

In Praise of Loving “Betrayal”: Reflections on the Steiner–Novellino Letters and the Life of Behavioral Science Organizations

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Abstract

As a reviewer for the *Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ)*, in October 2004 the author read the Steiner–Novellino correspondence, which was being considered for publication in the April 2005 theme issue on “Transactional Analysis and Psychoanalysis.” In this article, he uses his unfolding feelings and thoughts on reading it—in his roles as *TAJ* reviewer and as a member and officer of the International Transactional Analysis Association (ITAA)—as a starting point for reflecting on the relationship between tradition and innovation, integrity, betrayal, and the vitality, or lack thereof, of behavioral science organizations.

When Fritz Perls died, TA-trained lay analyst and teacher Carolyn Crane had asked Berne, “What happens to the followers of a great man who dies?” Eric had replied bluntly, “They always get screwed. Either way they get screwed. If they go on believing in the system it becomes a dead end, and if they go out on their own in reaction to the death of the leader they get equally lost. (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984, pp. 8-9)

No one needs psychoanalysis but some people might want it. Psychoanalysis, as a theory and practice, should not pretend to be important instead of keeping itself interesting (importance is a cure for nothing). You would think, reading the professional literature, that it is psychoanalysis that mattered and not what it was about. (Phillips, 1995, p. xvi)

When I received the Steiner–Novellino correspondence (Steiner & Novellino, 2005), with a

note from the guest editor expressing interest in publishing it in the April *TAJ* 2005 theme issue on “Transactional Analysis and Psychoanalysis,” I felt intrigued, curious, and honored to have a preview of this most interesting and colorful exchange. After a couple of readings, I found myself agreeing with the editor that the material deserved publication, and for several reasons. First, although the content is in the public domain—having been extensively covered by the authors in their scholarly works (e.g., Novellino, 1990, 2003; Steiner, 2003)—the nature of the exchange merited inclusion in a theme issue on “Transactional Analysis and Psychoanalysis.” Second, the authors’ voices deserve to be heard for their prominence as theoreticians. Third, and most important in my view, the exchange of letters articulates central theoretical, methodological, and political debates in transactional analysis today.

It is a delight to witness the evolution of the *TAJ* into a welcoming host of good-quality academic argument between theoreticians and practitioners within and outside the transactional analysis community. The more debate we can encourage in the pages of our journal, the better. Of course, such debate needs to be carried out in the Adult tone that a scholarly publication deserves and in the OK-OK spirit that is part of our values. We need to keep these standards close to our hearts. However, I would be surprised if we could ever fully live up to them. I consider the presence of a strong feeling tone, the crossing of the threshold between knowledge and belief, and the existence of overt political agendas compatible with publication. Were we to purge our journal of such exchanges, there would probably be no writing—or no writing worth reading.

Obviously, however, affect, beliefs, and political aims cannot be all there is to an article.

The Adult ego states of authors, reviewers, and editors need to keep a watchful eye. The letters by Steiner and Novellino provide a good example of such a transparent and thought-provoking exchange between authors in disagreement. Strong feelings are clearly there, points are argued with quasi-religious zeal, and political agendas are frankly discussed. Nevertheless, Adult argument is in close proximity, if not always in executive control, and the authors explicitly use transactional analysis principles and methods to tackle the difficulties in their communication—providing a living proof of the potency of transactional analysis to sustain interpersonal dialogue.

As I crafted a review of the Steiner-Novellino correspondence, a fleeting doubt impinged on my delight in the openness of the exchange and my appreciation for the authors' points of view and interpersonal skills: What form might best suit publication of such debates in the *Transactional Analysis Journal*? Normally, I would have suggested that Steiner and Novellino convert their letters into an exchange of position papers. Within such a format, both authors would have had a chance to deepen their arguments, and the journal would have avoided setting a precedent. One cannot, as a matter of course, have an enlightened, interesting, and circumstantiated exchange of views with a colleague and expect to see it published as such in a scholarly journal—even if you are a leading author of papers and books. In this particular case, however, I found myself of two minds.

On the one hand, a traditional exchange of position papers would have helped readers deepen their appreciation of the content of Steiner's and Novellino's letters: the relationship of transactional analysis to Freudian psychoanalysis; Berne's relatedness to Freud; the authors' relatedness to Berne, Freud, and each other; the existence of many "psychoanalyses"; the validity and utility of psychodynamic and transactional analysis concepts; the purpose of the *TAJ* and the ITAA—only some of the topics that the debate stimulates us to reflect upon.

On the other hand, there is value in being open. The reader needs to see things as they are, not sanitized, and have a chance to witness the process of the debate. This is, ultimately,

the reason that led me to recommend that we publish the epistolary in its original format. What intrigued me most about this exchange was the unfolding of the discourse. It is a fascinating document of the inevitable theoretical and political struggles occurring in all organizations of behavioral professionals, especially those originally born around a novel and visionary idea.

