From Autonomy to Contact

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Abstract

Autonomy is one of the key concepts in transactional analysis. A six-year research project in the Netherlands offers new indications of what this concept really means. Factor analysis was used to look for confirmation of Berne's hypothesis—that autonomy is manifested in the person's capacity for awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy— as well as the suggestion by other authors who added a fourth capacity: responsibility. The results show a different and interesting outcome. The data provides a powerful indication that autonomy is nothing more (or less) than good contact.

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Autonomy

Autonomy is a core concept in transactional analysis. Every reference in the transactional analysis literature to growth, changes in script decisions, development, education, healing, or analysis is legitimated when it leads to autonomy. The assumption is that all learning is directed toward autonomy, and contracts are used to pinpoint that goal. Autonomy can be considered an ideal manifestation deriving from axiomatic basic assumptions in transactional analysis as described by Hagehülsmann (1984). The attainment of autonomy is manifested by the release or recovery of three capacities— awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy (Berne, 1964/1967, p. 158)—along with a fourth (responsibility) added by later authors (Bonds-White, 1995; van Beekum, 1995). Awareness refers to an immediate sensuous openness to perception in the here and now as well as an unrestrained intensity in present sensations and feelings. Spontaneity involves freedom and the ability to immediately express these feelings and sensations. Intimacy refers to the possibility of engaging in candid, authentic, loving, and reciprocal relationships. Originally the concept of autonomy emphasized only the possibility of recapturing individual autonomy. More recently, social responsibility has become more salient as questions of a sociopolitical nature have been increasingly incorporated into transactional analysis (Hagehülsmann, 1984, p. 47). Thus, responsibility stands for the notion that one's actions are always influencing and influenced by a wider context in which one needs to take a responsible stand. In this respect, responsibility pays tribute to systemic thinking.

So far, no research has been done to test these postulated four capacities related to the concept of autonomy.

Description of the Research Project

This research project was sponsored by IAS (Institute for the Application of Social Sciences) International. This institute, based in the Netherlands, is active internationally in training, supervision and coaching, and organization and management development. One of its projects is an intercultural two-year training program called "Working on the Boundary." This program was developed for advanced trainers, consultants, coaches, and counselors; every year since 1991 a new group of students has entered. The program's core methods include systems approaches, gestalt, group relations thinking, and transactional analysis. A leading assumption has been that this training would help trainees develop greater autonomy (in terms of the four capacities mentioned earlier) in their professional lives.

Originally the institute was interested in finding a way to measure the effects of the training on trainees. In addition, the program trainers were interested in the relationship between the training program and participants' gains in autonomy in their professional work. For this reason a questionnaire was developed as a research instrument.

The first step in the research process was to test the construct validity of the questionnaire

with regard to the four capacities described earlier as representing autonomy. This article is about the first step. (The longitudinal aspects of the research will be considered in a later article.) After six years of collecting, the data were analyzed by a psychology doctoral student with support from the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands (Krijgsman, 1999). Since the data were mainly used for an exploratory test of the questionnaire's construct validity, the central question in the research was: "What does the instrument really measure?" This suggested the following research hypothesis: The questionnaire measures four separate capacities related to autonomy: awareness, intimacy, spontaneity, and responsibility.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was developed through a study of relevant literature in transactional analysis. The sources included the *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* from 1962 to 1970, the *Transactional Analysis Journal* from 1970 to 1994, and about 20 of the most important books on transactional analysis. These were scanned for statements about autonomy and its operationalization. A list of the most frequently found items or indicators of the four capacities is shown in Table 1.

