

The Culture of Transactional Analysis: Theory, Methods, and Evolving Patterns

Richard G. Erskine

Abstract

This keynote address, originally delivered on 8 August 2008 at the TA World Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, emphasizes how culture is acquired in three ways: formally, informally, and technically. Transactional analysis is examined as a unique culture that is in the process of continually changing. The author takes a historical perspective to describe how new theories and methods are integrated with core concepts to provide an ever more effective psychotherapy.

I want to talk to you today about the culture of transactional analysis (TA), a culture that I share with all of you, a culture in which I have been immersed for 40 years. Transactional analysis has had a profound influence on my personal and professional life. It has provided an important cultural journey. Undoubtedly, each of you share some of these same influences and have traveled a similar journey. You may also have assimilated other elements of our collective transactional analysis culture than the ones I will mention.

Culture describes a “deep seated system of values, assumptions, and meanings” (Kasier, Hogan, & Craig, 2008, p. 96). The anthropologist Edward Hall (1959) said that our culture controls a broad range of factors in our lives: “Culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual” (p. 35). Culture is composed of the hidden or unaware patterns and rules that govern people’s behavior. Culture is also a form of communication. It reveals a great deal about a person while, at the same time, it hides much more than it reveals. Another anthropologist, Ralph Linton (1945), described culture as providing both the overt and covert assumptions

underlying behavior as well as the patterns controlling our behaviors.

“Cultural climate” is the term used to describe the manifestation of culture in group perceptions and experiences (Reichers & Achniswe, 1990). It is my intention today to stimulate our thinking about the culture of transactional analysis. The cultural climate of TA is based on the perceptions and experiences of our members in the transactional analysis community. It is maintained through our shared theory, philosophy, and certification process. The cultural climate is expanded through articles in the *Transactional Analysis Journal* and in the granting of the Eric Berne Scientific and Memorial Awards. Each of these establishes and maintains a continuity of theory and practice over time while also stimulating changes in our culture.

How is a culture acquired? Hall (1959) described the learning of a culture as occurring in three ways: formal, informal, and technical (pp. 67-68). Formal culture is conveyed by precepts, rules, and principles. It is learned from teachers and mentors who accept the principles as true, and therefore students often learn the principles, theories, and canon without question. They are the “given” of a culture as it is handed down to the younger generation. Some transactional analysis examples include the principle of “I’m OK, You’re OK”; the idea that we are “born princes and princesses and later turn into frogs”; and the theory that scripts are caused by injunctions and decisions. These are three examples of the formal, and unquestionable, transactional analysis culture that I acquired during my training.

When culture is learned formally, it is often a long time before someone questions the truth or logic of the formal precepts. For example, someone once said to me, “If you are not diagramming ego states and transactions, you are not doing TA.” For him, there was no possibility

that the theory of ego states and transactions could be used in ways other than through diagramming. This was presented as a truism that was backed up by quoting Eric Berne. Formal systems of cultures have great tenacity. These formally learned systems of culture pull us to consistency and maintain a sense of cultural continuity.

Informal culture is acquired by observation and imitating a model. In this way, whole aspects of culture are learned without awareness that one is assimilating the cultural patterns and without awareness of the governing principles or rules. We are simply immersed in the culture and accommodate to it without much reason or awareness. We learn a culture informally when we learn it in situ (i.e., by being in the actual situation), such as by watching a master perform his or her craft. Much of the excitement of transactional analysis training in the 1970s and early 1980s was a result of the informal nature of training programs that were highly experiential. Many trainers did live therapy as a model for members of the training group. They demonstrated how transactional analysis was actually practiced. Trainees learned the subtler aspects of the practice of transactional analysis by observation and through actual practice with live supervision.

