ARTICLE

Looking at activism through the lens of transactional analysis

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Abstract

Inspired by the catastrophic social unrest in Hong Kong, this article considers the political aspect of psychotherapy with a particular focus on transactional analysis. Concepts from transactional analysis such as 'Discounting' and 'decontamination' are considered in relation to working with political activists. Drawing upon her personal history, the author gives an overview of how one's political identity can be shaped by various external factors. For example, in the case of Hong Kong, how levels of socio-political involvement might reflect the varying degrees of environmental trauma experienced by individuals of different generations. In therapy, the author describes what activists might come to therapy for and how the political self of both the client and therapist might be presented in the room. By questioning some of the fundamental ideas of psychotherapy—namely, empathy and neutrality—the author invites the reader to think about the ethical implications of working with activists.

KEYWORDS

activism, discounting, Hong Kong, political oppression, protestor

1 | INTRODUCTION

I was sitting precisely 5976 miles away looking at a computer screen showing that my home of origin, Hong Kong, was facing a horrific humanitarian crisis. Under the oppression of the Chinese Communist Party government, tear gas and rubber bullets rained down on protesters weekly, countless thousands were being indiscriminately clubbed by policemen and numerous women sexually assaulted while in detention (The British Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). Powerless and hopeless as this felt, I could not help pondering whether a transactional analyst could be of

service in such a situation. I decided to look into the idea of activism through the lens of transactional analysis theories.

In the following article, I examine transactional analysis in the socio-political context. I focus specifically on the idea of Discounting (Schiff & Schiff, 1971), in order to look at the characteristics of activists (I use the word 'protestor' interchangeably) and the dynamic between the political and apolitical in general. I will assess my family story and how it might shape my political self and its influence on me as a practitioner.

2 | TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS AND POLITICS

Samuels (2013) commented on how traditional psychotherapy removes clients' political energy by absorbing them in therapy that takes all available psychic energy for its own project of personal exploration. In the world of transactional analysis, it had been said that Berne 'made little or no connection between the consulting room and the larger world' (Jacobs, 1996, p. 207). The classic transactional analytic theories such as Ego State, Impasse, Script and so on seem to solely focus on our inner self and the intrapsychic processes which have been influenced by our developmental history. However, we must not forget that Berne (1961), in fact, intended transactional analysis as a branch of 'social psychiatry'; he suggested looking into individual psychodynamics and pathology in the analysis of 'social action'. In therapy, by working with the individual on the intrapsychic level, transactional analysts who adopt a relational method aim to work with clients' relational patterns in order for clients to have better relationships in the social realm. Indeed, I see working relationally in the room as 'necessary steps in visualising the person in a broader context, larger than the therapeutic encounter, which analyses the structure and pays attention to function as it relates to others' (Jacobs, 1996, p. 207). In other words, the intrapsychic and the interpersonal (social) are barely separable. This idea is made clear in a very classic transactional analysis way through Figure 1, offered by Jacobs (1996) himself. It depicts both the interpersonal and intrapsychic positions within the wider context of the world in which we live.

As shown, the two sets of ego states highlight the interpersonal element within the realm of politics, ethnicity, religion and subculture. I believe this is crucial when we try to understand how the inner self (including our values and belief systems) is formulated and influenced by our external environment and how this eventually affects us relating to each other. Moreover, to draw on Clarkson (1987), 'individual moral choices are exceedingly complex and based on family and cultural scripting as well as environmental trauma' (p. 82). Cultural scripting and environmental trauma can be seen within the realm of politics, ethnic, religious and subculture as shown in Figure 1. Given that the way we relate to others will be closely dependent on our world view, which in turn is inevitably influenced by various external factors around us, we can see how the inner and external world are inseparable. Therapy work cannot simply deal with one's personal material.

It is also worth thinking about therapeutic work as an intentional and political choice of participating in society. As part of the humanistic tradition, transactional analysis advocates the therapists' active involvement in alleviating the plight of the less unfortunate. Many of us chose to work in public sectors and charity settings in order to widen the accessibility of support for more vulnerable members in our society, especially under the current austere environment. Hence, working as a therapist is a political act in itself.

