

TA- a question of identity

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Is an article without circles and arrows and without usual TA-concepts or terminology is a TA-article? This question touches our identity.

In the last five years I met at least two times a point when I lost my identity as a transactional analyst. I knew better what I did not want to be identified with, than I could say what then would remain.

One of the things I did not want to be identified with seems now to become history: This was the superficial and placative use of TA and childlike (sometimes childish) behavior in the scene. When we are in a nasty mood, we call this Mickey Mouse TA - and it did cost us a lot of reputation in fields with high professional standards.

This kind of dealing with psychology, especially TA does have the function of building up conventions, which are attractive to many people for some time, because there is a need for new ways to experience and to behave outside of the conventional frame of reference. And it is also attractive to people who want to have the world simple, too simple.

The question is what happens when the fashion passes by. What happened to TA in the United States? What is going to happen in Europe?

The other point of identity crisis had to do with TA-theory. Eric Berne and his followers gave us a set of practically valuable concepts that seemed to me for a long time very clear. But when I really wanted to investigate some of them theoretically, I found a patchwork of creative ideas. But the viewpoint out of which the basic TA-terms have been used, the implications that go with them and the consequences that come out of them, have often been inconsistent and unclear. First I thought, something is wrong with my understanding of TA, but now I am convinced that this has to do with the theoretical foundation and conventions to deal with theory in the TA-community. I was not able to teach TA-theory in an engaged way any longer, because I lost my believe in the concepts, and this irritation was good.

In the meanwhile, I had been trained for some years in systems therapy with the

Milan Group (Gianfranco Cecchin, Luigi Boscolo and others), and I found a new theoretical meta orientation in system theory and theories of the construction of reality. I studied the approach of the two chilenian neuro-biologists Umberto Maturana and Francesco Varela, as well as the ideas of Gregory Bateson and the Palo Alto Group, and others.

I was tempted to look for a new identity and to call myself a systemic therapist. But then I studied again "TA in Psychotherapy", Eric Berne's first basic book in TA that was published in 1961, and I found there again a highly interesting and at it's time a very modern way of a new conceptualization of psychotherapy. This encouraged me to stay and to think through many TA-concepts from a systemic perspective. I have written down these thoughts in my textbook: Systemic TA (German language only).

Today I don't believe in Transactional Analysis any longer. But this does not matter because we don't need believers. My impression is often, that TA-terms or graphics are often used in the professional intercourse to say: I want to be in the same club. A candidate of mine said after the last conference: In some presentations there are circles on the blackboard like the advertisements background of a tennis-match. They give the right to play there but do not serve the game.

We need high-standard professionals using TA-concepts to describe situations and problems, and to talk about possible steps in treatments and dealing with situations. For that we need to improve our qualification to take a meta-stance to our tools, to our patterns of explanations and professional conventions, so that we understand the language-tools and conceptualizations that are pulled together as the contents of TA so far. It is not done at this point to have the general sight that theory is a map and not the territory, and then still using the map with little awareness of its impact on how we deal with reality.

What we need to learn is to resist to our tendency of reification of TA-concepts. The term reification is used, when the ways of seeing things become objects themselves.

The most misused term in this respect is the term Ego-state. It is not a thing. It is a logical structure to differentiate between phenomena. I have discussed many TA-concepts in my manuscript "Systemic TA", going back to the original questions.

TA-concepts are no answers. They are examples of questions. They are based on assumptions that go along with implications and consequences we should become aware of.

I do not longer use the terms Parent, Adult and Child because they are misleading. Instead I use the original terms of Eric Berne "Exteropsychic system, Neo-psychic system and Archeopsychic system" when I talk structurally in the original sense. I do use very seldom graphics, because they stimulate reification very much. Especially I use the three circles only very seldom. As I have discussed in my textbook about Systemic Transactional Analysis, the three circles do only make sense in real structural analysis and not in functional analysis. And there the three circles mark a specific differentiation between three logical types of Ego-states. This is all "TA in Psychotherapy", Eric Berne, 1961.

