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To cite this article: Claude M. Steiner (2003) Core Concepts of a Stroke-Centered Transactional Analysis, *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 33:2, 178-181, DOI: [10.1177/036215370303300209](https://doi.org/10.1177/036215370303300209)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1177/036215370303300209>



Published online: 28 Dec 2017.



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Claude M. Steiner

Abstract

The author presents a set of core concepts that offers his answer to the question, "What is transactional analysis?"

In this article I present a set of core concepts of a stroke-centered transactional analysis. By the time he finished *Games People Play*, Eric Berne's (1964) transactional analysis theory had had almost ten years to differentiate itself from psychoanalytic thinking and to mature in its own right. In the Introduction to that book, Berne laid out stroke theory and made it clear that he considered strokes to be the fundamental motive for human behavior and the reason why people play games. He wrote:

The individual for the rest of his life (after infancy) is confronted with a dilemma upon whose horns his destiny and survival are continually tossed. One horn is the social, psychological and biological forces which stand in the way of continued physical intimacy in the infant style and the other is his perpetual striving for its attainment. (p. 14)

The following core concepts of a stroke-centered transactional analysis are substantially based on Berne's theory of strokes. However, these concepts, while based on Berne's theories, represent a substantial elaboration over many years following Berne's death. Unfortunately, Berne was prevented from hearing many of these ideas. The presentation of my work on strokes and the stroke economy that I had prepared to give on 1 July 1971 at the Tuesday night seminars in San Francisco fell a few days after his deadly heart attack. Those ideas in their mature development are presented here as a tribute to his prescience and openness to original thinking.

The Purpose and Function of Transactional Analysis

Concept #1: The principal activity of a transactional analyst is the analysis of transactions for the purpose of contractually improving people's lives.

Concept #2: Through the analysis of the information contained in transactions it is possible to understand human behavior and experience.

Concept #3: Through the contractual modification of human interaction it is possible to beneficially modify human behavior and experience.

Motivational Basis, Strokes

Concept #4: People need strokes to survive physically and psychologically. Stroke hunger is a form of information hunger, which is a fundamental, constant, and pervasive drive in all living beings.

Notes: Strokes are transactional units of recognition. Wide-ranging research (Field, 2002; Ornish, 1999; see also <http://www.miami.edu/touch-research/index.html>) has shown that strokes are required for actual survival in young children and psychological survival and health in grown-ups. Strokes can be generally divided into positive and negative based on the subjective experience of the recipient; positive strokes are pleasurable, negative strokes are painful.

Concept #5: Positive strokes are in pervasive scarcity due to a set of inhibiting social and internalized rules that prevent people from exchanging them freely. The scarcity of strokes creates heightened stroke hunger that stimulates stroke-seeking behavior.

The stroke economy is a set of rules that seeks to interfere with the exchange of positive strokes; it involves asking for, giving, and accepting strokes that are wanted and rejecting those that are not wanted.

Concept #6: People prefer positive strokes but will seek and accept negative strokes when

they are stroke hungry and positive strokes are not available.

Transactions and Ego States

Concept #7: A transaction is an exchange of information. Every stroke is a transaction. However, a transaction can contain more information than a simple stroke does. Transactions can be seen to emanate from separate, distinct systems in the person, each with its own specialized function. Berne constructed three such systems and called them ego states: the Parent, the Adult, and the Child.

Notes: Normal human behavior can fall into distinct, internally coherent patterns or behavioral systems. Berne called these systems "ego states" because they are three separate manifestations of the ego as defined by Freud. The three ego states are distinct enough that it makes sense that they have a biological basis in distinct neural networks in the brain (Siegel, 1999). Each ego state is associated with separate, observable modes of perception, emotion, and behavior.

The three ego states are the visible manifestations of evolutionarily developed neural expert networks, each with a different function: The Adult is expert in predicting events, the Child is expert in maintaining emotional motivation, and the Parent is expert in developing value judgments.