The next step was to make a further selection and to create conceptual meaning for each of these items. A pilot group of students ($n = 20$) was chosen. Their selection was based on the fact that they were representative of the training population and had advanced status in the program; all were in their second year of training and were familiar with self-reflection. The students in the pilot group were individually asked to look at each item and to give the opposite meaning of that item according to their own view. The thinking behind this was that by creating an opposite meaning, the real

Table 1 Most Frequently Mentioned Items Cited in the Transactional Analysis Literature as Related to the Four Aspects of Autonomy			
Awareness	**Spontaneity**	**Intimacy**	**Responsibility**
eidetic perception	options	liberation	holds position
transcends classification	independent	perceptive	challenges authority
no hiding away	expresses feelings	respect	has own thoughts
no symbiosis	expresses thoughts	works from proximity	maintains own behavior
access to internal dialogue	does not play games	complementary	subjective interpretation
interpretation	owns own shadow	pure	active
creates realities	chooses freely	dilute	does not take over
intuition of possible	rises above programming	encouraging	stands for own needs
perception of present	open mind	mutually free	individuation
puts into order	rebellious	gives permission	separateness
deals with complexity		contact	space
expresses newness		stimulation	
		recognition	

meaning of the original item would become clear. This method is related to the personal construct psychology developed by Kelly (1955). Given the item "white," for example, one person may think of the opposite as "black" while another may think of the opposite as "colored."

The meanings were collected and compared, and the most frequently shared meanings were listed. Meanings that were too unusual or infrequent were thus removed from the list. Working with these opposite meanings also provided a direction for the creation of a continuum for each of the items. From these results the questionnaire was created. Finally, the questionnaire rated 24 items indicating the four capacities. Each item and its opposite were represented as polarities on a six-point scale. The respondents were then asked to rate themselves on these scales (see Table 2).

Research Population

Trainees in the two-year "Working on the Boundary" program were asked to voluntarily fill in the questionnaire at the start and at the end of their training. In this way, data were collected from 74 respondents over a period of six years. These 74 respondents represent 69% of the total research group, with 66% being female and 33% being male. They have schooling to the level of higher education (55%) and university (45%) and represent an average of more than 10 years of working experience. All respondents were Dutch, although half of them had non-Dutch ancestry. They ranged in age from the late twenties to 55. The research population clearly represented the training population of the "Working on the Boundary" program. It was also representative of professionals who come into an advanced, process-oriented training with an accent on both professional and personal development. However, the high number of academics and women in the research population may not be fully representative of professional trainers, consultants, coaches, and counselors as a whole, not to mention the fact that there was no international representation.

Table 2 Items Used in Questionnaire, Including Their Opposite Meanings			
Awareness		**Spontaneity**	
creates realities	– makes restrictions	expresses feelings	– withholds feelings
perception of present	– perception of past	rises above programming	– withdraws
access to internal dialogue	– closed off from internal dialogue	expresses thoughts	– keep thoughts to oneself
deals with complexity	– simplifies	is independent	– is dependent
puts into order	– creates chaos	open mind	– prejudiced
intuition of possible	– static and rigid	rebellious	– overadaptive
Intimacy		**Responsibility**	
encouraging	– discouraging	challenges authorities	– follows authorities
recognizes	– discounts	has own thoughts	– takes over ideas
gives permission	– prohibiting	maintains own behavior	– lets happen
makes contact	– is isolated	active	– passive
works from proximity	– works from a distance	stands for own needs	– follows needs of others
respect	– despise	holds position	– lets go

Results

The 24 items, which were to represent the four capacities related to autonomy, were analyzed in two ways. The first—which we call the theoretical route because its assumptions are based in transactional analytic theory—consisted of a factor analysis that searched for the four capacities (awareness, spontaneity, intimacy, and responsibility) by making the analysis program search for those four components. The second way of analyzing—which we call the empirical route—involved an empirically guided analysis. The empirical findings in the data set were the basis of this analysis. An exploratory factor analysis was done without any preset limitations or specific search for factors. Further research decisions were made on this basis.

The Theoretical Route

The factor analysis that searched for the four capacities in the data set revealed that no such division could be made. The four specific aspects of autonomy did not return in the outcome of this analysis. However, the analysis showed small groups of items related to a particular capacity (e.g., spontaneity) that had a strong correlation with one another. This gave rise to the idea that reliability analysis of the items that comprised the theoretical capacities or factors would provide more insight about how these were constructed in the data set. This reliability analysis also did not show such good results. Only the intimacy factor had a reasonable reliability of .69 (see Table 3). With the

other factors it was necessary to delete some items from the original set that together formed the four theoretical factors. But even this deletion of items did not lead to the results for which we had hoped. As mentioned before, only the intimacy factor lived up to the standards of statistical research. Thus, so far the research had not yielded the anticipated results and our hypothesis remained unsupported. However, the empirical route did show some surprising findings.

