

# Transactional analysis and our philosophical premises: 70 years on

Karen Minikin

Wellington, Somerset, UK

**Correspondence**

Karen Minikin, 11 Fore St, Wellington, Somerset, TA21 8AA, UK.

Email: [karen@insights-sw.co.uk](mailto:karen@insights-sw.co.uk)

## Abstract

This article considers the origins and development of transactional analysis. The focus is on the philosophical premises that underpin the ideology of this theory. Accounting for social and political context, the writer reviews the times these premises were founded and their relevance in our contemporary international world.

## KEYWORDS

Berne, coronavirus, George Floyd, 'I'm OK/you're OK', philosophical premises

We are not makers of history. We are made by history. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: ERIC BERNE AND TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

Claude Steiner studied and worked with Eric Berne. He was part of a key professional group that helped Berne formulate his new theory of 'transactional analysis', initially for psychotherapy from the 1950s and through the 1960s. These must have been exciting and creative times for this team as a new body of theory evolved. Those that were involved with the regular Tuesday night social psychiatry seminars must have developed strong personal and professional bonds. Perhaps there was something of the feelings and moods of this group that founded the sort of culture that has evolved in the transactional analysis community. It has always been an interpersonal theory taught and executed with an emphasis on meaningful relations that have created professional and personal bonds. In the last decade of his life, Steiner (2008) wrote:

What is it about Berne's transactional analysis that so attracts people? Is it the simplicity of its concepts? His rebelliousness? The zany, provocative nature of Eric's language? The second- and third-generation writings of Harris, James, Steiner, Dusay, Karpman, English, the Gouldings, and Stewart and Joines? Is it the enthusiasm and methods of its many teachers or the missionary zeal of its

trainers? Is it the elaborations of relational, psychoanalytic, and integrative transactional analysis? Is it the opportunity it offers to become a therapist and make a living? Or is it the friendly, cooperative, open-minded attitude of the people in the movement? (p. 214)

Transactional analysis was formed in the United States after Berne, following 15 years of training, was refused admission to the San Francisco Psychoanalytical Institute. The rejection seemed to inspire a rebellious, though productive response. Since then, transactional analysis has developed into a body of writing that offers clarity concerning the complexity of human relations and answers about how to alleviate social and psychological pain. As Steiner (2008) stated, it has at times attracted 'missionary zeal' amongst trainers. So, it has grown, spread and enjoyed much success since its formation in California. There are now transactional analysis establishments and practitioners across four professional fields (counselling, psychotherapy, educational and organisational) in all continents. Given this diversity, the range of how transactional analysis is thought about, used, and developed has grown. However, what is common to all transactional analysis trainings is a subscribing to the three philosophical premises that were established and continue on decades afterwards. In this article, I review these premises and consider both the virtues and difficulties that I have witnessed and encountered. In doing so, I take a political perspective considering both overt and covert power dynamics at structural and interpersonal levels. In other words, I am interested in exploring the basic simplicity of the three philosophical premises and the shadow (Jung, 1938/1991) that lurks behind them.

Eric Berne was seen as maverick by his psychoanalytical colleagues. He was radical in his methodology, inclined to humanistic values, and possibly had socialist sympathies. If he did, expression of such views may have been quashed during President Eisenhower's reign when the fear of socialism was at one of its heights. He was somebody who evoked and provoked systemic change. In particular, his way of working such as his open communication and contracting (Berne, 1972), challenged the balance of power in medical institutions and was an expression of egalitarianism and respect for the humanity of people. For me, personally, Berne has been an enigmatic character, hard to get to know—hearing about him through the eyes of others, as well as his writing. He was a man who, like the rest of us, embodied his history, culture and era. I am part of his legacy—a fourth generation transactional analyst. I endeavour to continue his radical beginnings.

From these roots, transactional analysis has developed a diverse body of theories with breadth and depth of its four applications in terms of theory and methodology. The goal of all these applications is autonomy; comprising of awareness, spontaneity and capacity for intimacy (Berne, 1964). It is important to explain that briefly, as autonomy alone is a western concept privileging the experience and agency of the individual and minimising the significance of the group, society and the context. By clarifying what Berne meant by autonomy, we see his support for consciousness generally and a valuing of expression and satisfying interpersonal relationships. Underpinning this goal of autonomy is the philosophical premises of transactional analysis.

