

Psychotherapy Guidebook

TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

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DEFINITION

The theory of “ego states” is the cornerstone of Transactional Analysis (TA). Ego states are coherent organizations of thought, feeling, and behavior that are classified into three categories: Parent, Adult, and Child. Parent ego states are internalizations of the parents’ behavior in relation to the child, often subdivided into the “critical” (e.g., punishing) and the “nurturing” (e.g., protecting). Child ego states are residues of childhood that are reexperienced in later life, wherein the most intense feelings and need states are expressed. The Child ego states are typically subdivided into the “adapted” (i.e., under the influence of parents, whether compliant or rebellious) and the “natural” (i.e., autonomous from parental influence).

The Adult ego state is the objective data processor; it is attuned to external reality and mediates between the Parent and Child ego states. This theory of ego states highlights the parallel between internal conflict and interpersonal behavior and reflects their origin in family interaction patterns. For example, conflict between the adapted-compliant Child and the critical Parent may be manifested internally in guilt feelings, or interpersonally in

ingratiating attempts to please authority figures; these in turn might be traced to the child's early response to an over-controlling parent.

TA assumes that interpersonal interactions are motivated by a need for "strokes" in the form of recognition and contact. On the basis of the intensity and quality of strokes involved, several types of interactions have been distinguished: withdrawal (e.g., isolation), rituals (i.e., stereotyped interactions, such as greeting rituals), activity (i.e., Adult-Adult transactions, such as cooperative work), pastimes (i.e., more extended transactions than rituals), rackets (i.e., attempts to elicit strokes for expressing feelings, such as crying to obtain sympathy), games (typically, defensive interactions with ulterior motives that yield intense, if negative, strokes), and intimacy (i.e., genuine, Child-Child relatedness). Patterns of time structure thus described reflect the person's "existential position," of which there are four major varieties: I'm OK — You're not OK (e.g., intimacy), I'm OK — You're OK (e.g., the TA game of "Now I've got you, you S.O.B."), I'm not OK — You're OK (e.g., the TA game of "Kick me!"), and I'm not OK — You're not OK (e.g., autistic withdrawal).

On the broadest level of analysis, TA employs the concept of "life script," that is a life plan formulated by the Child as a compromise accommodation to parental injunctions. The injunctions are typically restrictions on behavior that are conveyed repeatedly to the child through various nonverbal

behaviors. For example, “Don’t think for yourself!” might be communicated by overprotective nurturing, and the life script adaptation might be alcoholism. Oftentimes a defensive “counterscript” is organized to protect the person from acting out the script decision (e.g., compulsive overwork as a means of avoiding failure and dependency).

HISTORY

Eric Berne (1920-1970) was a psychiatrist who parted with psychoanalytic tradition as he developed TA in the late 1950s. He was interested in lay education, and TA couches much traditional psychodynamic thinking in simple language that can be employed by therapists and patients alike. Thus, TA and psychoanalysis share much in common. The concept of ego state is itself psychoanalytic, and the Parent, Adult, and Child are parallel to the Superego, Ego, and Id. Further, both approaches assume that internal and interpersonal conflict have their origin in family dynamics, and both employ insight-oriented treatment. But TA also shares features with several other therapeutic approaches: for example, with humanistic schools, an emphasis on intimacy, spontaneity, and emotional experience, characteristic of the natural Child; with behavior therapy, an emphasis on behavior change and therapeutic contracts; and with Psychodrama and Gestalt, the techniques of role playing and portraying dreams and fantasies in action rather than words alone.

TECHNIQUE

TA is a theory of personality, not a method of treatment, and the theory has been incorporated into relatively standard treatment modalities. TA is especially well suited to group psychotherapy (and marathon groups) because of its emphasis on the analysis of interpersonal transactions. In general, standard interventions are employed, such as confrontation, explanation, and interpretation. But somewhat unique to TA is the practice of teaching the theory to the patients; many attend workshops in TA theory as they begin treatment. Thus, much of the therapy is conducted in the language of the theory. Patients learn to understand and label their ego states as such, and they analyze their interactions with others in those terms. They learn to identify their games, rackets, existential positions, parental injunctions, script decisions, and so forth. These didactic aspects of TA place a high premium on the role of the Adult ego state as a means of self-regulation and change, but TA therapy is not necessarily a “cognitive” approach. In fact, there is great variation among TA therapists in their emphasis on thinking (e.g., analyzing), feeling (e.g., expressing Child emotion), and action (e.g., practicing new behavior). Indeed, the comprehensiveness and broad applicability of TA concepts allow for their integration into a wide range of therapeutic approaches and styles.

APPLICATIONS

In light of its broad scope and direct appeal, TA has an extraordinarily wide range of applications (see the *Transactional Analysis Journal*). It has been applied to a great variety of clinical problems (e.g., sexual dysfunctions, alcoholism, drug addiction, child abuse, anorexia nervosa, exhibitionism, schizophrenia, and phobias). It has also found many nonclinical applications (e.g., parent counseling and organizational development consulting) and has been employed with a number of special populations (e.g., geriatric patients, prisoners, and the blind). Its popularity as an educational tool is reflected in the large number of workshops and courses given at various educational levels. The International Transactional Analysis Association has also set forth comprehensive standards for its practitioners. An especially effective training method is the supervision group, in which members are therapists in training who alternate roles as therapists and patients, with the leader supervising the treatment *in vivo*. This forum puts into practice the assumption that personal growth and the development of professional competence go hand in hand.