ARTICLE · 2013

We Are All Relational

Michael Soth

Published in response to Mark Little's piece on Relational TA, this article explores what 'relational' means when applied across different therapeutic traditions — arguing that a genuine relational perspective requires not simply adding relational concepts to existing frameworks, but a fundamental shift in how we understand the therapeutic relationship itself.

KEY THEMES

— What 'relational' means across different traditions

— The difference between relational technique and relational being

— Transactional Analysis and the relational turn

— When 'relational' becomes a new orthodoxy

— The genuinely relational challenge to all traditions

A Response to Mark Little

Mark Little's piece on Relational TA raises questions which resonate beyond the boundaries of TA and apply to virtually every therapeutic orientation. As therapists from different traditions increasingly claim the 'relational' label, it becomes important to ask: what does this claim actually mean? And is there a risk that 'relational' becomes a new orthodoxy — a label which different approaches attach to themselves without fundamentally changing their underlying assumptions?

The claim that 'we are all relational' can mean something genuine and important: that every therapeutic tradition, at its best, recognises the centrality of the therapeutic relationship to healing. But it can also mean something much more limited: that each tradition has added some relational concepts or techniques to its existing framework, without questioning the fundamental paradigm within which it operates.

The genuine relational challenge — which is what I understand by the 'relational turn' — is not the addition of relational ideas but a paradigm shift in how we understand what therapy is and what the therapist's role is within it.

The Relational Turn as Paradigm Shift

The relational turn, properly understood, is not a new technique or a new model — it is a shift in the fundamental assumptions about the therapeutic encounter. Specifically, it involves recognising that the therapist's subjectivity — their own woundedness, their embodied aliveness or deadness, their habitual relational patterns — is not a distortion of the process but constitutively part of it.

In the pre-relational paradigm, the therapist's personal psychology is ideally a neutral background, something to be controlled through personal therapy and supervision so that it does not interfere with the 'real work' of treating the patient. The therapist's job is to apply their knowledge and technique correctly.

In the genuinely relational paradigm, the therapist's personal psychology is not background but foreground — not a potential source of error to be minimised, but a primary vehicle of therapeutic action. The therapist's own wound, enacted in the counter-transference, is where the client's wound is most precisely known and most potentially transformable.

The Challenge for All Traditions

This is the challenge which the relational turn poses to all therapeutic traditions, including TA: can you take your existing theory and practice and genuinely expose it to the implications of a two-person intersubjective paradigm? Or will you add relational concepts at the periphery while keeping the fundamental structure of a one-person psychology intact?

There are no traditions which have fully met this challenge. Every tradition has blind spots — areas where its foundational assumptions predispose it to certain patterns of relating with clients, patterns which it cannot easily see because they are too close to the tradition's core identity.

The most genuinely relational position is therefore not one which claims a particular tradition as relational, but one which holds multiple traditions in creative tension, attending to the conflicts between them as clinically illuminating — rather than resolving those conflicts prematurely in favour of any single framework.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

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

— Benjamin, J. (1990) An outline of intersubjectivity. Psychoanalytic Psychology 7

— Soth, M. (2012) The relational turn. Interview with Nancy Eichhorn, EABP Congress

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

Published at soth.co.uk · © 2013 Michael Soth · All rights reserved