Acceptance Speech on Receiving the 2005 Eric Berne Memorial Award: Transgressions

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Abstract

This article comprises the author’s speech accepting the 2005 Eric Berne Memorial Award, with elaborations, including an excerpt from his study of the circularity of theory, psychotherapy, and psychopathology, for which he won the award, and a discussion of five questions expanding on these ideas. Transactional analysis was the case for the author’s study. Alcoholism, homosexuality, and schizophrenia were studied as examples of how transactional analysis theory brought about its own psychopathology. The argument is that there is no psychopathology until a psychotherapy is invented to generate it. Every theory-centered psychotherapy names its own psychopathologies, which define their own worlds of psychotherapy. This study, which is of the place of theory in psychotherapy, is a theory of theory (of psychotherapy) and thus a critique. The circular logic of cybernetics was utilized for this reflexive study of psychotherapy.

I am honored to receive the 2005 Eric Berne Memorial Award, and I accept it, in particular, on behalf of all people stereotyped by labels of psychopathology.

To my knowledge, I am the first openly gay person to receive this award, although others before me have deserved it. This is the first time the award has been given for a study related to gay and lesbian issues or for anything challenging the psychopathology of homosexuality or otherwise touching on the topic of homosexuality. Today’s event testifies to an unfolding human sensitivity and civility in transactional analysis.

This otherwise happy occasion is also a public lamentation for abuses caused by the circular relationship of theory-psychotherapy-psychopathology in transactional analysis. We care, and thus we grieve, for all who have suffered, and for all who are still suffering. This award today will be remembered with respect wherever transactional analysis goes.

The award also prizes transgressions that entail critical thinking, scholarly research, mastery of a body of work, and comparing multiple points of view. So, as a grateful scholar, I accept this unexpected recognition of my work. And I, a gay man, accept this award with pride. It is a great moment.

Permit me to address all who have encouraged my work over the years, the people who nominated me for this award and the others who supported my nomination, and the EBMA panel and its chair, Gianpiero Petriglieri, for his thoughtful introduction and presentation of this award. I am so glad at the presence of those who are both willing and able to be with us today.

If I were to invoke the names of all in so great a cloud of friends and colleagues, it would take more than my allotted time. So I name only a few as representatives of the many: Thanks to Mary McClure Goulding for nominating me, and to Jim Allen, Tommy Kvarnlöf, Paul Kellett, Flex Smith, Sven Österman, Felipe García, Nancy Porter-Steele and Curtis Steele, and Ken Woods. Thanks also to Professor Ranulph Glanville for years of collaboration on cybernetics. My gratitude to TAJ editors Nancy Porter-Steele for her support and help in 1999 and Bill Cornell for his help in 2004, and to Robin Fryer, Managing Editor of the TAJ and The Script, for invaluable editorial assistance and for working so closely with me over so many years, having played a significant role in helping me articulate and publish my ideas. Finally, I owe this award to my collaborator, friend, and life partner, my beloved Stefanos Giotas. Thanks to you and to all.

My title is “Transgressions,” which comes from the Latin and signifies the act of crossing...
or passing over. My story is about instances of transgressing, of unconformity or nonconformity. It is about the transgressions that have brought me here, transgressions that are related to the care and the lamentations I mentioned earlier.

Transgression—in the sense of nonconformity and being a nonconformist—leads to what Emerson (1841) called self-reliance, learning to trust ourselves, coming to know ourselves, becoming who and what we are, cultivating our individuality to become the best that we can be. Transgression means, as Emerson put it, do your work and you unfold yourself. Overstep limitations, theories, and generalizations, insist on yourself, never imitate.

Freud is an exemplar of transgression. Lacan (as cited in Schneiderman, 1983, pp. 117-118) called Freud’s method of free association a transgression of the rules of conversation. And Berne transgressed free association, mixing it with introspection and adding the notion of transactions. Further, he transgressed by urging psychotherapy to shift its focus from events deep within the cranium to transactions between people.

The transgressions I am addressing today are about transgressing theory, which brings me to my research on what theory does in theory-centered psychotherapy.

Circularity of Theory-Psychotherapy-Psychopathology

It was with Freud around the turn of the twentieth century that a mode of psychotherapy first emerged identifying theory and psychotherapy. Almost single-handedly, he invented the practice of a theory-centered talking therapy. His inner circle of devotees, as well as his dissident disciples, continued to conflate theory and psychotherapy. They were followed by the neo-Freudians, who extended the practice, and then others came along doing the same. These psychotherapy approaches set psychotherapy on the course not only of making theoretical abstractions tangible, but of constructing various conceptualizations of personality, with its conflicts and the diagnoses and treatment of its conflicts, without regard for the motivations, the everyday activities, or the physical, social, and political conditions of an individual patient that might not be accounted for by the theory or that might otherwise be framed within theoretical constructs. Beginning with psychoanalysis, these theories claimed to be scientific. Freud, and the theorists who took him as their model of a scientist, tended to draw their metaphors and analogies from the mechanisms of late nineteenth-century science. These theory-centered styles of psychotherapy, and their appeal to popular culture, reached their zenith in the United States during the middle decades of the twentieth century (Hale, 1995).

In the decades immediately after World War II, psychoanalysis took over Western psychiatry, just as psychiatry in the United States took over psychoanalysis, defining it as the property of medicine to the exclusion of the social sciences and the practice of lay (nonmedical) analysts. In the popular mind, Freud became a “larger than life” cultural hero who commanded awe and authority. Psychotherapy that was not psychodynamic, or Freudian, ranked low on the professional status scale, if it ranked at all. That was the era when theory-centered styles of psychotherapy flourished. Along with that, madness and many other conditions that did not conform to social norms were medicalized.

Schizophrenia, alcoholism, homosexuality, criminality, and many other abstractions became categories of emotional disorders, mental diseases, or mental illness. That is, the new psychotherapies used these concepts to devise new categories of psychopathologies. If patients’ madness, and these new categories of diseases and psychopathologies, were not treated with a “talking cure,” they were likely to be treated with electro-convulsive procedures, lobotomy, and, as they became available, psychotropic drugs. Psychotherapy was often viewed as the treatment of choice, one that provided an alternative to the intrusive procedures of medical psychiatry.

My study of theory departed from conventional ways of describing how theory works in psychotherapy. Generally, there seems to be the belief, even within theory-centered psychotherapy, that practice and observation can operate separately from theory. The assumption is
that practitioners apply theory in their psychotherapy, which means that they may use their theory as they wish. It follows, then, that the therapeutic procedures, or methods of treatment, may operate aside from the theory. It also is assumed that the observations of practitioners, or their methods of observation, are independent of their theory. My study challenged and refuted these assumptions by demonstrating how in theory-centered styles of psychotherapy, the theory becomes inseparable from the psychotherapy. The evidence shows that where theory and psychotherapy are the same, and where the concepts of the theory shape the discourse, the psychotherapy becomes inseparable from the theory, and that psychotherapy theory brings forth the psychopathology that it proceeds to treat. This is a dramatic conceptualization of psychotherapy. When its actions generate the psychopathologies that it purports to treat, the drama becomes tragic.

My study demonstrated that in theory-centered psychotherapy, what nomimates psychopathology is the theory as applied in the psychotherapy dialogue. The way theory works is not arbitrary; it works through ideas or concepts. Applying a theory’s concepts brings about its nominated psychopathology: The theory performs by doing what it says (Austin, 1979). It follows from this claim that there would be no psychopathology without there first being a theory to constitute it.