The Adult is the rational, problem-solving ego state. It is devoid of powerful emotions, which tend to disrupt understanding and logic. Of the three ego states, it is the most likely to have a specific brain correlate: the neocortex, which is the seat of imitation, language, and abstract thinking. Research shows (Ledoux, 1998; Siegel, 1999) that the neocortex has and can develop connections with other brain systems and can affect and modify them as well as be affected and modified by them.

The Child is the emotional ego state. All the primary emotions and their combinations—such as anger, sadness, fear, and shame, on the one hand, and love, joy, and hope, on the other—have their origins in the Child. Research shows that the emotional portions of the brain have the capacity to flood and disable the neocortex with stimulation in what can be

interpreted as an asymmetrical relationship of dominance of Child over Adult or "contamination" of the Adult by the Child.

The Parent is the judging, tradition-based, prejudiced, regulatory ego state. The separation of the Critical Parent from the Nurturing Parent is essential to the effective application of transactional analysis. Of the three ego states, the Parent is the most metaphorical in nature. It can be visualized as a microchip implant with recorded external messages and has been referred to as a "witch" or "ogre," an "electrode," and so on.

Authoritarian systems in place for millennia are highly dependent on the dominance of the Critical Parent. Starting at the end of the second millennium AD, there has been a global struggle to replace coercive, authoritarian methods with democracy, equality, universal human rights, cooperation, and nonviolence in support of every person's goals. The premise of this movement in transactional analysis terms is that every child is OK, that the Child's needs are legitimate, and that the most desirable and beneficial form of interaction is a cooperative, nonviolent, nurturing relationship. This premise stands in contradiction to the function and assumptions of the Critical Parent, whose premise is that the Child is not OK (stupid, bad, crazy, ugly, sick, or doomed) and that children require physically and emotionally violent power plays to be educated, including, especially, the curtailment of strokes (hence the stroke economy). A cultural sea change in this area requires that the functions regulating the Child, heretofore performed by the Critical Parent, be performed by the Adult and Nurturing Parent instead.

It is, therefore, desirable to limit sharply the Critical Parent's control of human affairs. On the other hand, given the goals of transactional analysis—to improve people's lives by teaching them more effective ways of interacting—it is essential to strengthen the Adult ego state. It is just as important, since the Adult's interactions are not the most powerful source of strokes, to strengthen the Nurturing Parent.

The Nurturing Parent is as prejudiced as the Critical Parent except that instead of judging the person not OK, it argues that the person is

OK: smart, good, sane, beautiful, healthy, and deserving and capable of succeeding and getting as many strokes as he or she needs. The Nurturing Parent, although essentially beneficial, can nevertheless overtake the personality and, by excluding the Adult, damage the person's capacity to deal rationally with reality.

Concept #8: Each ego state represents an evolutionary achievement, and survival depends on the independent function of the three ego states in coordination with each other. The ego states seldom appear in their potentially pure form and are usually contaminated or influenced by each other. The influence of the Child or the Parent on the Adult is especially significant because effective Adult functioning—detached from emotional, “irrational” influences and prejudices—is essential to the contractual goals of transactional analysis. Contaminations of the Adult are the metaphorical representations of neural connections between the neocortex and more primitive areas of the brain caused by repeated or dramatic events in the person's life.

Interaction, Power Plays, and Cooperation

Concept #9: Interaction can be divided into competitive and cooperative. Competition is transacted through power plays, cooperation is free of power plays.

Notes: Competitive, adversarial interaction is based on the assumption that it is acceptable to coerce others into giving up their rights and to undermine their power. Power plays are interactions to coerce others. Cooperative interaction is based on the assumption that everyone is OK and has equal rights and that it is not considered acceptable to coerce others at any level.

Games, Roles, and Scripts

Concept #10: Games are power plays for strokes; they are habitual, dysfunctional patterns of stroke procurement, usually learned in the family early in life, that undermine health and human potential.