## 2 | THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PREMISES

Everyone who has encountered transactional analysis in a formal capacity will know the three philosophical principles. Traditionally, transactional analysis theory, like the era it was born into, was upbeat and optimistic. With a goal of autonomy and a belief in treating each other with mutual respect, we have worked hard to taboo games (see Berne, 1964; or 'acting out' defensively—my definition) and enactments (eruptions of a traumatic nature, see Novak, 2015). In Jungian psychology, our efforts to behave well could be interpreted as a defence against the shadow. This may be changing in some forms of contemporary transactional analysis which has sought a different inquiry into psychological states. Many integrative, co-creative and relational practitioners (see Bonds-White & Cornell, 2001; Erskine, 1993; Hargaden & Sills, 2002; Little, 2013; Summers & Tudor, 2000, 2015) have been interested in the need to make space for symbolic and non-verbal communications—even if they seem primitive and

unformulated (Stern, 2011). Some developments in the professional and academic canon have struggled to permeate the culture in the international transactional analysis community. This means developments within the wider international community have developed but have not always linked up and been debated fully enough so that at least there could be understanding even if disagreement continued. I imagine this is true of all professions and all communities; that we struggle with competition, rivalry and conflict, becoming more invested in our own positions than in striving to understand the other. In this light, as a parallel to our current social and political global climate, I take the opportunity to review the three philosophical premises in transactional analysis which are meant to drive what we do and how we do it.

### 3 | I'M OK/YOU'RE OK: MACRO AND MICRO PERSPECTIVES

*I'm OK/You're OK* is a simple and catchy statement that became the title of a best-selling self-help book (Harris, 1967) shortly after Berne's death. This first premise has been a champion in transactional analysis and probably the most quoted inside and outside of our community. The sense and spirit is to promote holding respect for ourselves and respect for the other. The message speaks to the interpersonal roots of transactional analysis and its promotion of 'healthy' Adult functioning. By this, it is meant the achievement of autonomy had been acquired and that people were relating from one Adult ego state to another which places enormous pressure on people to become conscious of themselves. This seems important; yet, I place, 'healthy' in quotation marks because I think, above all, this is the premise that people feel most pulled to adapt to. In other words, 'I'm OK/you're OK' has at times been used as dogma, losing the depth of its intention and igniting politeness in our community rather than genuine congruent relatedness.

It is possible that the conflict with the psychoanalytical body that evoked the formation of transactional analysis has rumbled on through the decades. I'm OK/you're OK is always difficult when we feel our core values and beliefs are being challenged. Whilst Berne and English came from psychoanalytical roots, some of their contemporaries (i.e., Claude Steiner, Steve Karpman and John [Jack] Dusay) leaned towards a quest for emotional literacy and respectful behaviour. Over the years, these and other writers encouraged transactional analysis to take more of a cognitive behavioural direction—a direction that has since been challenged by new and, at times, conflicting perspectives.

As with many theories that start with creative thinking and a capacity to push and extend the boundaries of thought, they become introjects in the minds of students and subsequent generations of practitioners. I have been involved with transactional analysis for over 20 years and what I have observed and experienced in my era is a number of ways in which this premise has been exercised. I have seen some honourable striving for understanding, empathy and collaboration at times of difficulty and conflict. With that has come an orientation to seek to understand the other and heal ruptures. I have also witnessed as student, teacher and participator in our community, an adaptation to this introjected, yet not quite metabolised premise. This, to my mind, has been an expression of racket feelings (English, 1971) and behaviours (Erskine & Zalcman, 1979), or the false self as described by Winnicott (1960); my interpretation being that anxiety and aggression are covered over by expressions of warmth and friendship. As with many modalities, a professional community has developed in transactional analysis. We have our regional, national and international cultures. These are all relationally bound with a generic norm that has developed from our philosophical principles. I'm OK/you're OK becomes problematic at times of conflict, envy, rivalry and competition. It is different from straight forward anger that is more accessible to our conscious minds. In relations within our communities, nationally and internationally, I have witnessed an evasion of aggression and a desire to heal sometimes before the root of the problem has really been grasped. This has led to temporary relief of anxiety whilst toxic processes stay underground rumbling away till the next time. In these scenarios, I propose that I'm OK/you're OK becomes a rule rather than a premise that is genuinely strived for. Hence, the simple, straight forward language in transactional analysis can be misleading at times. In other words, to