Psychotherapy does what it does through communication between individuals who talk to each other. Even the construction and invention of theory is a communication and interpretation, as is the application of theory. To show how theory-centered psychotherapy brings forth psychopathology is to show how theory-centered psychotherapy brings it forth through communication; to show that psychotherapy brings forth psychopathology through communication is to show (some of) the ideas psychotherapy selects and invokes.

The usual assertion, which I am arguing against, is that psychopathology determines the psychotherapy, guiding, often unconsciously, the selection of concepts, topics, and ideas in the discourse between the psychotherapist and the patient: (1) The diagnosis of the patient is made in keeping with the patient’s psychopathology, (2) the treatment follows accordingly to ameliorate or cure the psychopathology, (3) thus the psychotherapy theory derives from the psychopathology, and (4) the psychopathology is found and is factual and the theory is developed from it.

The position I take is that the psychopathology is not found (i.e., a given), but, rather, is derived within the context of psychotherapy through the application of the theory of the psychotherapy. Figure 1 illustrates the circular relationship between psychopathology and the theory of psychotherapy in the context of a psychotherapist applying a theory in a conversation with a patient. This view is in strict contrast to the linear dependence of the generally accepted view. Thus, theory (T) creates psychotherapy (Pt) just as psychotherapy makes theory; psychotherapy-theory (Pt – T) brings forth psychopathology (Pp) just as psychopathology gives rise to psychotherapy-theory (Pt – T).

Figure 1
Circular Relationship of Theory-Psychotherapy-Psychopathology

Theory is a way of making patterns, and to make a pattern is to simplify. Simplification by definition excludes some of the richness of variety; thus, any category of psychopathology
based on theory cannot fully account for the variety of human activities. Because there are activities that are not accounted for in a theory of psychopathology, there is always the need to increase the range of application of the theory, which usually means increasing its complexity. As the theory increases in complexity, so does the psychopathology. (And the theory also eventually becomes less desirable as a theory since the idea of theory is to simplify.) Yet, the work of the theory is to find pattern in—and in this sense simplify—behaviors. The acts to be accounted for by the psychopathology increases the complexity that the theory has to deal with, while the psychotherapy, as an expression of the theory, aims at reducing the complexity.

Some major points in my argument are as follows:

1. Theory originating in the context of and formed from psychotherapy not only reenters the psychotherapy to re-form it but becomes one with the psychotherapy. Where theory and psychotherapy are the same, the theory forms the psychotherapy just as the psychotherapy forms the theory.

2. Psychopathology does not exist before it is construed within the logic of a theory and is given a name. Psychotherapy proposes its psychopathology and brings it into play in terms defined by the logic of the theory. Each psychopathology is a logical consequence of a theory and becomes true as a consequence of the description and explanation of that theory's logic.

3. The psychopathology produced by the theory adds to the complexity of the theory while the psychotherapy reduces the complexity and richness of the interaction between the conversation partners, thereby leading to an overall loss of flexibility and diversity.

4. Theorists and psychotherapists are changed by their theory. It is not a simple matter of using a theory as a tool or of deriving techniques from it. Psychotherapists who use a theory are changed by it, and how they are changed is not likely to be subject to conscious control. Individual patients are also changed. By planting psychopathology on individual patients, the theory construes them as its subjects.

I have studied what has happened, and is likely to happen, to groups of people who become subjects of the psychopathology of psychotherapy—not just anyone, but sufferers whose lives are tragic well before psychotherapy and whose tragedies psychotherapy turns into psychopathologies.

My argument, then, is about the “intersubjectivity” of a collective social practice. It is an argument about the practice of a style of psychotherapy as a whole and about groups of subjects constructed by the theory-centered practice. From the argument it may be inferred that the individuals who become victims of psychotherapy first become subjects of the diagnosis constructed by the theory's categories of psychopathology. The psychopathology that psychotherapy brings into play requires subjects to embody that psychopathology and to become the objects of diagnosis and cure. Thus, individuals constructed as subjects of the theory are susceptible to becoming victims of the psychotherapy; the psychotherapy makes individuals victims by bringing forth suffering and, in turn, the psychotherapy makes new theory to explain the suffering through diagnosing suffering as symptomatic of some psychopathology.

My study was not about what the theory or the psychotherapy might mean to an individual. Rather, the argument is logical, and its consequences are logical and social. (For this study, the logic and the evidence for the social are obtained from the literature and are acknowledged to be interpretations.)

The interpretation here is of theory as interpretation; it is not an interpretation of individual experience, which is of another and quite different order of interpretation. I am discussing how groups of individuals become subjects and categories. How are they categorized as belonging to this or that diagnosis of psychopathology? How is the psychopathology itself interpreted? These questions assume that the psychopathology creates its subjects and that the subjects who are diagnosed as having psychopathology are categorized and treated in view of their psychopathology.

One problem is the lack of critical, reflexive feedback between these processes, which means that the theory’s control of the psychotherapy is
severed from the everyday life experience of patients. Consequently, the psychotherapy practice does not effectively talk back to the theory to change it. Likewise, the theory cannot talk back to the psychotherapy because neither the psychotherapy nor the theory accounts for the fact that the psychotherapy is contained within, and becomes part of, the ongoing life story of the individual patient, in common with other areas in the social sciences. Instead, the theory’s (cybernetic) control decides the range of concepts the psychotherapy will apply, and the theory also controls the selection process of the psychotherapy. Thus, psychotherapy brings forth psychopathology (which, in turn, brings about more psychotherapy theory), but there is no return of the psychopathology to the psychotherapy for critical evaluation. Besides, if there were critical evaluation, it would likely constitute an infinite regress. The psychopathology controls the psychotherapy, which produces more and more psychopathology, and that, in turn, leads to more theory and psychopathology, ad infinitum. The result is a loss of flexibility. The theory, through its reductionism, consumes flexibility and eats up variety.

In summary, my argument is that psychotherapy brings forth psychopathology. There is no psychopathology until a psychotherapy is invented to generate it; the invention of a psychotherapy leads to naming of a psychopathology; and every theory-centered psychotherapy names its own psychopathologies, which define their own worlds of psychotherapy.

Circularity of Theory and Psychopathology in Transactional Analysis

The changes in practice mentioned earlier were influenced by the demands placed on psychiatry by World War II. Psychiatrists and psychologists returning to civilian life following the war brought with them many new modalities of psychotherapy, including group psychotherapy. Transactional analysis was one of those modalities. I took it for special study as an example of how theory works within theory-centered styles of psychotherapy. My study covered the period that begins with the genesis of the theory of transactional analysis in the psychodynamic practice of Eric Berne (1910-1970) in the 1940s and 1950s and from the rise of transactional analysis in the 1950s through its rapid growth in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the decade following Berne’s death, transactional analysis brought forth opposing and conflicting approaches, or schools, that dominated its theoretical development and practice during the 1970s. However, with regard to psychopathology, most practitioners would have agreed with Steiner (1971, pp. xviii, 158) that “alcoholism, depression, schizophrenia, homosexuality, etc.” were psychopathologies.

