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T.A. Where it started

In 1958 some people who enjoyed each others company and that of Eric Berne formed themselves into the San Francisco Social Psychiatry Seminar. By 1964 they had become the International Transactional Analysis Association. But that is another story.

In the early days the SFSPS met every Tuesday in Berne's house with (in some cases) outstanding faithfulness. It is said of Berne that he insisted on a spirit of rigorous scientific enquiry during the meetings, and that sloppy thinking and levity were equally discountenanced. However, at 10 o'clock punctually the meeting adjourned to a local bistro where only Free Child behaviour was accepted. Anyone who used his Adult for other than conveying food and drink to his mouth would again meet with crushing disapproval.

Now this was a good system and it worked well because everyone knew when it was 10 o'clock. But TA has been plagued ever since by the fact that it inherited Eric Berne without being able to tell the time. Let me explain...

1. There is no doubt that Berne thought of himself as a scientist, and believed he had discovered a system which was open to scientific investigation, One may quibble about the definition of scientific, but that isn't the issue. The problem is Berne's Child.
2. He loved to poke fun at fellow professionals who were apt to give themselves airs; who needed their patients as much as their patients needed them; and who were pleased when patients made 'progress' but would be alarmed at the idea of them actually getting better. It suited Berne to characterise himself as a 'cowboy' therapist; and to mock the pedantry and heavy professionalism of others.

The result was that he clothed his scientific theory in lay language; in 'throwaway' lines which acted and still act as an invitation to delight, perhaps even to instant expertise. And the fact is that millions (yes, probably millions) have personally profited from their contact with TA if only from reading one of other of the popular text.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch..., namely ITAA headquarters in California, a fairly rigid discipline is imposed on those who want to identify themselves as fully qualified and accredited TA practitioners. Even for the first level of Advanced Membership, two years of supervised work and a more and more rigorous examination system have usually to be surmounted. Transactional Analysis is perhaps unique among the modern therapies in its emphasis on formal training.

There was a tension in Berne and the original cell-group; a tension which was nicely regulated by the clock. But it invites a polarisation and a fission among their

descendants which has been evident for some time. 1] On the one hand there is the growing army of those who 'use or practice transactional analysis in their work, sometimes with more and sometimes with less concern whether their version of it coincides with anyone else's. 2] And on the other hand there is the comparatively tiny number of those who have gained official recognition, and who are often concerned to raise standards even higher, particularly in the clinical area. The last is reflected in the high proportion of those who do not pass exams the first time.

There are reflections too of the same divisions at an organisational level within ITAA which do not matter much here.

My conclusion is that the very language of transactional analysis is an ulterior transaction. It conveys a message at two levels: the obvious invitation to the general public to enjoy learning and to savour knowledge which has been unavailable (wickedly withheld?) from them; and the hidden request to be taken very seriously.

Hence I pick up a revue one week which dismisses TA as 'superficial', and another the next which warns its readers that TA is 'dangerous' and that TA practitioners are a particularly virulent specimen of a species which should be proscribed.

Good luck to readers of this special issue on TA.

Roger Kreitman

Transactional Analysis - What is it?

Origins and current status

T. A. was developed in the 1950's by Eric Berne, a psychoanalytically trained psychiatrist dissatisfied with the limitations of orthodox Freudian psychotherapies. Berne remained the most influential T.A. theorist up until his death in 1970; though since then many important theoretical and technical contributions have been made by other T.A. practitioners. T.A. now has a clearly defined institutional structure; the International Transactional Analysis Association regulates the teaching of T.A. and the training of therapists. Currently the I.T.A.A. membership directory lists more than 10,000 Regular Members and more than 600 accredited T.A. therapists (Clinical Membership category). Although developed in the context of psychiatry and psychotherapy, T.A. is finding applications in a wide variety of other settings, e.g. schools, welfare agencies, management consultancy, prisons, children's homes.