The Empirical Route

An initial exploratory factor analysis in which the statistical program had the freedom to search for any number of components in the data set showed that up to six components could be present. By running several other factor analyses with the command to search for either 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 components, we found that the data set could best be described by two components. Further statistical analysis of this two-component model showed that the reliability of these two factors was good (even after controlling for outliers) and that the correlation between the two was low (.201) (see Table 4). It was especially important that the correlation between these two components was not significant. When the correlation is low this means that the two factors have little joined variance together and are thus two separate parts of one concept (e.g., autonomy). If the correlation had been high, this would have meant that they

Table 3 Cronbach's Alfa Reliability Score	
Original factor Awareness	.3205
Original factor Spontaneity	.6464
Adapted factor Spontaneity (1 item deleted)	.6614 *
Original factor Intimacy	.7470 *
Adapted factor Intimacy (3 items deleted)	.7923 *
Original factor Responsibility	.5666
Adapted factor Responsibility (1 item deleted)	.4363
* Cronbach's Alfa should be bigger than .65	

Table 4 Reliability and Correlation of Components A and B		
	Cronbach's Alfa Reliability score on t = 1	Cronbach's Alfa Reliability score on t = 2
Component A "Contact with Self"	.7623	.6885
Component B "Contact with Others"	.7652	.6786
Correlation A & B .201		

shared too much variance; this is an indication that the meaning of both factors has too much overlap and therefore the factors are not separate enough. However, in this case the correlation was low, so the overlap between the two components was minimal, and each component could be viewed as describing a specific part of the overall concept.

What Do These Components Actually Describe?

Looking at the contents of the items that comprised the two components, revealed an interesting, exciting finding. Analysis of the items of component A showed that all were based on aspects of contact with self. Items such as "active/passive, access to internal dialogue/closed off from internal dialogue, have own thoughts/take over ideas, and stand for own action/let happen" represent aspects of how one is in contact with one's own needs, how one puts oneself into the contact or action, or how one takes a stand for oneself in the world. We call this component "contact with self."

When looking at the content of the items of component B, a totally different image emerged. These items had much more to do with contact with others—that is, the basic position or initial attitude one has toward another person when interacting with him or her. Items such as "express thoughts/keep thoughts to oneself, creating realities/make restrictions, encouraging/discouraging, open minded/prejudiced, and recognize/discount" formed the core elements of this new component, which we called "contact with others."

Conclusion

The research described here shows that the former operationalization of Berne's concept of autonomy into the three capacities of awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy, with the addition of responsibility as added by later authors, needs reevaluation. Earlier discussion among transactional analysis practitioners about the meaning of autonomy becomes new input based on the results of this research. This research supports the hypothesis that operationalization of these four capacities based on transactional analysis literature is worthwhile but not in its original meaning. The empirical data from this research sample revealed that the original four capacities could better be described by two components that cover contact with self and contact with others: I and I-You as described by Buber (1923/1970). In addition, this meaning bridges the gap between transactional analysis and gestalt. The results suggest that the transactional analytic concept of autonomy actually consists of the two basic components related to the gestalt concept of contact.

Of course, more research is needed to investigate these findings further, but so far this project interjects new, empirical input into the discussion about reconceptualizing the transactional analytic concept of autonomy. We would like to leave you with a more philosophical question: Can one be autonomous without contact at all? Just as we need boundaries to experience freedom, perhaps we can only be autonomous when there is contact with others. Real autonomy may indicate that we can fully experience ourselves as we move between contact with ourselves and contact with another.

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Note: The statistical analysis program used in this research was SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). See the website at http://www.spss.com .

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