experience this premise at depth makes demands on people to process, labour and honour self-interest whilst searching and pushing ourselves to understand the other (or 'those others'). Thus, a premise that becomes a 'rule' runs the risk of becoming an oppressive misuse of a good idea.

This personal process is also relevant for wider social and political dynamics. Transactional analysis is grounded in the interpersonal; yet Berne used his ideas in radical ways to challenge the medical institution. Other transactional analysts have also turned to social psychiatry roots to bring in the relevance of context, society and politics. Hence, accounting for 'we-ness' as well as the 'I' has been an important component in transactional analysis and Berne's extension to 'we are OK/they are OK (or not OK)' has been picked up extensively by Tudor (2016).

I am writing this article in the midst of the protests that have arisen around the world after the death of George Floyd. Whilst well-meaning people may agree this is a death that should not have happened ('I' psychology), his death is an example of transgenerational trauma and the persistence of the hate that accompanies 'othering'. The subsequent protests speak to how challenging it is to live collectively by egalitarian principles because we are in a world that is not equal. For those with privilege in societies, all the time systematic oppression is sustained and functioning, there can be little incentive to labour with their minds long enough or hard enough to metabolise the collective traumas that continue through the generations. This is perhaps a reflection that those with more power in society are the groups that get to define 'OK-ness'—which then is bestowed upon or withheld from certain groups or behaviours. This is a socio-political perspective about power dynamics which has some differences from our liberal humanistic philosophy. Hence, 'I'm OK/you're OK/they're OK' is honourable, simple and potentially meaningful as an ideological premise. It is one that most well-meaning people would agree. Living it in a congruent and meaningful way is a deep set challenge—personally, socially, politically and internationally.

## 4 | PEOPLE CAN THINK

A slave is still a slave till he can think independently. (Cliff, 1973)

The premise that people can think came about in part from Berne's commitment to promoting the health of psychiatric patients. He understood his patients as adults who had their own minds but were afflicted by the ways in which they felt compelled to cope in the world. Writing people off with a psychiatric diagnosis and committing them to a lifetime of medication was something that Berne opposed and used radical practice to challenge the hospital where he worked. Whilst this premise has been used to promote the resources and sanity in people, it is also the premise that, currently, most interests me.

Claude Steiner picked up on this premise and explored it more deeply when he started a personal and professional relationship with Hogie Wycoff an economic and political student. Together with others, they formulated their thinking about the systemic influence of capitalism and the impact that has on the minds of the people. They named and developed their thinking about the psychological condition of alienation, as described by Karl Marx (1967).

Extended individual psychotherapy is an elitist outmoded as well as nonproductive form of psychiatric help. It concentrates the talents of a few on a few. It silently colludes with the notion that people's difficulties have their source in them while implying that everything is well with the world... ..People's troubles have their source not within them but in their alienated relationships, in their exploitation, in polluted environments, in war, and in the profit motive. (Steiner et al., 1975, pp. 3–4)

Steiner et al.'s (1975) definition of alienation comprised of both oppression and deception. Oppression minimised a sense of autonomy of the other. They understood this misuse of power as systemically coercing people into adapting to the power base, whether that be an individual, group, institution, or society at large.

The significant contribution they made to the idea of the oppressed people was that they were not meant to realise they were oppressed. In other words, their capacity for thinking was impaired by the deception that accompanied the oppression. So, people were lied to about their internal experience, and lied to about external events such as the rationale for particular decisions, nature of people in society and political/cultural systems that people were dependent on.