Excuse (Digression)

For example, to diagnose a behavior as a symbiotic behavior means, that I look at a behavior out of the perspective of relationship, and within that perspective, I differentiate between behavior I put in the category "symbiosis" and other behavior I do not put into that category. If somebody else is describing this same behavior under energy perspectives, he may not put it into the context of relationship, but he may put it into the context of physical conditions or other contexts. If we would be exact in our language, we should say: We look symbiotically at a behavior. This clarifies that symbiosis is a viewpoint of the observer in the first place.

If we get aware that this is true concerning all TA-concepts, than we change our attitude in using those concepts. We do not longer ask how does this or that behavior fit into TA-models; for example we do not ask in which Ego-state intuition is located.

Instead I ask what is the question I have concerning a specific situation, what are the implications of my questions, and what are the consequences which will follow when I get an answer in the frame of reference of my question. What reality do I invent and introduce to the situation using this or that question.

The next step then is to examine, whether TA-concepts are useful as an investigation-schema to follow my questions. Do the implications and consequences of the concepts match my viewpoint and the consequences I am after?

Eric Berne himself uses the same terms and the same circles to deal with very different questions than investigating the origins of Ego-states. So we have a long tradition of using three circles, when we do not deal with full Ego-states structure) and when we do not separate them into three logical types. The term "Parent" is not precise, because it is often used for Ego-states that are not from parents, and the term "Child" is not precise, because it is also used for Ego-states that are

early in adult-life, but not actual as a definition for Adult says. As I said, these terms are as well used to describe expression qualities and functions and not Ego-states, what is a very different direction of asking questions.

- End of Digression –

But don't we get into a severe identity-problem, when we do not use circles and arrows and do not (or seldom) use the terms Parent, Adult, Child? Aren't these important external signs for the identity of a transactional analyst? Historically the answer, I think, must be yes, but I hope that in future it will be no.

What is my identity as a transactional analyst besides using circles, arrows or terms like Parent, Adult, Child? What is TA besides the contents of current TA-concepts?

I try to start an identity-discussion in the TA-field. I hope we will find ways to know who we are besides TA-concept and models. This will give us the freedom on the contents-level to discuss and restate the basic models from modern viewpoints. If we are identified with contents, we will probably not have the courage to do so.

I will now discuss six identity-building areas that are important to me:

1. analysis by transactions
2. developing models to describe transactions
3. context awareness
4. TA - a cybernetic model
5. TA - an experimental approach
6. culture of the TA-community

ANALYSIS BY TRANSACTIONS

The first identity-building factor in TA is to me, that transactions are my most important focus of attention. We learn to relate every hypothesis we have about a client or a situation to observable units of communication, and to relate every assumption of effective treatment to transactions that are carrying our ideas about what we are doing. And we carefully watch the direct reactions of our clients to our communication.

In Switzerland, Leonhard Schlegel has suggested in the German language the term "Transaktionale Analyse", what means "analysis by transactions", and I think this is the right term in German, because we do not only analyze transactions, we also analyze other things, but we do it by the means of transactions. We have

developed a basic vocabulary to differentiate between different kinds of transaction and personality-parts that are involved. We also focus on patterns of transactions, as a game-theory does, and in life-long patterns of life-styles etc. So the first identity-building factor is that we focus on transactions and patterns of transactions.

The second is that in TA we have and still develop pragmatically useful concepts describing kinds of patterns of transaction. So the developing of our concepts is primarily oriented on communication. If we describe internal processes, we do also describe them in terms of internal transaction as far as this is possible.

The third identity-building factor I would like to introduce in the TA-community is what I call "the context-awareness". This is coming out of the systemic approach and the approach of constructing realities.