It is not unusual for elements of a culture that were acquired informally by one generation to become the rules and fixated canon of the next. For example, the principle of “no-suicide contracts” was an important part of many transactional analysis conference discussions in the early 1970s. Many of us learned how and when to use such contracts by both engaging in informal discussions and watching the process used by master therapists. Over the ensuing years, no-suicide contracts have, in some training programs, become a rule to be rigidly followed. Perhaps you have heard colleagues say that if one does not get a no-suicide contract in the first session, then the therapy is unethical, or that one cannot engage in script work until a no-suicide contract is made. These two statements reflect how an informally learned procedure—a method learned by observation, discussion, trial, and error—can be turned into a formal rule. Rather than relying on the necessary

subtle aspects of person-to-person contact that are so essential in supporting a person in making a commitment to live—a quality of contact that is learned through modeling—the techniques for securing an immediate no-suicide contract are, in some training programs, now taught as the “correct” way.

The technical aspects of culture are usually learned through direct and explicit communication by a teacher to a student. This is done in lectures, through formal discussions, or by written works. The transmission of technical culture depends heavily on the teacher’s or author’s capacity to define various elements and their component parts. When we define the various parts of a theory or concept, we are teaching the technical aspects of a culture. For example, some years ago I wrote about the concept of therapeutic attunement and subdivided it into the various component parts of rhythmic attunement, affective attunement, cognitive attunement, and developmental attunement. I described how each was different and essential in establishing interpersonal contact (Erskine & Trautmann, 1996). In doing so, I was attempting to convey the technical aspects of a relational transactional analysis based on the experimentation and discoveries I had made over the previous decade. When people experiment with the technical aspects of culture, variations occur. New technical aspects emerge from what works and what has not worked.

The questions on the written transactional analysis exams are an example of the technical aspects of TA culture. The readers of the exams expect candidates to define the component parts of the theory and application, as well as to describe their own variations of practice. Sometimes the answers are written more formally, as though there is a truth to transactional analysis theory and there are rules that must be followed. Unfortunately, some of the exam readers may also be looking for the truth of transactional analysis theory rather than the practitioner’s understanding of the client and unique application of TA methods.

Cultures are always in development, even when they appear to be static over time. A live culture will continually change. “The characteristic of culture change is that an idea or practice

will hold on very persistently, apparently resisting all efforts to move it, and then suddenly, without notice, it will collapse" (Hall, 1959, p. 87). The emergence of a new concept and a rapid acceptance reflects this characteristic of culture change. Kuhn (1970) called it a "paradigm shift." The culture of transactional analysis is also undergoing a paradigm shift.

Although a few transactional analysts have been emphasizing the centrality of the therapeutic relationship for a long time, it is only in recent years that the quality of the therapeutic relationship has become paramount in the transactional analysis literature and in some training programs. We are in the process of change! We are integrating new perspectives along with our established concepts. Around the world there is an enrichment of transactional analysis theory and methods.

Come with me now as I take you on the journey of my immersion in the culture of transactional analysis. And, as I share with you my stories, perhaps you can also think about how the culture of transactional analysis has influenced you. Have you learned it formally, informally, or by mastering the technology? Was one way dominant in your training? Or, have you learned the TA culture in all three ways?

My first awareness of transactional analysis was in 1966 when I read *Games People Play* (Berne, 1964). Family members had liked this best-selling self-help book and gave it to me to read. I did not like the book! But I do remember appreciating the section on the advantages of games, wherein Berne described psychological homeostasis. That section seemed to be a good link to Freud's theory of primary and secondary gains. The concept of games eluded me until much later. It was not until the 1980s, when I was treating several clients suffering from posttraumatic stress, that I realized how games are a desperate attempt to tell an unconscious story. I was intrigued enough to read Berne's (1961) *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* and was impressed with his theory of ego states and his description of how a psychotherapist could work directly to alleviate painful archaic emotional experience.