To demonstrate how transactional analysis generated processes of theory-psychotherapy-psychopathology, I use three examples of psychopathology cited by Steiner. Schizophrenia is an example of the application of Berne’s personality theory of ego states and the results of applying his quantitative metaphors with real energy and force. Alcoholism is an example from transactional game theory. Homosexuality highlights Berne’s script theory, although it, like the other two, involves all of Berne’s theory as a logical whole. These three examples are about the real tragedy that was the outcome of transactional analysts sticking with the “hard core” of theory.

My first example from Berne’s theory of games and play is alcoholism. His theory led to the belief that “cured alcoholics” could drink moderately. Anecdotal evidence tells of the premature deaths of people addicted to alcohol who were told that alcoholism was a game and who were led to believe that (1) if they stopped taking part in the drama of the game and (2) if they used their Adult ego state for social control of their drinking, they would be cured of their alcoholism. This theory also seems to have given some leaders in transactional analysis confidence—even pride—in their ability to control their drinking and other chemical addictions. (Transactional analysts, with the exception of the Gouldings, did not begin to discuss these tragic outcomes until the 1990s [Barnes, 2000, 2002].)

A second example is how the quantitative metaphors that Berne used as the basis for his...
theory of ego states were taken literally by Jacqui Schiff and used to create a theory of reparenting that required the extinguishing and replacing of the Parent ego state to cure what she took to be schizophrenia. Parts of this theory are still widely used by transactional analysts, and reparenting and passivity confrontation are still being done in the name of transactional analysis. Yet, as has become apparent, reparenting destroyed the lives of many seriously disturbed young people in the 1970s. Reparenting is another example of how destructive theory can be to practice, of how the circle of “theory-psychotherapy-psychopathology” brings forth a psychotherapy that does harm (see Barnes, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2002).

My third example shows how the theory and practice of transactional script analysis proposed the psychopathology of homosexuality. I trace its phase-by-phase development as a psychopathology resulting from script theory and how script theory made homosexuality a psychopathology. Transactional analysis created its own version of the psychopathology of homosexuality, constructed its own description of the homosexual subject, and made lesbians and gay men psychopathological, thus diminishing their identity and self-descriptions (see Barnes, 2002, 2004, 2005).

It is ironic that a theory that makes so much of the damage caused by victimization made people its victims. Diagnosis was carried out according to a dogmatic psychopathology predicated on a theory. Individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia, alcoholism, and homosexuality gained, by virtue of their diagnosis and treatment by transactional analysis, membership in a practice that made them candidates for a “tragic offering,” all the while purporting to give them back their “membership card in the human race.”

A Cybernetic Study

My study was inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson, who was the first to apply cybernetics to the study of psychotherapy, and physicist Heinz von Foerster, whose model for a reflexive study of a subject by applying its own devices to itself led to the cybernetics of cybernetics (or second-order cybernetics).

Bateson (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951) envisaged in his cybernetic study of psychotherapy, and its epistemology, that all psychotherapy theories would eventually be subject to therapeutic study. The interpretive construction of my work is cybernetic and also therapeutic (Barnes, 1994). It is cybernetic because it studies theory as a social construction and a social activity that occurs through communication, specifically in the conversations of psychotherapy. It is also a cybernetic study because the study is subject to the circular logic of cybernetics.

This award you have so graciously honored me with is for research that began to take shape when I heard Bateson (1977) give the Southeast Institute’s Eric Berne Lecture in 1977. In it he described the theoretical knots transactional analysis would need to untie and the double binds transactional analysts would need to break through. My research project was furthered by my working with the kind of cybernetics Bateson used for his study of psychiatry and psychotherapy (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951).

Berne was quite familiar with Bateson’s cybernetic study of communication in psychotherapy, as he was with other works in cybernetics, but he chose to repress and maltreat them. The transactional practices that have brought us to grief can be traced to Berne’s distortion of cybernetics. His metaphors of psychic energy and his belief that there are basic units of personality, and that he had found them and identified them correctly, led to the theory of reparenting and passivity and the grotesque practice of regressing grown-ups back to infancy, reducing them to virtual vegetative conditions (Barnes, 1999b, 1999c). Berne’s theory of the game of alcoholic furthered his simplistic and misguided beliefs about alcoholism (Barnes, 2000, 2002).

My research returns to transactional analysis the cybernetics that Berne wrote off, but it does so as a different practice in new social situations, half a century later, to expose serious defects and problems Berne built into his theory. Cybernetics proposes solutions to those problems, for example, to the problem of psychic energy. Berne built his theory of communication on quantitative metaphors (Barnes, 1999a),

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replacing quality with quantity. That distracted us from the interpretation of differences and from the notion that a perceptual or neurological difference is an elementary idea (Bateson, 1972/2000) and that ideas or concepts are the basic units of communication and mental activity. The second problem that Berne built into his theory was the confusion of brain and mind. The third was the problem of believing that humans may be reduced to elementary units. And, not to be overlooked, there is the problem of a truncated definition of transaction, setting forth normative rules of communication that are prescriptive rather than descriptive and without explanatory value.

Return of the Repressed

Berne’s theory brought about its own psychopathology of homosexuality (Barnes, 2002, 2004, 2005). The study in which I present evidence for that claim also presents evidence for another claim, which is that his theory denied the legitimacy of same-sex desire and behavior. It obliterated from transactional analysis the concept of the homosexual through a transformation of concepts.

Berne construed the homosexual as a child and thus as an ego state, transforming the concept of the homosexual into the concept of the Child ego state. The concept of the Child ego state replaced the concept of the homosexual as a grown-up individual. One way Berne made up the Child ego state was by turning his images of the seductive homosexual into images of a squirming child standing naked before adults. In Berne’s theory, the homosexual is not a grown-up but a Child. With this the identity of the person as a lesbian or gay male ceased to be legitimate. Berne’s theory, eliminating homosexuality, also obliterated the idea of the homosexual.

What I show with the notion of the transformation of concepts is that both homosexuality and the Child ego state are concepts and that one concept gets transformed into another. Where does that argument lead? It takes us to the notion that the Child ego state was Berne’s invention, nothing more. From this we must confront the tradition Berne began for transactional analysis of making concepts real, that is, turning them into entities and concrete objects or tangible things. We need to start talking about ego states as concepts, not as things we possess or have or as things in our brains. They are concepts and nothing but concepts.

Thus the transformation is conceptual—the conceptual transformation of the homosexual into the Child ego state. The problem for this transformation was that Berne had turned an individual into something he or she was not, that is, into a psychopathology, which was the homosexual. Berne took over from psychiatry and psychoanalysis the concept of the homosexual as sick and of the psychopathology of homosexuality. He then transformed that concept of the homosexual into another concept, the Child ego state.

Why has it taken 50 years to spell this out and ask what Berne’s theory is doing? His rhetoric persuaded us to take what we read as an empirical report rather than as a work of fiction. It was at the level at which Berne claimed that he knew the mind of the other, that he had access to the inner thoughts, memories, and experiences of the other, that we should have doubted. (We did not because we hoped his theory’s magic would work for us as he promised it would.) Here was the novelist, not the scientist, at work. He told us he used intuition, describing it as if it was turning up empirical facts.