An illustration that comes to mind is the current social and political situation imposed by the coronavirus. In the United Kingdom social isolation and lockdown continued for several months as a result of the pandemic. As we headed to coming out of social isolation, there was a news item broadcast from the United States. The reporter stated that since coronavirus, gun sales in the United States have rocketed. In the United Kingdom, many of us would see that as bizarre to say the least. Yet, I saw that to many, it was an unquestioned truth in these days of COVID-19; that they are at risk from 'others' who will want to attack them. I found myself horribly fascinated both by the customers buying guns and the businesses selling them.

Given my interest and inclination towards the philosophy of radical psychiatry, the evolution of this subjective experience caught my attention. I wanted to get to the bottom of a pressing question which went something like: *How come seemingly rational people are doing something that I consider somewhat mad? How does this relate to our philosophical premise that people can think?* I had to think such a thing was possible within a social and historical context and a white mindset that was different from mine. I was reminded of the history of the United States including the colonisation of that land, legacy of slavery, and need to control and oppress those 'others' who are seen as a threat. Over and over at times of economic hardship we witness this legacy in the people who have inherited this particular cultural transgenerational trauma. It seems evident that when talking to white men who believe they need to own a gun that their thinking is motivated by anxiety about impending vulnerability. Furthermore, this seemingly unbearable fear of vulnerability means that relief comes from a fantasised experience of omnipotence facilitated by owning a gun to protect against 'the enemy'. Following my hypothesis that this could be historically, culturally and socially bound, I checked to see where in the United States exist the most relaxed gun laws. I saw links to a number of states in the south west which were the last to abolish slavery and formal apartheid. One source was Glenn Geher (2018):

In a 2013 analysis by the Law Centre to Prevent Gun Violence... (Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island) generally have stronger gun laws than do the five southern states that made up 'the south' during colonial days (Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia). It is also noteworthy that other slave-owning states, such as Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia, score as having very weak gun laws.

On top of this trend for traditionally slave-owning states to have lax gun laws, there is an extremely strong relationship between the strength of the gun laws in a state and the rate of gun-related deaths in that state: States with stronger gun laws have fewer gun-related deaths.

Simple though it may be, the most important philosophical premise for me is that *people can think*. Without thinking, people cannot change or respect otherness. The notion that people can think equips me to push myself to think and to help others think. Developing minds that can stretch, reach and expand offers potential hope. In its broadest and deepest sense, it serves the purpose for me, as philosophically I can believe that this is what I am commissioned to do in my work. The effort it takes to claim at least some of our own minds so that we can feel, experience, question, learn, be curious and, where needed, have meaningful thought provoking discussions that may help us solve complex problems. As a relational psychotherapist, I do what I can to help people metabolise,

mentalise and relate. Without this ability, people cannot think well as fear, hatred and unprocessed loss floods our psychic systems. Writing as a relational, social and political psychotherapist, it is our capacity to think in the fullest sense that offers me hope.

## 5 | PEOPLE CAN CHANGE

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. (Luther King Jr., 1963)

*People can change* is a direct message of optimism; one that is reflected in transactional analysis as a body of theory with much investment in hope. We need to hang on to the light of change in times of despair which was hard to do as I watched the political demise of the kind of democracy I can believe in (within the United States, the United Kingdom and other following countries) across the globe in recent years. At the time of composing these premises, the political climate had similarities and differences. Transactional analysis was situated in the liberal state of California, the civil rights movement was happening and there was a movement of growing international liberalism. It was into this era that I was born and perhaps that says something of my personal draw to political forms of liberation.

