Transactional Analysis:
An Elegant Theory and Practice

By Claude Steiner

2003

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. It was founded in the 1950s by San Francisco psychiatrist Eric Berne, MD. Transactional analysis has become a worldwide movement with upwards of 10,000 adherents. It is a sophisticated theory of personality, motivation, and problem solving that 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 clusters enjoy varying degrees of recognition within the behavioral sciences. They are listed below along with (between quotes) concepts that parallel them in the behavioral sciences.

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

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

3. *The Script and Games Cluster*. This cluster 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," and "self-concept."

4. *The Ego States and Transactions Cluster*.

The idea of 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 Analysis Theory of Change Cluster*. Transactional analysis is essentially a cognitive-behavioral theory of personality and change that nevertheless retains an interest in the psychodynamic aspect of the personality.

Echoes of each of these clusters of concepts can be found in writings in the fields of psychology, social psychology, and psychotherapy, where they exist independent 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. This portfolio is summarized in the following sections.

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 Bernean aphorism refers to research that demonstrates that a very young child needs actual physical strokes to survive 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 in which people engage in their daily lives.

Berne based his theory on Spitz's (1945) hospitalism studies and Harlow's (Suomi, Collins, Harlow, & Ruppenthal, 1976) "monkey studies" with wire and cloth mothers. Spitz established that in a foundling home where the children were deprived of maternal care and affection, motor and intellectual types of development were markedly depressed, mortality was high, and physical growth was retarded. Harlow also showed that baby monkeys clearly preferred cuddling with the softer cloth "mother" model, especially if they were scared. Harlow found that young monkeys reared with live mothers and young peers learned without difficulty 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; 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.

As mentioned earlier, 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 "love."

That the procurement of strokes-the "need to belong"-is a fundamental human motivation has been investigated by Baumeister and Leary (1995) in an excellent and exhaustive review of the literature. They concluded that "existing evidence supports the hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation" (p. 52). That nurturing physical strokes are needed to maintain physical and psychological health has been investigated in innumerable research studies. Excellent reviews of these studies, showing the pervasive relationship between stroking and health, are provided by Lynch and Ford (1977) and Ornish (1998). These concepts are also embedded in the all-important series of attachment studies by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1982), which also support the view that secure reliable contact with a caretaker is essential for positive development.

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

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. Berne called this positive experience of self "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 about 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 "I'm Not OK, You're Not OK."

The concept referred to in transactional analysis as the "OK existential position" 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," "spontaneous healing," "nature's helping hand," "vis medicatrix naturae" (the healing power of nature), and "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 (2000) reviewed the field in a special issue of the American Psychologist focused on positive psychology.

In transactional analysis, the OK existential position is also referred to as "the universal position" because Berne assumed that "people are born OK"; that is, people have an innate tendency toward 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.

Hundreds of studies (for an excellent review, see Matlin & Stang, 1978) have shown 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 an OK-OK attitude are likely to be healthier and live longer. In fact, Tiger (1979) postulated that optimism has driven human evolution and is an innate adaptive characteristic of the species, a part of evolutionarily developed survival mechanisms. This is consistent with Berne's views.

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, whereas 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 supports the view that this is an innate trend of the species.

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 in transactional analysis are referred 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," and "self-concept." All of these highlight life stories, myths, plots, episodes, characters, and so on.

Berne postulated that people make decisions in childhood that shape the rest of their life "script." Script theory hypothesizes that people can choose lifelong tragic scripts-such as 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 either contributed to or anticipated major trends in behavioral science can be seen in the evolution of the concept of scripts. McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman's (2001) thorough review of the literature on the psychology of "life stories" contains about 200 references, the majority of which were written well after Berne's introduction of the concept in 1965. Sadly, Berne is not recognized as a pioneer in this review. Most of the relatively few research articles in this area focus on the scripts inherent in short-term events, such as friendships, sicknesses, transitional periods (e.g., from school to work), 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 preconceived behavioral paths and that some of these are harmful to the individual. 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.