We have had to acquire the discipline to read his texts as they are, not as the texts direct us to read them. What Berne described as the homosexual with anal conflicts who wants Berne to fuck him is not about a homosexual. It is a description of Berne’s own fantasy. All these descriptions are the work of his imagination. What he describes as an ego state is not about an ego or a state inside the head of the other. It is Berne’s effort to construct a device that he could use to know the thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences of another. What I have referred to as the conceptual process of the transformation of the homosexual into the Child ego state was actually the transformation of one fantasy—Berne’s homosexual—into another fantasy—Berne’s image of a naked child. He went on to transform that fantasy into yet another: the Child ego state.
How, then, did I come up with the notion that Berne developed his theory of the Child ego state through a transformation of concepts? It came after years of meditating on Berne’s theory of intuition, beginning with his reports on how he perceived and classified the men he was examining for discharge from military duty following World War II. What drew my attention was what Berne (1949/1977) called his “neutral but unswerving gaze” (p. 9).

Later, when Berne directed his intuitive gaze on lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, he transformed the psychopathology of homosexuality into a primal image of homosexual and anal conflicts. Next he transformed his primal image into what he called a primal judgment about the patient. Tracking Berne’s movements through these conceptual transformations, I kept in mind that these were Berne’s reports of his own thinking. That is, they were his fantasies; he was making them up. That helped me to understand what happened when he converted his judgment into what he referred to as an “intuitive” ego image by constructing his image of a squirming child standing naked before adults. I saw Berne’s next move to be the combination of that image with Federn’s theory of ego states, that is, Berne construed his ego image as an ego state. That is how I traced his making up the Child ego state. What did I find? Whom had Berne transformed into the Child ego state? Berne’s homosexual had become a child (and, ipso facto, an ego state: the Child). Thus I concluded that Berne’s homosexual was hiding the Child ego state.

But, what if Berne had not transformed his concept of the homosexual into his concept of the Child ego state? Would he still have constructed the concept of the Child ego state? He was even then committed to the idea of reducing humans to elementary units. That was the very thing that cybernetics and systems thinking could have helped him avoid if he had not dismissed them. Ross Ashby, Gregory Bateson, Norbert Wiener, and other cyberneticians and systems thinkers were pointing the way to holistic conceptualizations, warning of the pitfalls involved in thinking in terms of elementary units and reductionism. If Berne had not persisted in his reductive thinking, he would not have developed his theory as he did.

Whether he would have developed the concept of the Child ego state if he had not transformed the homosexual into the concept of a child is a question that is not as interesting to me as the fact that he chose the homosexual as the object for the transformation of concepts. I do not consider that choice coincidental and do not wish to be distracted from its implications by changing the subject too quickly. It seems to me worth discussing that Berne (and the founders of the two major schools of transactional analysis of the 1970s) used homosexuality for their paradigm cases. From there we can ask if Berne would still have devised transactional analysis if he had not made the transformations he made.

I think Berne would have developed his theory even if he had not transformed the homosexual into the Child ego state, but his theory would not have repressed homosexuality or exposed gay men and lesbians to the maltreatment they have suffered from the theory as Berne gave it to us. Let us consider the suffering caused by Berne’s theory (and its entailments) before we return to the question of origins. Let us reflect on what the theory has done to groups of people—not only to lesbians and gay men, but also to alcoholics, schizophrenics, and others—before pushing aside these untoward results as unintended or unexpected consequences of our theories. And that is where I think my research may have turned up something interesting: It shows what theory-centered psychotherapy does to human beings by creating psychopathology, and how psychotherapy, by constructing psychopathology, makes up kinds of people to which it applies its theory, proceeding to cure them of the psychopathology constructed by its own theory.

My research points to the origin of psychopathology, and it is in that context that I have placed my discussion of the origin of the theory of the Child ego state. It is in the context of the origin of psychopathology that I see Berne’s theory presenting an insufferable problem that is not easily dismissed or explained away. I can only ask others to consider the results of my research as a whole, beginning with my study of Berne’s selection and use of quantitative
metaphors that led to their application by the Cathexis school and by people who still claim to reparent others. Berne’s published endorsement of those practices is an example of what his theory did to him as well as to others. What Berne’s theory (and transactional analysis) did is about one of the worst things any psychotherapy approach has to answer for. My research suggests that answering for it requires looking at what the theory itself (as well as the epistemology implicit within it) is doing.

We can no longer expect to be congratulated for saying we do not now do those kinds of things. We know we cannot continue using our theory without questioning what it, and its underlying epistemology, did and is still doing. We are probing and reflecting, and there is within transactional analysis the commitment to correct what needs correcting.

Even so, I do not want to dismiss either Berne’s double-bind situation or our own. He grew up and worked in a society that constructed the immorality of homosexuality and turned homosexuals into criminals. He became a psychiatrist at a time when psychiatry considered homosexuals sick. Furthermore, American psychoanalysts harbored some of the worst possible prejudices and stereotypes about lesbians and gay males. It is important to place Berne in this context, locating his practice and theory making in this situation. I believe this context shaped his theory. And, I believe he, too, was stereotyped by labels of psychopathology, just as he constructed new ones. He was, in his own way, a nonconformist, transgressing social conventions and psychoanalytic dogmas.

The double bind Berne’s theory set up for gay people is analogous to the double bind a heteronormative society sets up, not only for lesbians and gay males, but for all of humanity, including, of course, Eric Berne himself. It seems that one way Berne transgressed and broke through his own double bind was through the creation of transactional analysis. He had the satisfaction of changing the images of other people to match his image of the world. And his image is embedded in his theory.

Bateson (1997) reminded a transactional analysis audience in 1977 that going through the discipline of working through our double bind makes us better people. The discipline brings with it “certain advantages and joys in life that other people do not have” (p. 143).

With that, to my fellow human being Eric Berne and all of us here today, I say a heartfelt, thank you!

Questions

The TAJ editors suggested that it might be helpful to readers to include here a few of the questions raised during informal discussions following my speech in Edinburgh. The following five questions serve both to summarize and to enlarge on the ideas for which I received the award. The first is about a shift in contemporary transactional analysis, implied by my research, from ego states to transactions. The second is about cybernetics: what it is and its possible relevance to transactional analysis. The third, taking off from the notion of the transformation of the homosexual into the Child ego state, is about what happened to adult sexuality in transactional analysis therapy. The fourth addresses Berne’s relationship to homosexuality, and the fifth considers the intentions of my research.

Question 1: Berne insisted that without ego states there could be no transactional analysis. He believed that ego states were real, that they were the basic units of the personality, and that transactions were between them. You show how Berne went about the theoretical work of inventing the Child ego state, that it was not his discovery but his invention. Consequently, you propose that we need to shift our work from ego states to transactions. According to Berne, if we do that we will not be doing transactional analysis. What do you say to that?

Even if neuroscience discovered things in the brain that turned out to be what Berne called psychic organs, knowing that would not let us in on what other people think and feel. We can only know that by having people tell or show us through transactions. The mind we share is social, something different from the idea that thoughts are events deep inside one’s brain that a stimulus from the outside can bring out as a response. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (2000) warning about confusing the brain with
mind seems apt: “Our brains are not in a vat, but in our bodies. Our minds are not in our bodies, but in the world. And as for the world, it is not in our brains, our bodies, or our minds: They are, along with gods, verbs, rocks, and politics, in it” (p. 210).

A historical context for Berne’s statement about what is, and what is not, transactional analysis: When Berne started using the concept of transaction, he was borrowing it from the philosopher John Dewey, who credited the physicist James Clerk Maxwell with introducing the concept of transaction into science in the 1870s (see Barnes, 2000).

