BOOK REVIEW · 2011

Book Review: Ann Heyno and colleagues on Transactional Analysis

Michael Soth

A review of recent developments in Transactional Analysis — examining how the TA tradition has engaged with relational and intersubjective perspectives, and assessing the degree to which these engagements represent genuine paradigm shifts versus the addition of relational ideas to an essentially unchanged foundational framework.

KEY THEMES

— TA and the relational turn

— What relational TA actually means

— TA concepts revisited from an intersubjective perspective

— Strengths and limitations of TA as an integrative framework

— The contribution of TA to wider psychotherapy

TA and the Relational Challenge

Transactional Analysis has always had a distinctive relationship with the question of integration. Its foundational concepts — ego states, transactions, scripts, life positions — were designed from the beginning as accessible, demystifying tools which practitioners from various backgrounds could use. Berne's ambition was a psychotherapy which could be understood by both the professional and the layperson.

This accessibility is one of TA's great strengths. But it can also be a limitation: concepts which are designed to be clear and practically usable may be resistant to the kinds of complexity, paradox, and uncertainty which a genuinely relational or intersubjective approach requires. The question which recent developments in relational TA are engaging with is whether TA's foundational framework can be genuinely expanded to include relational and intersubjective perspectives, or whether the attempt results merely in relational language being added to an essentially unchanged structure.

What Relational TA Offers

The best of recent relational TA — represented in the work reviewed here — does achieve something genuine. The recognition that the therapeutic relationship is not merely a context for TA interventions but is itself the primary vehicle of therapeutic action; the acknowledgement that the therapist's own script, ego state functioning, and relational patterns are clinically significant; the engagement with intersubjectivity and mutual recognition — these represent real developments in TA's self-understanding.

Particularly valuable is the attention to what happens in charged moments in the therapeutic relationship — when the working alliance is under strain and enactment threatens. This is territory which the earlier TA literature largely avoided, tending to present TA as a fairly smooth collaborative enterprise in which the therapist's analytic clarity guides the process. The relational turn in TA acknowledges that it is not like this — that the therapist is inevitably caught up in the client's patterns, and that this is not a failure to be corrected but a feature to be worked with.

Limitations and Hopes

The limitation I see in much of relational TA is a tendency to add relational concepts at the periphery without questioning the foundational framework sufficiently. The tripartite ego-state model, for instance, is a brilliant clinical heuristic — but it is also a fairly static structural model which may not adequately capture the dynamic, moment-to-moment

fluidity of how ego states actually function in the relational field.

Similarly, the script concept — however important as a way of understanding the patterning of relational experience — can easily become reified into a more deterministic framework than Berne intended. The relational challenge to TA is to hold the script concept more lightly: as a description of tendency rather than a fixed structure, as something which is co-created and maintained relationally rather than simply residing in the individual.

My hope for relational TA is that it continues to engage genuinely with the challenges posed by intersubjective and embodied approaches — not adding them as modules to an unchanged framework, but allowing them to question and enrich the foundational concepts from the inside.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

— Berne, E. (1961) Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy. New York: Grove Press

— Little, M. (2012) Relational TA. Transactional Analysis Journal

— Summers, G. & Tudor, K. (2000) Co-creative transactional analysis. Transactional Analysis Journal 30

— Mitchell, S. (1988) Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis. Cambridge MA: Harvard

— Soth, M. (2013) We are all relational. Transactional Analysis Journal

Published at soth.co.uk · © 2011 Michael Soth · All rights reserved