In 1969 I had the opportunity to attend a training workshop with David Kupfer, the first

president of ITAA and Eric Berne's office partner in Carmel. Dr. Kupfer was originally a Viennese trained psychoanalyst. He presented ego state theory as a practical tool rather than just a theoretical concept. He related ego states to Freud's ideas of the ego and Paul Federn's concepts of archaic ego feelings and states of the ego. He made the theoretical concept of childhood fixation come alive. He taught about the significance of Berne's development of the concept of Parent ego states and how it was a major advancement on Freud's theory of the superego. I became intrigued with the technical aspects of the transactional analysis culture and joined the ongoing training group, because within Dr. Kupfer's teaching of TA theory, there was a clear explanation of what previously had seemed to be complex concepts.

Following David Kupfer's death, I continued my training with Hedges Capers, who brought humanism to the clinical practice of transactional analysis. Hedge's gentle and humane therapeutic style emphasized empathy, straight-simple conversation, and a positive perspective. Again, I was intrigued, this time by how warmly and caringly transactional analysis theory could be put into clinical practice. Hedges conveyed the informal culture of transactional analysis—a real "I'm OK, You're OK" relationship.

Over the years I was influenced by many other transactional analysis trainers. I will mention only a few. Each represents a particular dimension of transactional analysis theory and practice. Frank Ernst was the quintessential behavioral transactional analyst. Through his interpretation of transactional analysis, he made behavioral therapy come alive. He redefined the concept of OKness and placed it on a behavioral quadrant that he called the "OK Corral" (Ernst, 1971). He termed the different quadrants "Get on with," "Get away from," "Get rid of," and "Get nowhere." Each quadrant described specific behaviors. Dr. Ernst emphasized the importance of behavioral change as a way to end old script patterns. He taught us to use contracts at the end of a therapy session as a solidification of the client's commitment to change. He highlighted the importance of strokes and, particularly, the significance of using

people's names and emphasizing what each person was proud of.

In the early 1970s, I ran a therapeutic community in a maximum security prison. On one occasion, Dr. Ernst spent the day doing therapy with a large group of inmates. He worked with every man in the room, asking each to say something about himself in 2 or 3 minutes. He listened intently and then identified how each inmate's self-presentation could be described on one of the "not OK" positions in the OK Corral. He invited each man to identify a positive behavioral change that he was willing to make. Then he engaged in making a specific contract with the men wherein all identified new behaviors that they agreed to change. He did all of this within 5 or 6 minutes with each person. For example, one man, estranged from his father since his arrest and trial, contracted to finally write to his father. Another, with a booming aggressive voice, contracted to speak more softly.

This was the period of time when the transactional analysis culture emphasized short-term therapy and behavioral change. One of the most significant behavioral interventions that occurred in my life happened in a workshop with Steve Karpman. At that time, Steve was teaching his concept of "Loser's Loop and Winner's Loop" (Karpman, 1974). He invited several of us to participate in a small group in which we were to talk with each other about our concerns. Steve then identified how each of us presented our script through our behavioral interactions with each other. He identified my "Loser's Loop" as a cycle of behaviors that he labeled "Pushy, Preachy, Pompous, and Pedantic." I was shocked at his characterization of me. However, when group members agreed, I took his poetic description seriously. He then identified my potential "Winner's Loop" as an expression of the attitudes and behaviors of "Loving, Listening, Laughing, and Learning." Steve enjoyed making behavioral therapy poetic and fun. This hour of behavioral therapy has had a lasting positive influence on my life.

The mid-1970s became the era of confrontational transactional analysis. This was a time that, sadly, had a great effect on how I tried to practice transactional analysis. Both Martin

Groder and Jacqui Schiff developed techniques of confrontation that they claimed were effective in treating people with character disorders and in curing schizophrenia. They emphasized confrontation of the client's behavior and thinking. I was intellectually fascinated by the reputed therapeutic effectiveness of such confrontation. Jacqui Schiff eventually developed what she called "corner contracts" (a form of social isolation), which she used to reinforce her confrontations and to force people to contemplate the effects of their behaviors on others. The techniques of confrontation were seen as necessary for preparing someone for regressive therapy. During this period, I was working both within a prison and with delinquent adolescents, and I experimented with both confrontation and the behavioral methods of transactional analysis. I was following the formal culture of transactional analysis at the time, and I had lost sight of the empathetic style of TA that Hedges Capers demonstrated.