3 | DISCOUNTING THE SOCIAL ISSUES

As the intrapsychic and interpersonal are inseparable, I suggest many transactional analysis ideas are highly relevant and useful when working with clients who are politically engaged. Due to the specific socio-historical environment in Hong Kong, I am particularly drawn to the idea of discounting when assessing people who have different levels of engagement with social movements. I draw upon the analysis that Clarkson (1987) eloquently
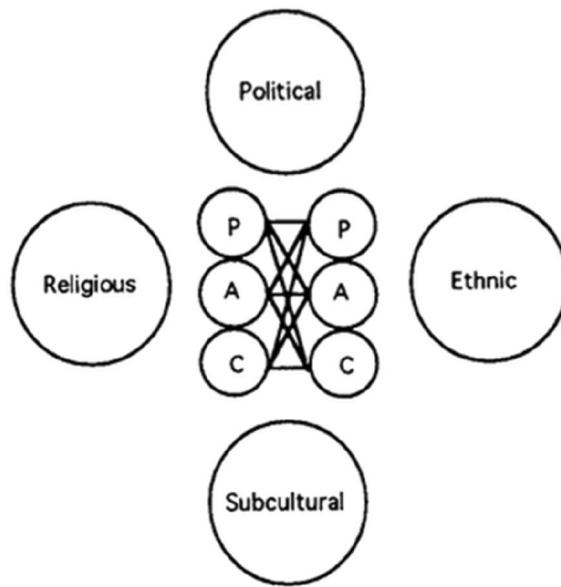
FIGURE 1 Social analysis (Jacob, 1996)

offered about discounting and Bystanders. Bystanders are those who 'frequently justify not intervening by believing that the situation cannot change, the problem cannot be solved, or that no other viable option for action exists' (Clarkson, 1987, p. 84). In other words, Bystanders discount social problems on all levels in the Discount Matrix (Stewart & Joines, 1987).

It is said that 'the political self is formed in culture, family and the inner world. The notion of differing 'political styles' as a source of conflict is explained and explored' (Samuels, 2013). In other words, one's engagement with social issues is closely related to their personal history. Having been through the traumatic catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, both of my parents fled to Hong Kong in the 1970s in their teenage years. Whilst naively thinking that the traumatic experiences of their lives in China might have crafted their political stance into a more liberal and democratic preference, it took me a long time to understand that their escapes were not out of their own choice or in protest against the authoritarian regime; rather, a necessity of survival.

In observing the suppression of Hong Kong by the Chinese Communist Party, I now understand how oppression can force the need for one to discount social issues. I have seen that when one's freedoms are violently withdrawn, some people can become Bystanders out of hopelessness and fear. My mother, for instance, would actively discount any social problems and her ability to make changes. Alternatively, some might choose to be what Massey (1987) called 'Followers'. Followers are those who 'are frustrated with their own options for fulfilment and who seek the grandiosity of overt aggression and violence sanctioned by a higher power' (Massey, 1987, p. 118). This perfectly describes my father, who embraces and glorifies the absolute power of the Chinese Communist Party and entirely discounts the social problems it causes.

Having been through extreme poverty and oppression, it was security and safety, the bottom two levels in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, for which my parents strived. It is understandable that both the Follower and Bystander positions would be relatively satisfying for them in providing sufficient comfort and consistency in comparison to the traumas they had experienced.

Conversely, Hong Kong was a place where everything was seemingly possible and abundant in the flourishing capitalist mirage when I was growing up. As a generation under the British colonialist governance, we also had a taste of western ideologies such as freedom, individuality and pseudo-democracy. I am undoubtedly part of the relatively privileged generation which was already grounded in the two survival levels for which my parents had

fought. This has enabled me to step my way up Marlow's hierarchy and focus more on pursuing values such as justice and equality. Combined with continuous working through of trans-generational trauma in personal therapy, I hope to move towards what Maslow (1943) called 'self-actualisation'.

On an intrapsychic level, fuelled by a sometimes useful Be Strong Driver (Kahler & Capers, 1974) and my rejection of the imposed Do Not Be Important injunction (Goulding & Goulding, 1976), I refuse to be a bystander who discounts the social problems and the ability to participate in social change. In common with many young people in Hong Kong, I identify myself as what Massey (1987) called a 'Resister'—someone who 'prefers social structures encouraging the power to become and, based on intrinsic ethics (Fromm, 1947), takes personal risks in order to work for a society beneficial to oneself and just to others' (p. 118). Although being far from home, I exercise the role of resister by giving psychological support to the young protestors who fled to the United Kingdom.