Context-awareness means that we are aware that we are inventing realities by what we are doing and how we do define and understand the situation and ourselves. This means awareness of the kind of reality we introduce to ourselves and to the situations (in which we are acting) by using our way of focusing and our TA-concepts and TA-procedures. It means that we do not use TA-terms and concepts only because we have learned them, but that we can explicate what it really means to use this or that racket definition. It means awareness, what kind of family-picture, for example, we are introducing when we use a script matrix with father, mother and one child, and not using a script matrix including uncles, siblings, friends, an important teacher, etc. It means that we do not in the first place invest in more elaboration of known concepts, but more into the process of stepping back and reminding ourselves that there was once a landscape that was tried to describe in these maps (concepts are maps), and that the description was tried to make in a specific context with specific implications and consequences.

In the Helo-book Eric Berne reminds us: "First look at the landscape and then on your map, not the other way around." He also mentioned that Prokrustes is the saint of psychologists and sociologists. Prokrustes was a hijacker who caught people and put them either in a too large or into a too small bed. In order to make everything fit, he both stretched people and cut them to the right size.

Holy Prokrustes, let us at least know what we do!

The important outcome of context-awareness is that we don't learn just to use tools, but we learn to understand how tools are made by thinking about for what and in which context these tools have been invented, and which optional tools would have been possible to develop at that given moment. Context-awareness includes also awareness how therapeutic situations are different from one

another, and that we are capable to invent new tools for every therapeutic situation, instead of fitting therapeutic situations into tool-schemata we have overtaken. If we exercise this a lot - and I do it with my training-group over and over again - then the spirit of the inventors of TA will come back to us all, and we will re-invent TA according to the needs of our time.

TA - A CYBERNETIC MODEL

Eric Berne was very much interested in cybernetics and he started to conceptualize TA from a cybernetic viewpoint, for example by defining an Ego-state as a system of emotions, attitudes and behaviors, and allowing us to define the specification or generalization of this system according to our question we have. As I mentioned before, we also used the terms Archeo-psychic system, Neo-psychic system and Extero-psychic system, what I find much better than Child, Adult and Parent.

The Cybernetics have been in the early beginnings that time. That is why one of the problematic thoughts of Eric Berne was that he expected that all psychic and social processes one day could be described as data processing. With the other foot he still was very much in the psychoanalytic viewpoint, although he wanted to go beyond this tradition.

My understanding is that if we want to develop Eric Berne's basic ideas of social psychiatry further, we should go into the direction of re-formulating many TA-concepts out of the viewpoint of a new understanding of Cybernetics and communication-theory. A do not think it makes sense to go back to psychoanalytic approaches. Besides any theoretic arguments we would have on that side, I cannot imagine the identity of TA in the future being too close to psychoanalysis. But I can imagine an identity of TA being reformulated and practiced out of a systemic viewpoint, because systemic therapy has a good general idea, but lacks of many of the qualities of TA can offer. If I expand my frame of reference to a deep-psychology, I refer to Carl Gustav Jung and his followers, because this psychology is not reductionistic and much richer.

But let me mention that we can certainly not follow this approach with the idea that TA should be for professionals simple, that it should be possible to explain the professional frame-work of TA to a 5-year-old. If we limit ourselves to that, then there will be no chance to reach the professional standards we need. I also think that this would be a misunderstanding of Eric Berne. When I tried to figure out what he meant by the idea of keeping TA very simple, then this had to do with his idea, that TA should be taught to patients, and certainly for patients it should be simple enough that they do understand without adapting too much to an artificial professional language. And may be by the times Eric Berne developed

his ideas, it was necessary to have a contrast to psychoanalytic speculations that he experienced as far away of the clients reality.

I personally do not use TA-language with clients at all, because I think the normal language is much richer than TA is, and I think it is very necessary that each trans-actional analyst learns to put his professional terms into rich and understandable every-day-language. I use TA-language as a teaching and supervision tool between professionals. There is no need that it is limited to the understanding of a 5-year-old, because all my candidates are older.