However, Berne had to differentiate what he came to call transactional analysis from all the other theories of transactional analysis, transactional processes, and transactional systems theory. By the late 1940s, a transactional psychology and a transactional psychiatry had developed. Among the names associated with transaction in psychiatry were the psychiatrists John Spiegel and Roy Grinker. Berne also had to differentiate his theory of games from von Neumann’s mathematical game theory as well as from Thomas Szasz’s game-playing model of human behavior and from game theories of other psychiatrists. Ultimately, Berne differentiated his theory by claiming that without ego states it was not transactional analysis, game analysis, or script analysis. He believed that science begins with basic units, and he made ego states his basic units. That made his whole theory reductive, but it also distinguished his transactional analysis from all others.

To return to Dewey, I think his concept of transaction can contribute significantly to contemporary transactional analysis. For him, a transaction was a social act, a circular arrangement of shared experience. The observations by both the observer and the observed in a transaction yield a double description.

Transaction is a concept describing activities that, in fact, are circular, not linear. Circularity both defines a transaction and is the procedure for studying it. What makes circularity desirable is that a transaction is not a one-way action. Rather, it is a circle that includes individuals and their environment, taking organism plus environment as a complete social circuit. A transaction is an action, not a thing; like an illusion, it cannot be located. It is a process that includes the observer, the observed, and their observations.

In the transactions of transactional analysis, the observations of the observer (e.g., the therapist) and the observed (e.g., the patient) are refracted, at times distorted, through the lens of transactional analysis theory. Thus, through applying certain concepts of this theory in transactions with the patient, the transactional analysis therapist may bring about a transactional analysis psychopathology, such as alcoholism, schizophrenia, or homosexuality.

What transactional analysis theory does not account for is the conversation and the stories therapist and patient (i.e., the observer and the observed) tell each other, bringing about the narrative that emerges within their transaction.

In what follows I draw insights from Dewey—and also from cybernetics—to develop an alternative to Berne’s definition and description of a transaction. I define a transaction as the unit of social action, consisting of conversations in which concepts are shared, verbally or nonverbally (Barnes, 2000, p. 236). In my description, concepts are exchanged or shared, distinguished, interpreted, described, pruned, unfolded. Participants in a conversation are within the transaction. They are agents acting together; they observe each other and they speak to each other. They share their experiences through sharing concepts, which forms the basis for the stories they tell one another. My approach means that it is not possible for transactional analysts, or others, to exclude themselves from their analysis of their transactions with patients. We cannot exclude ourselves from our observations, the concepts we share, our descriptions, and our interpretations. Further, the transactional analysis transaction is enmeshed in networks of other activities. So, the transactional analysis transaction is part of many different other transactions: for example, the family, which is a transaction, and even life itself, which consists of transactions and is itself a transaction. That is how living organisms stay alive and how we accomplish things. (There are times when Berne defined transactions as covering a lifetime, happily transgressing his
definition of a transaction as a stimulus and a response.)

We are now in a position to solve the problem of theory at the level of theory itself. The use of a theory in psychotherapy is an ethical choice. Transactional analysis can now become non-theory-centered by becoming a practice that is wholly transactional. We call what we do transactional analysis. Let’s do that—work with transactions. It will keep us busy for another 50 years, at least.

**Question 2: You seem to think cybernetics was important for the development of Berne’s theory, even if he was reacting to it for the most part. But cybernetics seems to have pretty much disappeared, even though your research is a cybernetic study of theory. Obviously, there are academicians and scholars who use it. What do you think cybernetics can contribute to transactional analysis today?**

Cybernetics has not disappeared. It has actually been absorbed into many disciplines and is multidisciplinary, which explains why there are not many university departments of cybernetics. In fact, cybernetics, which proposes alternative ways of doing science, belongs to all sciences, especially the biological, cognitive, and social sciences.

Cybernetics is the study of communication and social action. Applied to human communication, cybernetics is the study of conversation. That is what Gordon Pask explained in terms of second-order cybernetics (see Glanville, 2001). The key concept for understanding conversation, and all living processes, is circularity. But there are also nonliving circular devices. One of the most original was invented by James Watt, whose statue is at the entrance to the center where the Edinburgh TA conference was held at Heriot-Watt University.

Watt is famous for many things, including his invention of a steam engine. He also invented the centrifugal governor for automatic control of the speed of his steam engine. That makes him a precursor of cybernetics. (“Governor” was derived from the Latin word that was used to translate the Greek word from which “cybernetics” was derived, meaning “steersman.”) The Watt governor—which is a coordination, regulation, and control device—works on the simple principle of circularity, using negative feedback to control the speed of the engine. Mathematician Norbert Wiener (1954), one of the founders of cybernetics, described feedback as “the control of a machine on the basis of its actual performance rather than its expected performance” (p. 24). Watt’s governor was a feedback device that allowed his steam engine, as a system, to regulate itself so that it did not have to be regulated or controlled from outside. The governor and engine were connected, becoming one system, and thus the governor revolved as the engine revolved. The fast revolution of the engine created a centrifugal force, causing the whirling arms of the governor to fly outward. This movement regulated the input of energy to the engine. At the instant when an engine was in the act of going out of control, the action of the governor brought it back into control (see Beer, 1966, p. 255).

Several decades later, when Darwin and Wallace were formulating the theory of evolution by natural selection, Wallace (as cited in Gillispie, 1990) used the analogy of the centrifugal governor:

The action of this principle is exactly like that of the centrifugal governor of the steam engine, which checks and corrects any irregularities almost before they become evident; and in like manner no unbalanced deficiency in the animal kingdom can ever reach any conspicuous magnitude, because it would make itself felt at the very first step, by rendering existence difficult and extinction almost sure to follow. (p. 340)

It was the governor, as a device operating on negative feedback and thus as a circular arrangement, that also provided one of the analogies for the group of scientists who developed cybernetics in the 1940s, as my earlier quote from Wiener (1954) indicates.

Cybernetics uses simple words—difference, information, idea (or concept), observer, communication, conversation, organization, pattern, and circularity—but in a way that makes for difficult going at times. This is because cybernetics challenges some of the conventional ways we think about an activity as simple as
communication, which brings up epistemology, a term that is not so simple. And while circularity is a fairly simple word, it is not easy to grasp the activity it is describing, because the cybernetic use of the logic of circularity brings into play an epistemology to which we are not accustomed.

The circular logic of cybernetics is contrary to the linear logic many of us have learned. We usually talk about communication as if it goes from A to B, as stimulus and response, as if it is a chain. In fact, the mathematics of cybernetics and its logic demonstrate the circularity of communication and that communication is a sharing. In human communication, what is shared is ideas or concepts, all of which entail our neurological experience of differences.

Berne did not seem to grasp the implications of the concept of circularity. He insisted on using quantitative metaphors of psychic energy to discuss communication processes (including the activities of systems of the body). He did not try to defend the quantitative concepts and energy metaphors he used for describing human communication, nor did he offer proof or evidence for his claims. To do the latter, he would have been expected, as a scientist, to provide tools for measuring his quantities, something he could not do because his use of psychic energy was metaphorical (see Barnes, 1999a). Berne let metaphors make connections for him and do the work that required rigorous thought, mathematics, and tools to measure psychic energy. Since psychic energy could not be measured, no valid falsifiable hypothesis could be formulated; psychic energy could not, therefore, be a subject of scientific study. That meant that Berne had to ask others, in effect, to believe him. Some did and joined him in making literal his quantitative metaphors of psychic energy (Barnes, 1999b, 1999c).

