycle or Rescue Game is widely recognized as "codependency" in the twelve step movement. Not playing the various roles of the Alcoholic game as recommended by Berne is a basic strategy in AlAnon. The proposition that codependent (Rescuing) behavior leads to Persecution and Victimization has not been tested but is one of those intuitive bull's-eyes which resonate in everyone's experience.

Regarding games, there seems to be nothing in the academic or research literature that refers to them or similar concepts although in the popular culture, from which the term "game" derives, there is—again--a clear intuitive understanding of their occurrence and of their negative impact.

Ego States and Transactions Cluster.

In his last book *What do you say after you say hello*? Eric Berne made clear that analysis of transactions between ego states is the fundamental activity of a transactional analyst.

He focused on ego states and transactions because they are eminently observable. Ego states and their representation as three superimposed circles are the icons of Transactional Analysis.

Berne postulated three basic ego states, Parent, Adult and Child, each with an important function. However he quickly introduced possible additional egos states by breaking down each of the three. As an example the Child had three options: Adapted Child, Little Professor and Natural Child. Others followed suit until the numbers of potential separate ego states became unmanageable. Dusay (1972) narrowed the large number of potential ego states to five: The Nurturing and Critical Parents, the Adult, the Adapted Child and the Natural Child. These five egos states have been widely researched over the years with varying scientific rigor. A number of researchers have attempted to demonstrate reliability and construct validity for these ego states. The Tokyo University Egogram is reportedly very much in use in Japan. Unfortunately, no translations of that work were found.

Loffredo et all (TAJ, April 2004) review reliability research and update their own research in a study in which they measure the reliability of a questionnaire designed to identify the five ego states. This rigorous research demonstrates that their questionnaire reliably identifies these five ego states in people. In addition Loffredo et al determined substantial construct validity, that is to say the five ego states defined by his questionnaire represent five distinct forms of thought, feeling and behavior, ie: ego states.

However Berne's crucial idea that *all behavior* fits in one of these specific egos state categories has not been demonstrated nor does it seem likely that it will. This tends to support the notion that while ego states are credible phenomena the specific division into three that Berne chose is largely a wise, useful, intuitive choice that is best seen as a metaphor of heuristic utility rather than a proven reality. The fact that the three ego states are most often named as the reason why people find Transactional Analysis useful is a powerful reason for maintaining them as our flagship concepts.

Berne postulated that "complete ego states may be permanently retained." That there is such a phenomenon as separate manifestations of the ego (if not necessarily the three above mentioned) has been widely observed and postulated as "multiple egos," "selves" or personalities. There is ample evidence of the occurrence of multiple personalities but they have been consistently regarded as pathological abnormalities ignoring the possibility that multiple states of the ego may be normal, in fact desirable. Rowan (1999)

introduces the notion of pluralistic models of the self in which a normal person is seen as multiplicity of sub-personalities.

According to Berne "Federn is the one who first stressed on psychiatric grounds what Penfield later demonstrated in his remarkable neurosurgical experiments," namely," that psychological reality is based on complete and discrete ego states."(1961, pg 19) The hypothesis that there are several different, coherent functions of the ego which find a parallel in brain structures is being reflected in the findings of neuro-anatomists and evolutionary psychologists who refer to them as mind modules. Mind modules are evolutionary structures that specialize in certain functions such as language, empathy, attachment, emotions, movement and so on.

The research of evolutionary psychologists shows a great deal of corroborative potential, especially if it can be shown that there are three major mind modules that parallel the three ego states. One ego state, the rational Adult, is a well validated function which resides in the human prefrontal lobe.

Regarding transactions, if we accept that people transact socially it would follow that they will transact between specific ego states if such entities exist. However, transactions between ego states seem to have escaped the attention of researchers except for researchers within transactional analysis who have produced several respectable, though not statistically significant, studies in which transactions emanating from pre-defined separate complexes of behavior (ego states) have been judged with significant levels of reliability.

The Transactional Theory of Change Cluster.

From the beginning of its inception by Eric Berne Transactional Analysis was designed as a contractual, cognitive ("Adult" centered), behavioral (transactional) group therapy. The premise was that if people became aware of their transactional behavior, in particular their games and the underlying script, they would be able to modify their lives in a positive direction. Consequently, a very important therapeutic function was to provide "permission" for changing behavior and "protection" to sustain the change against social and internal pressures to maintain the status quo. The implication of the permission transaction are allied to the concepts of "guidance," "problem solving," "treatment strategies" and "interventions." Protection is allied to the concepts of "support," "empathy" and "secure base."

As a psychoanalytically trained psychiatrist, Berne had a historic and cultural bent toward psychodynamic thinking. Even though he focused on transactions between visible ego states he was well aware of the fact that, as Freud had discovered, a great deal occurred behind the scenes. However, with the years, as many of Freud's concepts were widely questioned (Crews, 1997) Berne's psychodynamic thinking became less and less psychoanalytic. As Berne's TA thinking matured, it moved away from libidinal conflicts and transference phenomena in the direction of the dynamics of script formation, proliferation, maintenance and redecision.

Be that as it may, therapeutic contracts, first seriously proposed by Berne in 1956, and suicide contracts, a later development, are now an accepted part of modern psychotherapy especially cognitive behavioral therapy. (Heinssen, 1995. Levendusky, 1983, 1994)

To the extent that behavioral therapy is, at this point, considered the most effective method of psychotherapy, transactional analysis can easily argue that we partake of that effectiveness. Ted Novey's excellent and rigorous research (2002) on the effectiveness of transactional analysts as evaluated by their clients is a powerful, corroborating study.

Conclusions

A great deal of research and theorizing in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry corroborates certain aspects of transactional theory and practice. While we found a limited number of "hard" studies that directly supported some Transactional Analysis theory or practice point, there is a mother lode of methodologies and projects which provide "soft" corroboration for Transactional Analysis notions. Many theoretical concepts and practical techniques which did not exist before Berne introduced them have been assimilated into the professional fields of psychotherapy, counseling, education and consulting, most often without knowledge that Berne was their innovator.

The principal contribution that transactional analysis can make for behavioral professionals is to knit together under one comprehensive system a theoretical and practical framework that can help psychologists, counselors, educators and consultants to coordinate and extend their knowledge in an information based, systematic and elegant manner.

The interested student or professional can find a great deal of additional information about Transactional Analysis and related subjects on the Internet. Most of the concepts featured between quotes above will generate long lists of references on a search engine. In addition, the International Transactional Analysis Association maintains an extensive website (www.itaa-net.org) with basics and advanced information.

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