Tradition and Innovation

Looking at it from this angle—and with my ITAA member "hat" on—I became aware of reading the exchange with a shade of sadness. The sadness, I believe, was about the relationship between tradition and innovation. It seems rather difficult for us humans—who are different from trees in fundamental ways—to regard roots for what they are: anchoring and nourishing parts for the trunk, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits. In a tree, roots reach under the ground and do work for the rest of the plant, and for themselves. Leaves, flowers, seeds, and so on, in turn, do their work to keep themselves, the plant—and consequently the roots—alive. But defending? Both Steiner and Novellino claim to be defending "Berne's roots." Were we to turn a behavioral lens on this claim, we would have to pause and wonder. Where is the threat coming from? We promptly externalize the threats; we identify external attacks to our personal, theoretical, methodological, and organizational integrity. But might there be equally dangerous threats within?

Every organization, to survive and thrive, needs to accomplish its primary task (Miller & Rice, 1967). This requires boundaries, processes, values, and leadership, which contain and direct the flow of the organization's resources and the energy of its people. When boundaries become rigid, processes cannot be questioned, values become impositions, and leadership turns messianic; then trouble is in sight. Revolutionary ideas become compelling ideologies and are then revered as the "glue" that holds an organization together and provides cohesion among its members. If we continue with this metaphor, however, it carries a disturbing prophecy: What happens to glue with the passing of time?

“Every family is an institution, and the child does not learn much flexibility from them,” wrote Berne (1972/1975, p. 57). We all know rigid families—and rigid institutions, for sure. That institutions limit individual freedom is inevitable. That they do so rigidly might often be the case. But is the rigidity inevitable? Despite his opinion of “institutions,” one of Berne’s major accomplishments was to found a successful one—the ITAA—which several decades later aspires to be a learning community that is encouraging of individual thinking, respectful of tradition, and welcoming of novelty and debate. As Berne demonstrated with his life’s work, this requires curiosity and intellectual acumen as much as distraction and disobedience (Petriglieri, 2004, p. 7). In that respect, the talk about “father’s” programs and vision in the Steiner-Novellino letters leaves me somewhat perplexed.

Integrity and Betrayal

In their exchange, Steiner and Novellino, like many of us, attach familiar value judgments to the words “integrity” and “betrayal.” They both seem to associate integrity—of transactional analysis or the ITAA (which, incidentally, do not necessarily coincide)—with the “good” and the “to be wished for.” Betrayal, on the other hand—of Berne’s original vision or of his theoretical parenthood—appears to be “bad” and hence not to be attempted. Looked at more closely, however, integrity is no simple matter. Social scientists attempting to examine its function in organizational behavior find integrity an elusive subject, as it means different things to people in different roles (e.g., Hooijberg & Lane, 2005). *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (2000) lists three revealing meanings for the word, which originates from the Latin “integer” (entire, not broken, undivided). One is “firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values” (as in honesty); the second is “an unimpaired condition” (as in soundness); and the third is “the quality or state of being complete or undivided.” While possessing the first kind of integrity—being morally sound and honest—is a laudable aspiration, being unimpaired and undivided is not always conducive to individual and collective growth.

Sound coherence, predictability, reliability, efficacy, validity, and so on are necessary attributes for a theoretical framework. In so many words, a theory needs to hang together clearly; if it contradicts itself, it is usually neither popular nor practically helpful. An organizational framework, however, much like an individual psyche, works the opposite way: To be viable, it must allow, if not actively encourage, the expression of difference and apparent contradictions. Painful as they might be, internal conflict—and occasional separation, as well—are necessary for vitality and growth. For individuals, groups, and organizations, development often begins with an emotionally loaded polarization (Wood & Petriglieri, 2005), whereas remaining “undivided” for too long leads to developmental arrest or psychological inflation.

Not all kinds of integrity are necessarily good, nor are they synonymous with progress and development, as is evident to observers of history. For example, in the name of defending “our integrity,” many a nation has acted questionably, to say the least. And many a psychoanalytic institute has ostracized, or denied access, to disturbingly creative members. As a leader, Freud was no exception to the rule that wants bearers of subversive principles—and what is more subversive than the unconscious?—to be feared to be undermining our organizations.

If anything, we might want to learn from psychoanalysis what happens when our institutions become insular and religious adherence replaces creative followership and freedom to think. The Oedipal complex per se might not be as ubiquitous as Freud believed, but rigidly maintained dogma that makes it impossible to “betray the father” creates conditions in which the only choice left for radically creative contributors is the Oedipal one—“unintentional” parricide. Unlike what many argue, I am convinced that if psychoanalytic institutions had not been so rigid, Berne (and Jung, Adler, Klein, and others) would still have enriched the theory and practice of psychology just as much. It is hard—and Freudian—to believe that the only drive of the creativity of individuals such as those just mentioned was to pay Freud back. I am more inclined to think that creativity is a

universal principle in its own right, and not simply the handmaiden of revenge.