Energy is the language of analysis, but Berne gave us neither mathematical tools nor the logic for doing the analysis. In contrast, Wiener (1948) provided the language—the mathematics and the logic—for working with just the kind of things Berne proposed. Unfortunately, Berne dismissed the tools Wiener made available, thus denying transactional analysis the chance to link biology and communication by connecting Berne’s theory with cybernetics.

As described earlier, cybernetics is the study of communication, communication means to share, and what is shared in human communication is not substance or matter (or energy) or even things, but concepts or ideas, a pattern or form (Wiener, 1954). In its most elementary form, it is a difference. If there is one concept that we might associate with cybernetics, it is difference, which refers to a change in time or between one time and another. We might say that our bodies—our whole biology and cognition—operate on difference. In fact, the most elementary definition of information is news of a difference that makes a difference to a sensory organ (see Bateson, 2000).

Psychotherapy is a dialogical activity, which means it can only occur through communication, a circular activity rather than a linear one. That makes psychotherapy subject to cybernetic study. A cybernetic study of psychotherapy begins with the idea that psychotherapy, as dialogical, is a circular rather than a linear activity. What saves this circularity from becoming a vicious cycle is that it is constructive, which means that it leads to productive processes and outcomes, as in the example of the Watt governor.

We may express this circular logic in three forms, as worked out by von Foerster (2003), who took part in the early refining of cybernetics and who led in the development of second-order cybernetics.

First, the logic of circularity shows how communication is a circular arrangement: A implies B, B implies C, and C implies A.

Second, this logic, in its reflexive form, states that A implies B (the self, the other) and B implies A (the other, the self). So, without the self and the other, there is no communication and no transaction. Expanding on this, we could say the self is reflected in the other. How we see the other influences how the other sees us and vice versa. More formally stated, (1) I see you, you see me; (2) I see you see me, you see me see you; (3) I see you see me see you, you see me see you see me. This is an example of “recursion,” which means that a term becomes the basis for, and generates, the next term. Each product of a process becomes the
basis for the subsequent process, which follows
the logic of circularity.

Third, this logic, in its self-reference form,
states that A implies A (the self proposes the
self). Any statement or observation requires a
self; it is always the statement by and of the self.
Every statement is a self-statement: I am the per-
person who talks “like that,” and what I say is “I”
telling you about “me,” regardless of what I may
tell you about “it.” Again, we have reflexivity.

Here, reflection on what we say and think
comes into play. We turn our own way of
speaking or thinking on itself. We ask ques-
tions such as: Why do we talk the way we do,
using this vocabulary? What does this way of
talking permit us to do or keep us from doing?
How do we know what we know? How do we
learn? These questions are about epistemology:
how we know, think, and decide. Cybernetics
leads us to question our epistemology by ques-
tioning the premises, or logic, on which we
make our statements.

The epistemology of cybernetics is scientific;
it proposes to be subject to experiment and em-
pirical study. It makes its beliefs explicit, stating
them clearly so they can be subject to critique
by comparison with other epistemologies. As
an epistemology, it can never be right and is
subject to disproof. The change in epistemol-
yogy effected by cybernetics is a result of its use
of the logic of circularity. It is recursive.

An act, process, argument, or concept that is
recursive turns on itself, or returns to itself.
This epistemology leads us to question our
theories— their assumptions and logic—and the
tems for how we think we know. It is not about
how to see things. Rather, it is about how we
observe and understand our observations. It
takes us into an exploration of everyday experi-
ences of how we know what we know, how
knowing is done, or how we come to know.
These are social experiences, just as knowing
is a social activity, which means we can de-
scribe them.

Cybernetics helps us to avoid pretending that
we can know what, in fact, we cannot know.
We cannot know what is in other people’s
minds. In cybernetics this is called the black
box problem (Glanville, 1982). The inaccessi-
bility of the thoughts and feelings of other
people suggests that the way we can know any-
thing about another person is through our com-
unication, and that means through our sharing
concepts or ideas with each other.

If we were to begin with the kind of problem
Berne began with, we might ask how we de-
scribe a human organism as a system if its un-
verbalized thoughts and feelings are inaccessi-
table to us. This system presents uncertainty,
and we cannot predict with certainty what it
might do at some point in the future. One solu-
tion is to reduce this system to what von Foer-
wanted to predict what would happen “next
time,” did just that: He turned the human or-
ganism into a trivial machine with three (pri-
mary) states. We can see how reductive Berne’s
theory was by the way theories of ego states
have proliferated over the past 4 decades.
These theories will continue to proliferate be-
cause theorists are trying to replace some of the
complexity that Berne’s theory ignored. They
are trying to show that the human organism is
nontrivial. Such ego state theorists are working
to account for many worlds, but to do so they
must create a new theory of ego states for each
individual. Even doing that, however, will not
accomplish what Berne promised; it will not
make accessible an individual’s thoughts, feel-
ings, memories, and other unconscious experi-
ences. The only accessibility we know about
occurs through conversation, which makes ac-
sessible the social action of what we might call
a social mind, one that communicates through
kinesics, speech, and other languages.

Cybernetics looks at the human organism as
nontrivial. In a probabilistic world, we live
with contingency because the world is not de-
terministic. In the world of probability we do
not deal with quantities. And rather than deal
with one world, we might as well count on
dealing with many worlds—at least as many
worlds as there are people, worlds that, for all
we know, may be similar yet unique. In these
worlds we have to deal with the irrational, the
unpredictable, the contingent, the paradoxes,
and the double binds in communication.

Berne insisted on determinism. He had to do
that to come up with a theory that made it pos-
sible for him to claim that he could predict
what people would do. There were other (non-deterministic) ways he could have accounted for regularities and patterns of behavior, but he, unfortunately, was not open to them.

**Question 3:** In your discussion of the homosexual and the Child ego state, are you saying that Berne’s theory led to a denial of adult sexuality in transactional analysis? For example, in your discussion of Berne’s case of Mr. D, you note that Berne insisted on separating sex from other actions. I am wondering if this became the norm for transactional analysis and if it led to the denial of sexual feelings in transactional analysis therapy. Did Berne translate everything about the homosexual into manifestations of the Child ego state rather than dealing with it in terms of legitimate adult sexuality?

I have not studied transactional analysis theory with the thought in mind of how the theory may have led to the denial of sexual feelings in TA therapy, except in the case of homosexuality. However, I think your question deserves thought and study, including how it relates to homosexuality. I do not think my study of this topic has exhausted the possibilities. All who work with the texts will have their own thoughts and interpretations, because Berne’s texts are rich with metaphors that, like fiction, arouse each reader’s imagination.

I will stay with the topic I studied: how Berne’s theory of homosexuality gave rise to the psychopathology of homosexuality; how Berne’s theory obliterated homosexuality; and how Berne went about transforming the homosexual into the Child ego state. After he had made that transformation, homosexuality could reappear as a psychopathology located in the Child ego state, being caused by a script injunction of Don’t Be the Sex You Are.