Sometimes when I try to introduce quite unfamiliar systemic ideas and discussions of meta-standpoints to colleagues, then I get a bored or angry reaction saying, they don't understand this because it's not simple enough. It may be that you feel that reaction to my speech right now, too. I ask you, please do not stick to that reaction; it is not easy to invite us all into complex new ideas and understandings of TA. We need discipline. My forecast is that TA will not survive as a high-professional standard community if we do not train this discipline. Certainly at the beginning this is not easy, because we are used to think, speak and act differently.

TA - AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

My impression in the TA-scene is that there is still an implication that really qualified work means to generate a context of personal histories of people involved in a situation with the consequence that a kind of regression work, if possible with heavy emotion, should be done to do really profound work. This is a habitual explanation pattern that is found in Eric Berne's work a lot, but not defined as dominant. Eric Berne said, that working with childhood traumata is the focus of classical psychoanalysis that is a very specified sub-category of structural analysis. I have a strong preference for renewing the social psychiatry approach in clinical work.

I know that I quote parts of Eric Berne's work that support my suggestions. Anyone who wants to support another more psychoanalytic orientated work will find as much good quotes to be justified. The consequence of that is in my opinion that we have to start the discussion in the context of today again. Eric Berne was in between; let's go beyond.

Even in the clinical context I think we should not habitually generate the context of the personal history of a person, but focus in the first place on what Eric Berne has called "the predominance of reality testing and social control". I personally do not focus more than 10% of my clinical work to the personal (maybe traumatic) history of my patients, although I do also work with psychiatric patients. I am more

interested in the question how a patient and the social context he lives in is re-inventing a problematic behavior each day, and what are the feed-back-loops of maintaining conditions of problematic experienced behaviors. And I generate other contexts to invent and introduce to my client-systems new ideas to create forward-loops in order to provide new reality-options.

I want TA to be an experimental approach that does not habitually by convention but phenomena into the context of child-history, but allows the other thousand possibilities of generating contexts of phenomena to be as important, and everybody to experiment creatively with those contexts in his field of application. The major aim is to irritate the conventional frame of reference of the client-systems, so that new views, new experiences, new behaviors, new relationships, new understanding and new orientations to the future can be developed. We should be aware that working with the so-called history is working with a metaphor, a story about the past invented in the presence to provide an explanation and a symbiotic domain to work with.

Max Frisch, a Swiss author, writes: "At one point in their life people invent a story that they think is their life. People usually invent stories of their childhood that are a background (and often a justification) to their present behavior and to their restricting orientation to the future. If therapists help to invent new stories and call that working through something in a child-ego-state, that this is one ok-option."

We should not stick to or return to a reductionistic TA, but proceed to TA as an experimental approach. There are lots of other contexts to be generated and metaphors to be invented in communication-processes that help people to re-orient them towards present and future and so open up new, more satisfying realities.

The sixth identity-building area is the culture of the TA-community. In an editors conference of the German TA-Journal we discussed whether this or that article is still TA, and we had problems to define what is still TA and what is not TA. Finally we came to the conclusion: TA is, what transactional analysts do.

This raises the questions, who are we and what is typically for us to do. I do not talk now about differences in our orientations, in our thinking and our approaches. I talk about what is the shared culture of TA.

This is first that we have International standards and exchange. You can go everywhere in the world with the credit you have got in TA-training and continue your training, and you don't have to re-study, because the TA-community elsewhere has different conventions how to do it right.

Second is that the TA-community always was engaged in problems of the society

beyond the specific professional questions.

Third is that we have high professional standards and that the roles we can play in TA-associations as practitioner, as a supervisor, as instructor, as examiner or supervising examiner, are based on qualification in the first place. Those qualifications you have to prove to be a board of independent examiners. In our system there is little chance for a training culture of symbiotic (corruptive) relationships in the long run, because all certifications are the result of an independent examination.

I also appreciate very much the freedom for each candidate and each trainer to build professional training relationship, to say yes or no to a potential partner or a specific relationship with him, without negative consequences in the community. If a candidate thinks that he has trouble with the trainer, there are ok-ways to change and to finish with his or her training without disadvantages.