Schemas, 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 schemas are formed in response to experiences over a lifetime, they can be restructured. This is the basis of redecision therapy (Goulding & Goulding, 1997), a transactional analytic practice that focuses on a "redecision" of the early decisions that are the foundation of a person's script.

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's cognitive-behavioral therapy manual for depression (Persons, Davidson, & Tompkins, 2001). "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 in the clinical literature as well as in fiction and nonfiction, such as mental illness, depression/suicide, criminality, alcoholism, and other chemical dependencies (Steiner, 1971).

Regarding games, Berne postulated that they are the building blocks of scripts; without the continuous playing of games, scripts cannot

advance. Berne assigned roles to the players in games and suggested that they are interchangeable. Karpman (1968) narrowed the roles that are essential to any one game to three: Rescuer, Victim, and Persecutor. The familiar Rescuer-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 it is one of those intuitive Bernean bull's-eyes that resonate in everyone's experience.

Nothing in the academic or research literature seems to refer to games or similar concepts, although in popular culture, from which the term "game" derives, there is an intuitive understanding of their occurrence and their negative impact.

Ego States and Transactions Cluster

In his last book, What Do You Say After You Say Hello?, Berne (1972) made it 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 stacked 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 ego states by subdividing each of the three. For 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: Nurturing Parent, Critical Parent, Adult, Adapted Child, and Natural Child. These five ego states have been widely researched with varying degrees of scientific rigor. The Tokyo University Egogram is reportedly very much in use in Japan. Unfortunately, no translations of that work were found.

Loffredo, Harrington, Munoz, and Knowles

(2004) reviewed reliability research and updated their own research in a study in which they measured 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, the five ego states defined by their questionnaire represent five distinct forms of thought, feeling, and behavior (i.e., ego states).

However, Berne's crucial idea-that all behavior fits in one of these specific ego state categories-has not been demonstrated, nor does it seem likely that it will be. This tends to support the notion that while ego states are credible phenomena, the specific division into the 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.

That there is such a phenomenon as separate manifestations of the ego (if not necessarily the three Berne 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, thus ignoring the possibility that multiple states of the ego may be normal and, in fact, desirable. Rowan and Cooper (1999) introduced the notion of pluralistic models of the self, in which a normal person is seen as a multiplicity of subpersonalities.

According to Berne (1961), "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" (p. 19). The hypothesis that there are several different, coherent functions of the ego that find a parallel in brain structures is being reflected in the findings of neuroanatomists 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 that 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 those within transactional analysis who have produced several respectable, although not statistically significant, studies. In these studies, transactions emanating from predefined separate complexes of behavior (ego states) have been judged with significant levels of reliability.

The Transactional Theory of Change Cluster

From its inception, 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 underlying script-they would be able to modify their lives in a positive direction. Consequently, an important therapeutic function was to provide "permission" for changing behavior and "protection" for sustaining the change in the face of social and internal pressures to maintain the status quo. The implication of the permission transaction is allied with the concepts of "guidance," "problem solving," "treatment strategies," and "interventions." Protection is allied with 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 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 et al., 1995), Berne's psychodynamic thinking became less and less psychoanalytic. As his transactional analysis thinking matured, it moved away from libidinal conflicts and transference phenomena in the direction of the dynamics of script formation, proliferation, maintenance, and redecision.

Therapeutic contracts, first seriously proposed by Berne in 1966, and suicide contracts, a later development, are now an accepted part of modern psychotherapy, especially cognitive-behavioral therapy (Heinssen, Levendusky, & Hunter, 1995; Levendusky, Berglas, Dooley, & Landau, 1983; Levendusky, Willis, & Ghinassi, 1994). To the extent that cognitive-behavioral therapy is, at this point, considered the most effective method of psychotherapy, transactional analysis can easily argue that we partake of that effectiveness. Novey's (2002) excellent and rigorous research 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 support transactional analysis theory or practice, there are many methodologies and projects that provide "soft" corroboration for transactional analysis ideas. Many theoretical concepts and practical techniques that 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 in this article will generate long lists of references on a search engine. In addition, the International Transactional Analysis Association maintains an extensive website with basic and advanced information.