The aforementioned differences of existential goals and levels of discounting between my parents and I are not at all unusual in current Hong Kongese families. In fact, this generational conflict is precisely the challenge faced by a lot of young activists. It often manifests in therapy and motivates me to reflect on how I use certain transactional analysis concepts when working with this group of clients.

4 | HOW THIS INFLUENCES MY WORK

I wonder how making a conscious choice of being a Resister influences my take on some general psychotherapy concepts and transactional analysis ideas. I believe this wondering is important in terms of shaping my work with clients and my personal growth as a therapist.

Opposing political ideas can be seen as unacceptable to a given social structure; in extreme form, a diagnosis of 'sluggish schizophrenia' was given to Soviet dissidents in the USSR (Jargin, 2011). Political thoughts can be deemed as 'contaminations' by people with opposing interests, such as power or profit. I thus reflect on the idea of decontamination (Berne, 1961) and how if we apply this concept to activist clients we might hinder the work. Research has pointed out that, 'novice activists tend to experience growing pains such as stridency and confrontation with pre-existing friends and family members, highlighting a source of potential distress' (Lee, 2014, p. 18). As some activist clients might come for therapy exactly because of the relational problems with friends and family caused by their political beliefs; in therapy, if the therapist were to challenge the political view of these clients as contamination rather than being therapeutic, the room might turn into a re-traumatising stage for the struggle they are experiencing outside. With this specific scenario, I believe it is important for therapists to validate and affirm the meaning of activism in clients' lives. It is also important to support clients emotionally when facing relational difficulties which consequentially contribute to the empowerment of their work to promote social justice and social change. This brings complex questions to mind: how do we know if we are standing on the more justified side of the moral compass when we are validating someone's view? Moreover, are not we, as therapist, supposed to be neutral?

Political opinions are often polarised and entrenched, making the position of neutrality in the face of such stark social inequality difficult. Such a stance challenges two fundamental therapeutic ideas: neutrality and empathy. Would then, the activism on the part of the therapist betray the professional requirement of neutrality? Do I need to believe in the same thing as my client in order to work with them?

These questions make me wonder how my relationship with my own activism would present itself in the therapy room. For instance, I would feel much warmer towards a client who is very political and who sympathised with Hong Kong. With this in mind, how would I feel with a client who empathised with the Chinese/Hong Kong government and police, would I withhold from this client? Such questions elicit a rather crucial reflection on working ethically. Abiding to the very first principle of the *Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Conduct* (UK Council for Psychotherapy, 2019), in order to serve the best interest of our clients, I believe the

therapist has to be authentic and congruent. In the case of Hong Kong, because of my political self being intertwined with my therapist self, it would be difficult for me to be empathetic to clients who were not empathetic towards the young students (as young as 12 years old) who have been silently murdered and raped. In other words, not only is this a matter of 'Professional Integrity' (UK Council for Psychotherapy, 2019), it would be out of my competence as well as unethical to take on a client who has explicit pro-Chinese authoritarian views with whom I am not capable of connecting with on matters that are so intrinsic to me. To summarise, in the context of politics, my choice of clients would have to be grounded in my constant reflection and awareness of my own belief system and political choice.

5 | CONCLUSION

Although the devastating situation in Hong Kong is unlikely to be solved anytime soon, and as hopeless as it seems, I believe it is important 'not to run to the nearest exit to save your own ass but rather to stand and fight and focus your attention on the nonviolent power you hold in your hands every single day' (Žižek, 2019, p. 85). It is important to support our clients to nurture their subjective sense of power against the oppressor in such situations.

As Clarkson (1987) reminds us, we are psychotherapists and people too: 'we as psychotherapists and people will develop greater congruity, authenticity, and courage to act on behalf of ourselves and others in unjust or violent situations' (p. 87). This piece has provided an opportunity for me to reflect on some transactional analysis ideas and my own personal thoughts on activism, as well as revisiting some fundamental ethical ideas in psychotherapy. 'Engagement in political activity and processes of personal growth and development are seen increasingly as the same thing or at least two sides of a coin' (Samuels, 2013). As a practitioner, I believe the political self cannot nor should be concealed by the therapist hat—the fighter's armour in our life will also be present in the room.

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