Let me return to the basis of your question and the way I got from Berne’s concept of the homosexual to his concept of the Child ego state. I think my formulation of this idea shows that Berne was inventing the whole thing. What he was seeing and imagining, what he described as his judgments and thoughts, were all his creations: He was making them up, which involved using what he called his intuition. And Berne, as their creator, is responsible for creating them and for the theory he made up to explain his imaginative inventions.

Berne leads his readers to believe that he knew what his patients were thinking and that he knew that through intuition. But he did not know, because it is not possible for anyone to have access to another’s thoughts, feelings, and consciousness unless they are social. What Berne called intuition, others might call imagination.

In fact, it is intuition that needs to be investigated and subjected to careful and rigorous experiment, something that has not been done for many reasons. One problem is pinning down what intuition is. Berne satisfied himself that he had done so, and that he therefore had license to turn his constructive imagination, or his mind readings of others, into facts about them. Yet, for the reader today, his mind readings remain his. They can only be his thoughts and not the thoughts of others. If others could not verbalize their thoughts, Berne could not know what they were.

Berne claimed that the ego states are concealed: People do not know about them because they do not listen to them. I claim, instead, that people have ego states because they have Berne’s theory. Since ego states cannot be empirically observed, Berne “observed” them using intuition. And although he talked about the intuitive as if it could be elevated to the empirical, his work on intuition provides only a set of beliefs that cannot be questioned because there are no independent criteria for investigating what Berne called intuition. We must rely on his theory to observe ego states, and his theory says he came to know them through intuition.

To hear ego states, we must first see a diagram of Berne’s three stacked circles, labeled from bottom to top as Child, Adult, and Parent. The theory claims that these ego states have been there all the time; we just did not hear them before Berne told us to listen to them as voices in our heads. Once he told us about the three ego states, and what they were doing in our heads, we could hardly hear anything else.

What I have done is show that there was no Child ego state before Berne turned his imaginative gaze on the homosexual. Berne’s next
step was to perform a series of transformations of concepts. If Berne had not done that (or something analogous to it), he could not have come up with the Child ego state. What I propose is taking ego states for what they are—concepts, theoretical constructs, and abstractions—and to stop making them concrete and in the process giving simple location to psychopathology.

I know my work challenges Berne’s theory and the theories that transactional analysis has generated since the 1950s. But what I am doing is not unreasonable if we see that theory is only theory—it is not truth—and if we see that Berne’s atheism does not allow us to make him or anyone else into a god, that he himself, as Dr. Petriglieri has reminded us, insisted on “ruthless self-examination.”

Our theories, as expressions of our thoughts, are social acts. As such, they are conduct and moral acts for which we are responsible. “It is [Dewey’s] argument,” writes Geertz (2000), “that the reason thinking is serious is that it is a social act, and that one is therefore responsible for it as for any other social act. Perhaps even more so, for, in the long run, it is the most consequential of social acts” (p. 21).

Berne is responsible for his thoughts as they are embedded in his theory as well as for his theory as a whole. If we teach Berne’s theory, we are also responsible for what we teach as well as for what we think. I hear in what you say a deep ethical concern about our practice. I also hope my work will help us, as a community of ethical practitioners, to take responsibility for our theory in a way we have not been able to, as a global community, heretofore. My study of the circularity of theory calls this issue to the attention of transactional analysts. The change that is now afoot within transactional analysis is much greater than any individual or single contribution; I may have made a small contribution, but its influence has depended on the readiness of the community, and the people in it, to accept it. We are now at one of those turning points when changes of historical importance occur (Barnes, 2000, pp. 75, 79-81). Our turning point is a change of attitude toward theory and about how theory will be used in transactional analysis.

**Question 4:** Do you think Berne may have been in the closet? He was certainly homophobic, and when I read some of the things he wrote about homosexuality, I wonder. I feel ashamed that he wrote what he did about lesbians and gay men. If he were around today, I think he would be an advocate of reparative therapy for gay men. I know there are people in transactional analysis today who agree with what Berne wrote about homosexuality. And they would certainly support the idea that homosexuality is not normal, that it is the result of script, that it can be cured if the individual wants to change. I feel very strongly about this because in my country there are transactional analysis trainers and public agencies taking this position, though some do it covertly.

The only Eric Berne we can know today is the one we invent. And the Berne I write about is the Berne who emerges from my interpretation of his writing, not the Berne who wrote, ate, defecated, and copulated. We have the body of work he left behind, and that is my sole source for working with his ideas, respecting the canons of scholarship.

Why should we be concerned about Berne’s sexuality? I think it is because we are relating it to his theory, and we are interested in what applying the theory does. Before I had worked through his theory and found out how his theory generated the psychopathology of homosexuality, I had given little more than a passing thought to Berne’s sexuality. The interest I now have in Berne’s sexuality—and here I refer to the Berne who shows himself to us as we turn his pages—concerns what his theory did to him, or what he was doing to himself with his theory, and antecedent to Berne’s theory, what psychoanalytic theory did to Berne.

**Question 5:** You acknowledge the satisfaction of working with Berne’s theory and the intellectual rewards you have derived from it. My question is about gratitude. If you have gained from Berne’s theory, as you say, should you be criticizing it as you do? I don’t myself believe it is ingratitude, and the EBMA now acknowledges your work, but if we take what you say to heart, we will find ourselves leaving Berne’s theory behind. What do you say to
those who suggest that it is ungrateful to abandon Berne’s theory?

Believe me, I’ve thought about that. I did not expect to receive this award, even after I was nominated, but winning it is a great honor and I am enjoying it. In fact, I think it would be ungrateful not to return to Berne’s theory what I’ve learned from my scholarly study of it.

First, Berne constructed his theory as a scientific theory. Whether he expected it to be challenged or critiqued is not for me to decide. By insisting that it was a scientific theory, he invited the kind of thing I am doing. Even if it is not approached as scientific, it would still, as literary theory, be subject to criticism.

Second, my study of Berne’s theory has included a study of its premises. That was the kind of thing Gregory Bateson suggested in his discussion of epistemology in his Eric Berne Lecture in 1977. Bateson’s acceptance of our invitation to give that lecture is to me exemplary of what the scientific attitude is about when it shows generosity and respect. From as early as 1951, after the publication of Bateson’s work on communication in psychiatry, Berne maltreated and misconstrued it. Yet Bateson, after hesitating and voicing doubts, consented to give the inaugural lecture honoring Berne. Without making any attack on Berne, Bateson (1997) spoke of three epistemological problems plaguing Berne’s theory. But he did it by placing Berne’s theory and transactional analysis in the larger context of Western thought.

Third, I have tried to amplify the call by some leading transactional analysts and others for transactional analysis and other theory-centered practices to surmount their grand narratives and to work instead with each patient’s narrative or proto-theory. From the beginning of transactional analysis, many practitioners have taken a pragmatic approach to theory. They evaluate theories neither as explanations nor as ways to predict human behavior but in terms of how they are more or less useful vocabularies for human understanding or ways of talking about how to cope with life. My conviction is that the survival of transactional analysis as a viable contemporary practice requires that their approach eventually carry the day. For some time, highly regarded transactional analysts have been moving away from writing theory and theory-laden concepts in the uppercase, instead keeping concepts in the lowercase and making theory plural. In addition to advocating pluralism, they have urged us to avoid privileging any theorist, including Berne. They entreat us to respect Berne’s theory as one of many, and not one we must reference or to which we must make our own work a footnote. They insist that we are free to tell our own stories and write our own cases rather than practice exegesis of Berne’s texts and write elaborate commentaries on Berne’s theory.