The concept of confrontation permeated transactional analysis theory. Bob Goulding described the importance of confronting the first transference transaction or con in a client's game as a prerequisite to doing redecision therapy. Jack Dusay used confrontation as one of his four options to games: ignore, explain, confront, and switch. Steve Karpman's drama triangle was intended to explain game dynamics to people but, in that era, it became a tool of confrontation.

In the late 1970s, my practice included a number of borderline clients. Although I deluded myself into thinking that I had some success using confrontation with prison inmates and delinquent adolescents, I discovered that confrontation was not effective with borderline clients. They overadapted for a short time and then would quit therapy. I realized that they needed a therapy that established clear expectations, set some achievable limits, and allowed an opportunity to express a child's early affective confusion within a relationship that was stable and attuned. The psychotherapy had to be accomplished within a careful balance of acceptance rather than confrontation and also without the therapist becoming overly involved in caretaking. Confrontation, no matter how

seemingly appropriate, only added to the borderline client's emotional confusion. Experience was fostering in me a different way of thinking and working from the formal culture of transactional analysis. Clinical experience stimulated many of us to engage in informal collegial conversations about how we practiced transactional analysis.

The era of the 1970s and 1980s were exciting learning times for me. The workshops at transactional analysis conferences were informative, and we had outstanding keynote speakers. But the best learning experiences were the late-night impromptu seminars. It was in these discussions among 10 or 12 people that we argued over theory and methods. We challenged the formal precepts and rules, we talked about what worked and did not work with our clients, we looked at the advantages and disadvantages of our behavioral and confrontational methods. We even talked at length about our therapeutic failures. We were inadvertently teaching and modeling for each other. As a result, I gained the impetus to change much of my therapeutic style.

By the early 1980s, I began seeing several clients with posttraumatic stress disorder who used dissociation and ego splitting as a means of self-protection and self-stabilization. I found it essential to avoid focusing on behavioral change and confrontation. The transactional analysis methods of interrogation, explanation, and interpretation were not effective because they often increased the client's anxiety and attempts at self-protection. It became evident that redecision therapy was not appropriate for the resolution of traumatic dissociation. Instead, I returned to my earlier informal learning that modeled the power of centering on the client's experience and affect. I began to experiment with phenomenological inquiry and focus on my capacity to provide affective, rhythmic, and developmental attunement.

I have talked about the era in which transactional analysis was behavioral and confrontational. Throughout this period of time, transactional analysis therapy also emphasized cognitive understanding. Explanation, interpretation, and diagrams were central. A colleague who went on vacation asked a fellow therapist to be

on call for his clients while he was gone. A client saw the fellow therapist for a couple of sessions. When the original therapist returned, the client said, "That wasn't a real psychotherapist you sent me to see." The therapist asked why the client thought so. The client answered, "Because he never drew any diagrams on the board or explained anything to me. He listened and was sympathetic." Transactional analysis has retained a culture of cognitive explanation and the use of diagrams that were prominent in the early days of the San Francisco Social Psychiatry Seminar. There are times when such explanations and diagrams are important to clients.

In 1977, Graham Barnes published a book entitled *Transactional Analysis after Eric Berne* in which he described three schools of transactional analysis: the classical San Francisco school, which emphasized explanation, diagrams, contracts, and behavioral change; the redecision school, which emphasized the child's compliance with injunctions and the power to make new decisions; and the Cathexis school, which emphasized confrontation and reparation. At that time, he described a culture of transactional analysis that integrated diverse theoretical concepts. Today, there are a dozen schools of transactional analysis, each representing a particular theoretical slant. For example, one could include within our diverse theories and methods psychodynamic transactional analysis, constructivist transactional analysis, relational transactional analysis, body-centered transactional analysis, and a host of other approaches to transactional analysis. I raise the question, "Have we wandered too far from our cultural center or are we an ever-growing culture that is expanding from our core?"

