Wonderful World, Beautiful People
Re-casting Transactional Analysis as Positive Psychology

Abstract

The author reports on experimental work with the egostate model and specifically, the implications for practice when the conventional model is inverted. The paper goes onto explore the possibilities for promoting growth and development using a re-framing of core TA concepts. Finally the author offers a connection between TA and the emerging field of positive psychology.

Introduction

How might things have turned out if Eric Berne has presented his ego state model like this:

Over the past year or so I, and others with whom I train, have been developing theory and practice along these lines. We have invited groups of TA practitioners to consider a range of questions, such as:

- What happens when the conventional model is inverted?
- How does it change the way in which we understand the human experience and interpersonal dynamics?
- What are the implications for how transactional analysts develop and apply theory?
- What is the impact on a TA practitioner's frame of reference in the light of this simple change in the central model?

This article considers these questions, draws on a range of responses gathered from workshop participants and offers a new theoretical overview through which transactional analysts might prefer to re-frame their work. The paper is intended to excite, provoke and engage readers, but most of all will encourage practitioners to reassess the basis on which they relate to others.

First let us consider what it might mean to start from the premise that individuals not only are born OK, but that for the most part, remain so throughout their daily lives; that the ingenuity and resourcefulness so readily apparent in infancy is sustained into adulthood. Let us assume that instead of dysfunctional relationships in the early years, the infant gains sufficient affirmation to prosper. How then might the practitioner utilise TA models to help us understand why most people, for most of the time can cope, are resilient and succeed? How helpful is the current egostate model in capturing Berne's essentials of personality?

The conventional model
When Berne presented his original egostate diagram he gave the following explanation;

> *The Parent was put at the top and the Child at the bottom intuitively. This intuition had good moral origins. The Parent is the guide for ethical aspirations… The Adult is concerned with the early realities of objective living; and the Child is a purgatory, and sometimes a hell, for archaic tendencies. This is a way of thinking which has come naturally in all times and nations.*
> (Berne, 1961 p.60)

Both Berne, and more recently, Steiner (2003), referred to the model as a metaphor and, as with all metaphors, it has the potential for alternative interpretation. There is an ambiguity in using metaphor that can be usefully exercised, sometimes with surprising outcomes.

The most significant and longstanding implication of the conventional egostate model is that it supports the notion of the Parent as suppressing the capacities of the Adult and Child egostates. Arguably this image confirmed much of the liberational radicalism which permeated much of early TA writing and practice. To precis, the purpose of the therapist was to free the energy – physis – held within the Child from the oppression of the Critical Parent, mediated by Adult processing. Whilst the original model may have been inspired intuitively, it was also clearly influenced by a highly specific cultural frame of reference.

The emergence of transactional analysis during the post-war era is worth noting;

> *Psychology after World War II became a science largely devoted to healing. It concentrated on repairing damage using a disease model of human functioning.* (Seligman in Synder & Lopez, 2005 p.3)

The long-term implications of the original intuitive format has been significant. The early radicalism of TA has in many respects been tempered and incorporated within the context of mainstream, pathological discourse. Typically intervention focuses on working relationally with the client to identify and either root out, or neutralise, unhelpful archaic Parent residue. Essentially it is an approach that has been preoccupied with the 'frogskin', acquired by the client, (Berne, 1972).

There can be little doubt that Berne's early intentions were to make psychology accessible and encourage a hopeful and efficient method of returning people to happiness. Comparing TA to a Model T Ford, he believed that his ideas were designed to carry the average family to health and happiness, (Crossman). To what extent can this be said of contemporary TA practice and training today? Whilst the core belief of OK-ness has endured, has the hopefulness and radical optimism of early TA become diffused?

Positive Psychology

Psychological frameworks do not have to exist within a healing paradigm;

> *The aim of positive psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life.* (Seligman in Synder & Lopez, 2005 p.3)

I believe that TA is well-placed as a major contributing theory to the growth of positive psychology. As a TA community we have both concepts and language that illuminates how people have the capacity to be wonderful, potent and effective. Examples include;

- accounting for strengths and qualities, as explored by Petruska Clarkson in her innovative perspective on driver behaviour, (Clarkson, 1992)
- building healthy partnerships through using three-cornered contracting, (see English, 1975)
- resisting dysfunctional dynamics and finding solutions drawing on the potential of the Winner's Triangle (Choy, 1992)
- re-framing child development with the expansive and affirming work of Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson, (1998)

The most comprehensive account incorporating core TA concepts within a health promoting framework is provided by Trudi Newton elsewhere in this journal, (Newton, 2007).

These ideas, rooted for the most part in classic Bernian theory, resonate strongly with the objectives of positive psychology theorists. Within the overall goal of re-balancing a deformed model of psychology, the positive psychology movement seeks treatment that 'is not just fixing what is wrong; it also is about building what is right', Furthermore, that 'Psychology is not just about illness or health; it is also about work, education, insight, love, growth and play', (Seligman in Snyder & Lopez, 2005 p. 4).

Here, then, is a movement that echoes the hopeful radicalism which Berne succeeded in generating fifty years ago. However, I do not believe that we necessarily need to look outside the TA community to identify positive psychology practitioners. The emergence of developmental transactional analysis is increasingly aligned with a positive perspective on psychology. If we return to the diagram at the opening of this paper, the inversion of the conventional egostate model becomes more than a playful curiosity. It too is created intuitively and also has sound - and different - moral origins.

By reversing the Parent and Child egostates there is a recognition that in healthy individuals the Parent wisdom, security and surety both ground and uphold the desire to be alive, energised in the Child egostate, mediated by the 'integrating Adult', (Temple, 1999). It is as if symbolically the Parent egostate is the offered open hand from which the hopes and aspirations of the Child can lift the whole individual (as opposed to flying off, free and disconnected from the Adult and Parent).

As a transactional analyst I want a model that describes what I am seeking out with others; that captures how we might experience transformation, through in-the-moment action/reflection, with an authentic OK-OK regard for one another; the C-A-P model symbolises this precisely.

Finally, and importantly, by forging closer theoretical ties with positive psychology we may continue to fuel the political activism so prevalent in TA. Here Seligman claims the civic arena as a legitimate territory for the psychologist;

> *At the group level, [positive psychology] is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic' (Seligman, 2005).*

This challenge to the narcissistic potential for individuated psychology approaches was succinctly spotted earlier by Mary Goudling in her thoughts about cure;

> *We therapists have not done well in imposing a social conscience on our clients, who therefore may be happy curing themselves while ignoring the world…We can learn and teach the joy of participation in world change. And that joy – the joy of turning outward to the world – is, I believe, the finest and richest of personal cures.* (Goulding, 1980 p.134)

If TA began as a radicalising model for changing the world it was in part due to the organic nature of Berne's original ideas. Organic in the sense that they have the capacity to evolve and adapt and incorporate the external and internal influences that inevitably arise over time. As transactional analysts let us enjoy this freedom to adapt and explore whilst having due regard for our enduring values of respect, reflection and the ever-present potential for transformation.

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You must be the change you want to see in the world
Mahatma Gandhi

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