References

Ainsworth, M. (1982). Attachment: Retrospect and prospect. In C. M. Parkes & J. Stevenson-Hinde

(Eds.), The place of attachment in human behavior (pp. 58-86). New York: Basic Books.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychology Bulletin, 117(3), 497-529.

Berne E. (1961). Transactional analysis in psychotherapy: A systematic individual and social psychiatry. New York: Grove Press.

Berne, E. (1966). Principles of group treatment. New York: Oxford University Press.

Berne E. (1972). What do you say after you say hello?: The psychology of human destiny. New York: Grove Press.

Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment. Vol. 1 of Attachment and loss. New York: Basic Books.

Crews, F., et al. (1995). The memory wars: Freud's legacy in dispute. New York: NYREV Collections.

Dusay, J. (1972). Egograms and the constancy hypothesis. Transactional Analysis Journal, 2(3), 37-41.

Heinssen, R. K., Levendusky, P. G., & Hunter, R. H. (1995). Client as colleague: Therapeutic contracting with the seriously mentally ill. American Psychologist, 50(7), 522-532.

Goulding, M. M., & Goulding, R. L. (1997). Changing lives through redecision therapy (rev. ed.). New York: Grove/Atlantic Press.

Karpman, S. (1968). Fairy tales and script drama analysis. Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 7(26), 39-43.

Levendusky, P. G., Berglas, S., Dooley, C. P., & Landau, R. J. (1983). Therapeutic contract program: A preliminary report on a behavioral alternative to the token economy. Behavior Research and Therapy, 21, 137-142.

Levendusky, P. G., Willis, B. S., & Ghinassi, F. A. (1994). The therapeutic contracting program: A comprehensive continuum of care model. Psychiatric Quarterly, 65, 189-208.

Levine, S. (1960). Stimulation in infancy. American Psychologist, 202, 80-86.

Loffredo, D. A., Harrington, R., Munoz, M. K., & Knowles, L. R. (2004). The ego state questionnaire-Revised. Transactional Analysis Journal, 34, 90-95.

Lynch, J., & Ford, J. (1977). The broken heart: The medical consequences of loneliness. New York: Basic Books.

Matlin, M., & Stang, D. (1978). The pollyanna principle: Selectivity in language, memory, and thought. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.

McAdams, D. P., Reynolds, J., Lewis, M. L., Patten, A., & Bowman, P. T. (2001). When bad things turn good and good things turn bad: Sequences of redemption and contamination in life narrative, and their relation to psychosocial adaptation in midlife adults and in students. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27, 472-483.

Novey, T. (2002). Measuring the effectiveness of transactional analysis: An international study. Transactional Analysis Journal, 32, 8-24.

Ornish, D. (1998). Love and survival: The scientific basis for the healing power of intimacy. New York: HarperCollins.

Persons, J. B., Davidson, J., & Tompkins, M. A. (2001). Essential components of cognitive-behavior therapy for depression. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Rowan, J., & Cooper, M. (1999). The plural self: Multiplicity in everyday life. London: Sage Publications.

Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology. American Psychologist, 55(1), 5-14.

Siegel, D. J. (1999). The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are. New York: Guilford Press.

Spitz, R. (1945). Hospitalism: An inquiry into the genesis of psychiatric conditions in early childhood. In O. Fenichel et al. (Eds.), The psychoanalytic study of the child (Vol. 1, pp. 53-74). New York: International Universities Press.

Steiner, C. (1971). Scripts people live: Transactional analysis of life scripts. New York: Grove Press.

Suomi, S. J., Collins, M. L., Harlow, H. F., & Ruppenthal, G. (1976). Effects of maternal and peer separations on young monkeys. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 17(2), 101-112.

Tiger, L. (1979). Optimism: The biology of hope. New York. Simon & Schuster.

Young, J. E. (1999). Cognitive therapy for personality disorders: A schema-focused approach. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Exchange.