This proliferation of new ideas happens when a culture is changing and growing in many different locations. Each of us is integrating many new ideas into a common whole. One of the hallmarks of transactional analysis has been the flexibility of theory. Over the last year, I have asked many people about what attracted them to transactional analysis, and two common responses are that "the theory is not dogmatic" and "it is flexible enough to integrate diverse concepts and methods." Culture expands outwardly from the center; while culture is

expanding and developing new perspectives, it is also retaining elements of the past. The old elements remain the symbols of the energizing cultural changes, just as Greek cultural images and themes remained icons of the Roman culture, and then, in turn, Roman images and themes remained icons of the nineteenth century. Yet, even when we retain the icons, symbols, and logos of the formal culture, change is always occurring. This is the nature of living cultures. Our logos and icons provide a connection with the past while new themes, concepts, and technologies emerge. The new concepts and technologies enliven the culture and keep it growing. This idea of cultural change also applies to transactional analysis: Our old theories remain as our icons and logos while, at the same time, we are developing new concepts and methods.

Beginning in the 1980s, it became evident to many transactional analysts that the quality of the therapeutic relationship was central to the process of healing and script cure. Therapeutic methods that included explanations of behavior, empty chair work, supportive regression, rededication, and disconnecting rubberbands were still forefront in clinical practice, but there was an ever-growing realization of the importance of a caringly involved therapeutic relationship. The quality of the therapeutic relationship became increasingly evident and important, even in regressive or rededication therapy. There it became viewed as important as a holding environment both before and after the regressive work and, most importantly, as a way of communicating the client's essential OKness to him or her. Yet, at this same time, explanation, behavioral change, and confrontation were still dominant in the practice of many transactional analysis therapists. At the time of the 1990 joint ITAA/EATA conference in Brussels, I asked 90 people the questions, "Were you ever hurt by your therapist's use of confrontation?" and "Did confrontation damage your therapy relationship?" Every person in the room raised his or her hand. Our transactional analysis culture was in the midst of informal change. Transactional analysis therapists were questioning the use of confrontation and an overemphasis on behavioral change as the primary techniques in TA psychotherapy.

In 1988, Janet Moursund and I published *Integrative Psychotherapy in Action*, which emphasized the therapeutic methods of supportive regression, disconnecting archaic fixations from current adult psychological functioning, and the in-depth psychotherapy of Parent ego states. While we were preparing the manuscript for the book, the Professional Development Seminar at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy studied many transcripts of actual therapy sessions. We examined each sentence and comment made by the psychotherapists. During the years that we studied these transactions, we identified a number of terms and concepts that described the action of an effective therapeutic relationship. We eventually factored our research findings and chose several descriptive terms that depicted our relational psychotherapy: inquiry, attunement, and involvement.

Each of these descriptions of the therapeutic process was subdivided into further descriptive terms (e.g., acknowledgment, validation, normalization, and presence) that emphasized the psychotherapist's personal involvement in the therapeutic relationship. We were exploring and discovering the components of a relational psychotherapy. This relational perspective on psychotherapy was first published in 1991 in an article entitled "The Psychotherapy of Dissociation: Inquiry, Attunement and Involvement" (Erskine, 1991). Over the past 20 years, I have had the honor of teaching these relational methods at many transactional analysis conferences, workshops, and training programs, thereby contributing to the ever-changing culture of TA. Transactional analysis is in the midst of integrating new discoveries, concepts, and theories along with our well-established core concepts. How we practice psychotherapy, counseling, and educational and organizational consulting must include both the classical concepts and the integration of new perspectives if our culture is to continue to survive and grow.

The concepts and methods that emerged from the research at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy were not unique to us, even though we thought so at the time. We were in the forefront of a larger paradigm shift that has moved the focus of psychotherapy away from the client's internal disturbance alone to an

attuned two-person or relational psychotherapy. Through my psychoanalytic training, I was familiar with Kohut's (1977) influence on changing psychoanalysis from an interpretive approach to a more empathetic relational approach. As a result of Kohut's influence, I worked hard to limit my use of confrontation and focused instead on understanding clients' experience and my own failures to value their internal experiences. Then Stolorow, Brandschaft, and Atwood's (1987) intersubjective approach provided the verification for what we were discovering and identifying in the Professional Development Seminar. We spent the next few years studying the intersubjective literature and the emerging ideas of both the narrative and constructivist approaches to psychotherapy.