Much as I am the same as the politically engaged teenager marching against racism in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, I am also changed. I waver and swing much more between hope and despair. I see the magnitude of our systemic organisation of economic and global power, and recognise that as individuals we cannot challenge the scale and complexity of this without collective action. Even if a collective uprising was possible, I struggle to believe that there will be enough restructuring and change for a greener, safer, kinder and more egalitarian world. It seems to me that the people and institutions that hold power do their best to hang on to it and it takes one mighty revolution, like the civil rights movement, to effect meaningful change. The process of change can be slow, the process of recovery from trauma long and arduous—nonetheless, we cannot 'not' believe. From our consultation rooms to the streets, we see people expand and flex their mind, we see the processes of oppression and deception being challenged. It can only happen through relationships, collaboration and at times mutual pain. As a psychotherapist, if I believe in recovery, I have to believe that psychological change is possible. It is probably true I feel more confident in this in my consulting room than I do as a citizen. As a citizen, I feel more in touch with the magnitude of systemic power, the sustenance and dependency on capitalism, and the repetition of traumatic dynamics as I watch the news items on the death of George Floyd and the ensuing fury that has erupted. My learning, as a psychotherapist, is that psychological change needs a context and mental health is a systemic issue.

## 6 | TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS TODAY

We will not create change without getting our hands dirty, our pride bruised, our frames of reference shaken. (Cornell, 2018, p. 109)

Earlier in this article I referred to the eclectic nature of transactional analysis. The simplicity of our terms and language was in part a rebellion against the use of enigmatic language and elitism within psychoanalytical quarters. I almost hear the cry from my professional ancestors, 'let the people understand!' The capacity our pioneers had, to portray complexity simply and clearly, has been invaluable socially, institutionally and clinically. It meant people from all walks of life can be attracted to transactional analysis, can use it to help their understanding of their minds and the relationships. This legacy has also been a source of frustration. It has facilitated a myth that transactional analysis is superficial, is all about 'parent, adult and child' and 'I'm OK/You're OK'. In the United Kingdom health

care system (the National Health Service), it is not a recognisable treatment for mental health. Amongst other professionals, who have caught aspects of the ideas, it can sometimes be seen as over simplistic and cognitive. Thus, the original scripting process that led Berne to leave the analytical community, feeling unappreciated and misunderstood, continues.

Since Berne's day, transactional analysis has expanded the core models to keep it relevant with the times, with scientific developments as well as developments in the clinical field. Drawing from psychoanalysis, there is an emphasis on the goal of awareness and insight through reaching the unconscious via transference and dreams (see e.g., Blackstone, 1993; Bowater, 2003; Moiso, 1985; Novellino, 2005). There has been an integrative movement interested in self psychology and the importance of empathy and attunement. The range of writers within an integrative tradition, include Barbara Clark (1991), Petruska Clarkson (1993) and Richard Erskine (1993). There has been the innovative launch of co-creative transactional analysis (Summers & Tudor, 2000, 2015), drawing on mutual conscious and unconscious influence and bringing together psychodynamic, political and person centred perspectives in transactional analysis. Contemporary transactional analysis is also influenced by the relational movement in psychoanalysis and, here, has been compelled by depth in understanding subjective and unconscious relating with a focus on transference and countertransference (see e.g., Hargaden & Sills, 2002).

There is another movement emerging within our field—that of context. Back to socio/political roots, transactional analysis is finding ways to think and write about the concerns of our time and the psychological and social responses (e.g., Minikin, 2018; Cornell, 2018). In terms of my identity as a transactional analyst, I have learnt in the tradition of relational psychotherapy and developed a political and psychodynamic leaning as psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer. This growth has been important development for me in metabolising and accounting for a personal history and legacy that takes on new meanings and purpose.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Transactional analysis is an integrative therapy that has needed to open its doors to other modalities, contribute to them and mostly learn from them. It has been available to learn from both humanistic and psychoanalytical camps. It has been at risk of being eclectic and so has experienced an ongoing struggle with identity. The three philosophical premises are potentially meaningful and important. However, in leaning towards clarity and universality, we have risked becoming superficial. For these premises to stand up to the spirit in which they were formulated, they need to be thought and talked about with the complexity and depth to which this body of theory was born.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



**Karen Minikin TSTA(P)** is a psychotherapist, trainer, and supervisor working in West Somerset, UK. She has a special interest in working at depth integrating political dynamics with clinical thinking. She teaches at the Iron Mill in Exeter, and is a visiting tutor at a number of training institutes.

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