

# the essence of transactional analysis and the challenges and benefits of it in this changing world

Elana Leigh

Thinking about the topic “Professionals in a Changing World from a Transactional Analytical perspective”, I have decided to start by giving some history of the modality’s development and then bring this presentation into the current challenging and changing times.

Transactional Analysis was founded by Eric Berne in the late 50’s and early 60’s. At that time, it was a radical and revolutionary theory based on a philosophy and a political belief that power structures, like the medical model, of which psychoanalysis was a part, should be challenged.

Clients, Berne believed needed to be treated in a relational manner, meaning that more information needed to be shared and that the working relationship needed to be a bilateral agreement, as apposed to a unilateral one.

Research at that time indicated that when patients were given information and treated by the therapist in a manner that respected independent thinking, as well as holding the belief that change was possible, cure and change rates were substantially statistically higher.

Berne changed the field of psychology significantly by adding and stressing the importance of the interpersonal as well as the intrapersonal relationship. Intrapyschic work being the focus of the psychoanalysts at that time, made this the radical approach and model that it was perceived to be.

Berne’s contribution to the field was therefore not dissimilar to what we have recently experienced in the move from one person to two person psychological approaches. He went on to develop Federn and Watkins’ concept

of ego states and created the EGO state model, the famous three circles - Parent, Adult and Child. In the creation of this model Berne brought the understanding of intrapsychic life alive, and people began to have a phenomenological understanding of their many selves and how these selves or ego states did or did not interact. His model of ego states and his radical approach to working ‘transactionally’ was his brilliance, and this has stood the test of time.

Part of Berne’s innovation was that he was stressing the importance of integration at the political, personal, and psychological levels. His theory was, and is, an integrative one where he brought together the psychoanalytic, behavioral and humanistic approaches. It not only offered and offers a sound and coherent theoretical model, but also a methodology which was lively, dynamic and at times appeared magical. This after all was the revolutionary era where change was believed to be possible, and people were freely talking out against all forms of oppression.

So where does that leave us in 2008?

My suggestion is that in our challenging times we have perhaps digressed from Berne’s original ideology which was about holding and working with the socio- political context.

If change is about challenging old systems, then as Berne suggested counseling and psychotherapy are inherently political. If this is true then my challenge to us all is, what are we doing with our privileged knowledge?

In these challenging political and personal times integration is central to mental health. Creating cohesion out

of fragmentation is integral to what we do in the world of counseling and psychotherapy. We are expected to know and talk many more languages than the one we have been taught, and here I am using the word language metaphorically. We are required to work across boundaries and with diversity. This is crucial in a world where difference is more present than ever before, and yet paradoxically, less tolerated. We can only walk the talk of integration, inclusivity and diversity when we perhaps hold true to our political values.

Bearing this in mind as transactional analysts, then, our challenge is to continue to develop our theories, ethics and practice, but not without reclaiming our philosophical and political roots. In the process of integrating our heritage which inhabited a radical and political edge, we will surely be healing the past in the present to enable a different future. We will do this on a personal, psychological and political level. ◆

**Elana Leigh**  
MSc Integrative  
Psychotherapy  
(Middlesex, UK).  
B Soc Sci (SW)  
(Cape Town).

Teaching and  
Supervising Transactional  
Analyst (ITAA). Certified Transactional  
Analyst (ITAA). Elana is the founder  
and director of the Australian Centre  
for Integrative Studies which offers  
psychotherapy training, supervision and  
professional development courses. She has  
a private practice in Sydney.