And a fourth thing is coming in, and I want to direct your attention to something that is new in the examination procedures of EATA. The theory-oriented questions and the written examinations are no longer defined in terms of TA-concepts on a content level. They are all defined in general questions like what TA-concepts (and other concepts) do you use to describe patterns of communication or to describe life-long patterns of life-style.

The candidate is not forced to learn the one or the other concept, because he has to do with it in the examination. He can choose concepts he really uses and he really has integrated into his work. We also have now some re-focusing on professional competence as represented in the written examination. I do not want to stress this point too much right now. The key word is tobleron concept of TA-competence. I expect a profound influence on training and supervision in Europe.

These changes are so important, because the examinations are a major orientation to the training culture, and by this to culture in TA. The permission included in that is: you are really allowed to choose within the known TA-concepts, and you only have to show thorough competence in those concepts you have chosen. You are clearly allowed to say that you do not know other concepts. This helps to have an almost repressions-free learning-climate.

May be, you do not find so important what I told you right now, but I say this with the background of years of experiences with university didactic. What usually happens there is, when commissions sat together to define standards of university training, they did two things: they enlarged the canon of what you should know in a way, that everybody certainly could not fulfill these requirements, but the fiction was that you should. This is the source of over-

adaptation, because everybody can be proven not knowing enough, if the examiner wants to do that. The other mistake that is usually done is to define the professional level by the examination, without making clear that the training process really leads to this professional standard. University teachers were proud on high standard, meaning proud that so many students failed the examinations.

Another thing is that we have defined professional standards exclusively in terms of professional competence and have not bound it to professional status. We are an organization that qualifies professional communicators in many fields and help them do their job better. When I am asked by TA-beginners what it does mean to do TA, I tell them: TA is to do your job better.

So let's start with your job and your competence you have so far, and see whether and how TA-concepts can help you to do it better. Please do not try to do something that you think it is TA, and do not try to forget your identity in order to get a new one in TA-land.

As a fifth point let me mention another development in TA that I appreciate very much. This is that we overcome to give the priority to the clinical application of TA, that we really moved beyond the sub tile messages and believes, that clinical is better, more profound, some kind of really understanding the human being, while in other fields of application there are done superficial things. We begin to understand that the complexity of an organizational context is as high, sometimes even higher than the clinical context, and that the competence we need there is not lower, but different. And I am glad the representatives of the different application-field really stand to their challenges and to their competence.

Since most of the TA-concepts are developed within clinical frame-works, they have a lot of clinical implications that do not fit much into other application-contexts. There is still the underlining idea active that the analysis of a personality in the sense of dealing with childhood-traumata of a person is deeper, more profound work than working with social control. But let me remind you that the first goal of structural analysis according to Eric Berne in "TA in Psychotherapy" is to establish the predominance of reality-testing Ego-states. Social control according to Eric Berne is control of the individual own tendency to manipulate other people in destructive or wasteful ways and of his tendency to respond without inside or option to the manipulations of others. He also said, experience has shown that such a sequel (he means to attempt the resolution of the archaic conflicts and distortions) is not essential to the therapeutic success of the method, and the decision as to whether or not it is undertaken becomes a problem of clinical judgment and situational freedom.

But let me come back to the implications and consequences for other application

fields. The fact that in most application situations the focusing on personal childhood history and generating strong feelings is inappropriate is not a problem to me, but a chance. It is the chance to develop conceptualizations and professional strategies to work with social systems effectively, without the habitually turned-on context of personal childhood history. A real partnership between the clinical and other fields of application will be fruitful for everybody; especially it will help the clinicians to go beyond the fixations of their own explanation and focusing conventions and stereotype habits. I think there is a big chance for TA to stay open and to develop a high-complex understanding of our cultural life.

These are the things I am proud of and gave me a lot for what I am a professional today also on a gut-level. And it does mean much more to me than the one or the other concept of TA. Being aware of these identity-building factors and not at all afraid to question every TA-concept, if necessary, and every basic assumption we have so far, and to re-formulate things newly out of a new understanding of cybernetics and the construction of reality.