Concept #11: Every person who plays games has a favored set of games and resulting emotions to which he or she is habituated. Every instance of games played, and the ongoing

playing of games, reinforces the life script, which is an overall plan acquired and sometimes consciously decided on in early life. Scripts, the lifelong patterns built on habitual games, can be redecided.

Concept #12: People play games by taking on roles in the game. Three roles—the Persecutor, the Rescuer, and the Victim—appear in all games. Anyone who plays one of the roles will eventually play the other two. Since the particular manner in which any one person performs these three roles are the daily building blocks of the script, giving up these roles will also facilitate the abandonment of the script.

The Practice of Transactional Analysis

Concept #13: Transactional analysis was designed for, and is ideally practiced, in groups. The role of the transactional analysis practitioner is defined by a contract arrived at consensually between the client and the therapist, teacher, or consultant.

Concept #14: The basic existential position of “I'm OK, You're OK” reflects the belief that people are born with an inherent tendency for health and healing. Nature's helping hand, “*Vix Medicatrix Nature*” (the tendency to heal), is the transactional analyst's principal ally. To facilitate nature's helping hand by encouraging beneficial behavior and discouraging toxic behavior are the transactional analyst's principal tasks.

Concept #15: The three operations of the process of transactional analysis are permission, protection, and potency: permission to change unwanted behaviors, protection from the Critical Parent and other influences that will resist or counteract the desired changes, and the transactional analyst's potency in the form of information, skills, and personal support and investment in the process.

Avoiding the three basic game roles (Rescuer, Persecutor, and Victim) by learning how to obtain strokes directly is the fundamental lesson of the transactional analyst. A potent transactional analyst will also bring all additional available science and proven, practice-based information to the completion of the contractual relationship with the patient or client.

What It Means to Be a Transactional Analyst

Over the last 30 years I have developed Berne's views on transactional analysis, particularly with regard to strokes. In his last book, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* (Berne, 1972)—to which he made his last corrections on his death bed—he wrote:

Transactional analysis is a theory of personality and a clinical method of psychotherapy based on the analysis of all the possible transactions between two or more people on the basis of specifically defined ego states. . . . *Any system or approach which is not based on the rigorous analysis of single transactions into their component specific ego states is not transactional analysis.* (p. 20, italics added)

To this I would add that transactional analysis is a contractual process in which a promise is made and performance is expected. This requires difficult, hard, and at times exhausting action. It is difficult to run a group. It is difficult to establish and assiduously pursue contracts. It is difficult to offer creative suggestions or to make contract-driven demands. It is difficult to stay current on the research literature and to acquire regular supervision. Regarding psychotherapy, it is my view that successful therapy requires more than individual, one-on-one work and that an effective therapist cannot remain passive or rely on attunement, kindness, and intuitive analysis alone. He or she must remain actively engaged with the client in pursuing a clear contractual goal and in using the group environment to further that process.

Clearly, it is incumbent on any health professional, regardless of training background, to practice empathy, attunement, and kindness while avoiding codependency or Rescuing. A competent mental health or education professional should stay in touch with well-researched and validated areas of knowledge,

such as substance use and abuse, diet, exercise, sexual and emotional trauma, spirituality, cognitive-behavioral techniques, attachment theories and research, and death and dying, to name a few. Finally, she or he should seek supervision and/or therapy when needed and pursue a healthy life.

In addition to these basic requirements for any modern professional, it behooves the transactional analyst to make contracts, analyze transactions and stroking patterns, practice group psychotherapy, tender permissions and deliver protection for those permissions, and maintain focused attention on a satisfactory completion of the contract or "cure."

This is the art, knowledge, and pragmatic skills that transactional analysis brings to the behavioral sciences.

Claude Steiner, Ph.D., TSTA, was a founding member with Eric Berne of the ITAA and is presently vice president of research and innovation. He is currently involved in dealing with the various challenges facing transactional analysis in order to modernize and legitimize it in the professional world. Please send reprint requests to him at 2901 Piedmont Ave., Berkeley, CA 94705, U.S.A., or by email to csteiner@igc.org.

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