The Professional Development Seminar's clinical experimentation and professional discussions increasingly pointed us in the direction of the significance of the therapeutic relationship—a therapeutic relationship that is coconstructed out of the intersubjective involvement of two or more people revealing their feelings, thoughts, internal physiological reactions, fantasies, and hopes in an ongoing narrative encompassing the scope of their lives. However, we realize that intersubjectivity does not mean equality. The therapist does not necessarily reveal everything. The therapist's self-revealing is carefully done in accordance with the client's need to engage in a shared experience. Revealing the therapist's thoughts, feelings, and reactions must always occur within an ethical perspective of sensitivity to the client's welfare.

Many transactional analysts were also being influenced by the new emerging concepts and trends in the professional literature. Colleagues around the world were—and still are—integrating new theoretical perspectives and methods into their practice of transactional analysis. Many therapists and trainers have been actively involved in the integrative process of creating a new transactional analysis culture. Unfortunately, we may have gone overboard. At the 2007 European TA Trainers' meeting, Adrienne Lee proposed that there were a dozen or more schools of transactional analysis. Have we created a theoretical Tower of Babel? It is amazing to me that each of these "schools"

claims to be somewhat "integrative." They have each borrowed ideas, methods, and/or research findings from the contemporary psychotherapy literature and have emerged with a new synthesis of theory and practice. Integration is happening, and, at the same time, many of us also rely on Eric Berne's original concepts of ego states, the analysis of transactions, and the theory of life scripts as our core concepts. Yet I wonder: Are these diverse schools also divisive? Will the proliferation of many schools of transactional analysis cause our culture to fragment? Do we have theories and concepts that are sufficiently robust to be an integrative force in our transactional analysis culture?

The integrative and relational focus that has emerged in transactional analysis in the past decade reflects a meaningful change of attitude about our clients, a change in how we perceive them in relationship with ourselves, and a change in how we transact with each client. When transactional analysis therapists were focused on changing clients' behavior, explaining their psychodynamics, or confronting their passivity, we emphasized the formal rules of transactional analysis rather than a transactional relationship. Although the cocreative and intersubjective interplay of games was present in Berne's original theory, it was often not evident in practice, nor was it emphasized in journal articles and conference presentations in years past. The emphasis was on the correctness and superiority of our theory and our authoritative perspective rather than on the client's phenomenological experience or on the relational experience of two people meeting. In our postmodern intersubjective perspective, the authority of theory is secondary to the cocreative process of establishing a relationship wherein the client's expression of his or her phenomenological and unconscious experience is the primary focus in psychotherapy. When we carefully examine our transactional analysis theories, it becomes clear how little is really known about the remarkably complex psychological functions of human beings. Yet, Eric Berne's original concepts of ego states, the analysis of transactions, and life scripts remain the core of our transactional analysis culture.

I would like to end with three questions:

What first attracted you to transactional analysis?

What influence has transactional analysis had in your life?

What change in our transactional analysis culture do you envision?

Richard G. Erskine, Ph.D., is the author of numerous articles on transactional analysis, some of which are published in Theories and Methods of an Integrative Transactional Analysis: A Volume of Selected Articles (TA Press, 1997; available at www.itaa-net.org). He may be reached at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy, 500 East 85th Street, PH B, New York, NY, 10028, U.S.A.; e-mail: IntegPsych@earthlink.net; Web site: ww.integrativetherapy.com. This article was presented as a keynote address entitled "The Culture of Transactional Analysis: Theory, Methods and Evolving Patterns" on 8 August 2008 during the TA World Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa. The theme of the conference was "Cradled by Culture: The Journey of Humankind."

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