

Pluripotent transactional analysis

This article is about the challenge and the possibilities of professionally reinventing transactional analysis in a contemporary way. And about how we could use our heads for this. I know that some TA friends are suspicious of such a request, as the directly tangible often seems to be more important and plausible. However, I hold it with my revered teacher Fanita English, who is now over a hundred years old. She is said to have exclaimed once in a group of colleagues, where once again emotional consternation was played off against theoretical discussion: "Leave me my head. It is the most valuable thing I have!" And I would like to add: Clever thinking creates meaningful frames for meaningful feeling!

I am now retired myself and enjoy it. As a farewell to the TA communities, I have presented my contributions to TA again in detail in 2017 in German in Zurich and in English in Berlin. With this sketch I am following up on a discussion with Leonard Schlegel in 1997. Extensive treatises would go beyond this scope, but such are available for those interested. Videos and all materials are available for free.

What does professional mean?

Of course, transactional analysts see themselves as professional. But what does that mean? Professional means, according to an everyday understanding, usually competent in the sense of being able to do something well-versed, methodically conscious and with assured quality. A Transactional Analyst is considered professional when she has understood the well-known concepts of TA and can apply them in the assessment of people and in communicating with them. In most cases, the aim is to help others in some way. This includes being able to free oneself and others from entanglements and to positively develop patterns of experience and behavior.

In the meantime, the DGTA website contains a much broader description: "Transactional analysis enables qualified handling of the creation of realities through communication." This creates the challenge of being able to contribute to the creation of reality in many areas and from the perspective of many professions. To achieve this, TA would have to be developed into a pluripotent approach. Before this metaphor is elaborated further, let us first take stock.

So far, so good

Transactional analysis was developed in the second half of the last century in the field of psychotherapy in the USA. As an image of the world and of man, as well as an idea of healthy living, it therefore transports corresponding cultural ideas. If TA had been developed in Japan in the military field, it would certainly have taken on different characteristics. Western psychotherapy at the time believed that it was mainly about helping individuals in one-on-one encounters to identify their biographical burdens and to free themselves from them through corrective experiences.

One of the core ideas of TA is to divide people into parts, namely into ego states. Depending on this, structural or functional considerations are more likely to be made. Here, inner dynamics on the one hand and qualities of action on the other hand are related, whereby ultimately a mechanical model "function is structure in action" is the basis. This implication suggests as a consequence that one can

only really work with function if one understands causal structure: Sound work with ego states requires an understanding of biographical backgrounds. This habitually lived part of the identity of TA makes it difficult to break away from biographical considerations and psychotherapeutic ways of thinking and behaving where TA is to be further developed for completely different fields and services (e.g. political consulting).

What next?

Another core idea of TA: social development is thought of as the sum of the development of individuals, and from a psychological perspective it is attempted to promote this. In many areas, however, it should be more about the development of systems, structures and processes. These can be much more important for frameworks in which individuals and communities can understand, act and develop themselves. If the conditions are not right, everyone gets off track under this burden, albeit in their own way. To help here through individual help would be a bottomless pit. Efforts to shape the situation should be directed equally towards the development of the conditions. This also requires transactional competence. System and cultural development can also bring about more for many individuals from a psychological point of view. Organizing swimming lessons for all can also save more lives than saving individuals.

Such cultural developments require the consideration of content, roles and contexts and systemic contexts and the "orchestration" of the interaction of diverse design factors and levels. All this must be incorporated into transactional competence, which must meet quality criteria from very different perspectives. Optimization from a psychological point of view alone does not go far enough. Professionals today almost always have to be "decathletes". In practice, therefore, almost all TA-people take additional approaches. However, it would be urgently necessary to integrate them programmatically with TA concepts. In this way, the self-image of TA keeps pace with actual developments, and clever programming helps to control developments in practice.

Many professional fields

Even the founding generation made a point of not limiting TA to psychotherapy, but also to fields such as education and training or other professional groups such as nursing staff. However, the models and procedures of TA have hardly been newly developed for this purpose. Despite the increasing efforts to expand the use of TA into other fields of society, such as organizations, it mostly remained the not really reflected "export" of grown self-evident aspects of psychotherapeutic approaches into other fields. Today's challenges include identifying questionable specifications of such exports for other fields. For example, in many questions in the field of organization, the biographical reference implied in the structural model of the ego states would have to be questioned.

As an alternative I have developed the role model for personality and communication. This model does not suggest biography, but life worlds as a primary reference. In order to create starting situations for such developments, TA concepts must be traced back to their basic figures and ideas. With these, members of many professions and service providers in many fields of society are then free and encouraged to make their own specifications that are appropriate for each case. Does TA need to be rethought for such profession- and field-specific needs? How must it be thought about?

Pluripotent qualities

One can imagine this as the retransformation of specific body cells into pluripotent stem cells. Such cells lose their specialization and can then be re-specified in many different ways. Interestingly,

many original definitions of TA were of pluripotent quality. Eric Berne generally defined an egostate as a "coherent system of feelings, thoughts and behaviour". The Parent egostate, for example, as a summary in the structural ego-state area, followed as one possible specification, but eventually dominated the picture. John Watkins, who, like Eric Berne, had studied with Paul Federn and developed the idea of egostates in parallel, defined egostates as ".... organized system of behavior and experience whose elements are connected by a common principle ...".

If one becomes aware of the concept constructions, then instead of reflexive exports, suitable specifications can be consciously chosen and, if necessary, newly differentiated for different fields of work. For example, special structural considerations for trauma therapy or special functional considerations for career counseling. These do not have to be translatable among themselves. After all, one does not expect that a connection has to be established between the specifications liver cell and optic nerve.

Thinking exercises

A conscious handling of implications and consequences requires abstraction, then new specification and concretization. Abstracting is about working out the principles and basic ideas. For this purpose, an exercise that is common practice with Berne can be used: You take a concrete procedure or concept and ask: What is this an example of? Symbiotic relationships are then an example of how responsibility is avoided and invited to "participate". Once this general question is named, it can be transferred to other areas. For example, responsibility avoidance initiated by structures, processes and responsibilities can be identified and transactional concepts for dealing with it can be developed. For the new specification one can always ask for the differences that are decisive for the upcoming communication. So differences that make differences. For the concretization, one can, so to speak, use the theater metaphor to ask for concrete scenes and action structure.

Good luck

Not everyone is interested in such fundamental considerations and often a hotchpotch of concepts is a good way to get ahead in practice. Evolution thrives on compromises that have been formed without a program. But it also had much, much time for that. Whoever discovers talents and interests in him/herself to contribute to a cross-professional development of TA is inspired by this sketch and invited to use my abundant material on the one hand and to follow his/her own path of development on the other.

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