For example, Robert Goulding (1981) contributed a piece entitled “Challenging the Faith” to the tenth anniversary issue of the Transactional Analysis Journal. It is about challenging “TA beliefs.” He wrote, “For if we don’t constantly challenge what we have been taught or have initiated ourselves, we will be falling into the same errors that psychoanalysis has fallen into.” Goulding said that if Freud were alive he would have changed his mind and “have constantly grown.” Berne “would have changed too, would have challenged some of his own beliefs, had he lived through the past ten years” (p. 50). Goulding warned, “We cannot afford to say ‘but Eric said’ as if his picture would really fall off the wall if we stated that something he said was no longer valid. We keep changing, and we keep growing” (p. 53).

Transactional analysis still has a love affair with Berne; there are transactional analysts who tend to confuse their devotion to the image they have of him with his theory, distorting what they write about his texts. Old Euhemerus keeps coming back. We exaggerate “certain qualities attributed to a primal leader or hero after his death” (Berne, 1966, p. 242). Berne has become the “dead canon-maker who occupies a special position in the esteem” (p. 33) of transactional analysis. Since his death 35 years ago, he has become “greater and greater.” His followers believe the “more and more glorious and splendid” apocryphal stories about him. If he could come back “in the form of an ordinary human being,” people would see that he was an ordinary human being (p. 99), even an ordinary psychotherapist. Berne’s unfortunate
theory of euhemerus constructed the myth of Eric Berne the euhemerus, turning him, and his body of work, into the authority for his followers. If only he had let his theory of transactional analysis stand on its own without propping it up with Freud’s theory of the group’s identification with the leader (p. 138). Berne believed that “it is difficult to think of any enduring group that does not or did not have a euhemerus. The founders of all religions are euhemerized” (p. 101). Psychotherapy is not a religion; we psychotherapists do not need to turn either our theorists or our theories into authorities. Imagine what biology would be like as a science if biologists were as devoted to Darwin as psychoanalysts are to Freud.

Now we can go further, acknowledging that transactional analysis does not advance by remembering Berne. Alfred North Whitehead (1961) cautioned, “A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost” (p. 144). Whitehead ascribed to this hesitation the barren failure of logic and theory. We get nowhere extending antecedent theory; a science advances, as Kuhn (1970) suggested, through discontinuous, random jumps, recognizing that communication processes approximate something analogous to biological natural selection. Theorists may be wedded to their theory, as Freud admitted he was, but we need not be. Science cannot subscribe to yesterday’s beliefs. A theory that worked as recently as 10 years ago offers no promise of working today.

Finally, my winning this award is to me what the Goethe Prize was to Freud. In his way he criticized Goethe as well as other great thinkers. Freud (1930/2001a) wrote, “If we learn about a great man’s life we shall also hear of occasions in which he has in fact done no better than we, has in fact come near to us as a human being” (p. 212). Berne comes near to us in life “as a human being” when we read him critically and when we take what he says as self-statements. His texts give us his intellectual thoughts and fantasies, his wishes, ambitions, and longings, his secrets, and his verbal expressions of his joys and pain.

I will conclude my answer on a note of caution. I am at what I might consider my ironic best when I say that it will break my heart to see transactional analysis forget Berne’s theory, if what I fear might happen should come to pass. My fear is based on what has happened over and over since Berne’s death. Some people have seen what Berne’s theory has done on the rebound—as in the examples in my study of alcoholism, schizophrenia, homosexuality, and other psychopathologies made by that theory—and they have concluded that they wanted nothing further to do with it. However, some who simply wrote transactional analysis off did not learn from what they had experienced Berne’s theory doing. They did not use it as an example for reflecting on what theory itself does when applied in practice. My fear is that transactional analysts will reject Berne’s theory and then go off in all directions, without the mooring of understanding how theory works in practice. In that case, they could end up with a surreptitious theory-centered practice using theories in the practice of transactional analysis that lack the beauty and logical consistency of Berne’s, theories that may still do unspeakable things to individuals.

At least now we have Berne’s theory, and we know what’s wrong with it. It is not a theory that we can correct piecemeal; it is one that we have to surmount. But we should surmount it by climbing the ladder of abstraction that allows us to reach a new plateau of understanding through having come to terms with it. Berne’s theory is a theory worth criticizing, and, for me, it has been worth spending more than 3 decades wrestling with it. When you have used it as a ladder to new insights about what theory does and how it performs in practice, you do not need the ladder. Thus, we do not learn a theory and then surmount it to prove how smart we are. We learn it and then surmount it by climbing the ladder of abstraction to change ourselves.

So, challenge new generations of transactional analysts to learn Berne’s theory, not to apply it in practice on either their clients or themselves but to understand how a theory is made and what it does when it is applied. From working through it as a theory, they will find out why they should not make their practice theory centered. Hopefully, that will make them
better practitioners. In this way, each new generation of transactional analysts can find Berne’s writings useful and in reading his rational narratives ask, “Dr. Berne, what were you really writing?” They will have to work out how they are to distinguish theory from fiction in his narrative, how he clothed the fiction of his patients’ stories, dreams, and hallucinations in the fiction of his theory, how he relied on theoretical fiction. That is what Freud (1900/2001b) admitted doing when he wrote, “No psychical apparatus exists which possesses a primary process only and that such an apparatus is to that extent a theoretical fiction” (p. 603).

Berne gives us the stuff of fiction, and he gives it to us as memorable literature. He couches his rational narrative in a poetic science, giving us a foretaste of what it would be like to know what the truth is and to live with certainty, if it were possible. Much of what we read in Berne never existed in our minds before. We can say about each of Berne’s concepts—ego states, games, and scripts—what Oxford literary theorist John Carey (2005) said of the poet representing the thing that does not exist: “It exists where everything we read about exists, in our minds. The fact that it has never existed beyond that makes it more wholly ours. We create and possess it, rescuing it from nothingness” (p. 237). Berne gives us the metaphors, analogies, similes, rhymes, and myths to make what he wrote our own. Once we have them, they are hardly distinguishable, if at all, from our own thinking. We create and write as we read. Each of us reading Berne brings into existence our own new world, which, given what we know, is unlike any other world. As Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. wrote in his 1965 Life Magazine review of Games People Play, Berne’s story lines would not be exhausted in 10 millennia.

Future transactional analysts will have found out that Berne’s theory, as his construction, is about him. Try imagining the case studies that might come out of that notion. And having learned that Berne’s theory is his narrative—constructed by him and the product of his imagination—they will have learned that their own theory is their construction and thus about themselves. Further, they will have learned that each person they work with has a theory that is a self-construction and makes up a world for them. By learning the theory of each individual, they can work within it, finding within it the ideas that, if applied creatively and perhaps paradoxically, might overcome pain and suffering, solve problems, and make life more worth living. They will then write the one paper that Berne said was worth writing, a case study, but it will not discuss psychopathologies (because it will not be using a theory to produce them) or tell how to cure some psychopathology. Rather, the paper will show how they learned an individual’s vocabulary and way of talking, how they used that individual’s own theory to help her or him go on living and to move through the tragedy of human suffering to enjoy happy moments.

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