Obedience and rebellion are not the only ways for an individual to preserve his or her integrity, just as indoctrination and ostracism are not the only ways for an organization to preserve its integrity. Creativity demands a certain degree of freedom. When an institution grants it, we have innovation; when it does not, we have schism. Had many “fathers” and “mothers” of behavioral sciences been less insecure and more comfortable with a loving “betrayal,” we would probably witness a less fragmented theoretical and institutional landscape in psychology today.

For almost a century, students of the psyche have demonstrated that it is possible to be a psychoanalyst—and a very sound, effective, influential one—while disagreeing with many of Freud’s, Jung’s, Adler’s, or Klein’s axioms. Let us hope that the same privilege is granted to transactional analysts vis-à-vis the views of Berne. Loving betrayal, pursued with faith and responsible dedication, has been, on more than one occasion, the germ of true novelty. It is crucial, then, that our transactional analysis organizations remain flexibly bounded spaces in which tradition and innovation can argue, debate, fight, hurt themselves, embrace, and all of the wonderful things that these two principles do in a lively community—even if today’s innovation might at a first glance appear similar to yesterday’s rejected tradition. It is hardly surprising that in a theoretical landscape that originated in the impulse to provide an alternative—or an improvement—to psychoanalysis, newer generations find their identity wrestling with a domain of the psyche that is being, let us say, momentarily overlooked: the unconscious.

Who Owns the Unconscious?

While a therapy that “cures” can aspire to be a science more than an art, a therapy that “heals”—that is, the kind of therapy that we might not strictly need and yet often demand—needs to meddle with a domain that is not simply biological or social, but is spiritual as well. In my view, an ambitious theory of personality and method of psychotherapy cannot avoid dealing with unconscious phenomena

—whether it wants a relationship with this or that school of psychoanalysis. To say that the unconscious and transference belong to Freud—and psychoanalysis—is like arguing that the analysis of social transactions and life scripts belongs to Berne or transactional analysis.

Things become complicated, of course, because there is not just one “unconscious”: There are many—in psychology, science, and the arts. The unconscious has the disagreeable habit of not limiting itself to the psychologist’s consulting room—the one with a couch in it. But we have no choice but to engage with it. Among the basic questions that therapists should ask themselves, Berne (1966/1994) posed the following one: “What will this hour contribute to [the client’s] *unfolding*?” (p. 64, italics added). Offering such a contribution requires the capacity, so to speak, to side with physis, or the Self, or whatever we prefer to call the inner dynamic core of human nature that strives for wholeness, development, and fulfillment of an individual’s potential—once we remove the obstacles that impede its work (p. 64; Berne, 1972/1975, p. 78; Jung, 1921/1971, p. 460; Yalom, 2003, p. 1). Good therapy, after all—like genuine friendship and true love—is a mixture of subtle knife and soothing embrace.

The current wealth of contact between transactional analysis and psychologies of the unconscious appears as a refreshing “recovery” to Novellino and an engulfing “regression” to Steiner. Both are most likely right. As is evident to practitioners of psychotherapy, many a recovery and spurt of growth begins with regression—often an overwhelming one—that pushes individuals or organizations to seek help for transcending their current condition. It is only in the painful grip of scripted predicaments that most of us can summon enough courage and frustration to seek help in order to change. Conversely, any developmental opportunity poses a threat to one’s current identity. The tension of such “regressions,” managed sensitively, bears the fruit of more differentiated relationships with ourselves and others. Jung (1928/1969) captured this psychological movement most vividly when he wrote the following:

What the regression brings to the surface certainly seems at first sight to be slime

from the depths; but if one does not stop short at a superficial evaluation and refrains from passing judgment on the basis of a preconceived dogma, it will be found that this “slime” contains not merely incompatible and rejected remnants of everyday life, or inconvenient and objectionable animal tendencies, but also germs of new life and vital possibilities for the future. (pp. 34-35)

Shall we then look at moments of regression as a curse, or pause and help their developmental purpose to emerge?

Conclusion

Novellino and Steiner, as leading thinkers within the transactional analysis community, articulate the tension between the two souls of transactional analysis—the cognitive-behavioral and the psychodynamic. In addition to that, “personal integrity” and “organizational integrity” appear to be, as usual, at odds. The tension between the two is felt more strongly the more removed one is from the organization’s founder and/or the less identified one is with the organization. These are tensions we must not discount if we are to grow as lively and creative individuals while remaining part of the systems to which we belong—that is, if we really want to create and maintain lively and creative associations. When a community cannot manage tensions and conflict, then creativity stops—growth stops—and the community either dies or forges an enemy. Whether Berne’s alleged opinion about the inevitable doom awaiting followers of a “great man who dies” proves itself an accurate prophecy largely depends on the followers and their institutions. It is up to us as members of the transactional analysis community to rise to the challenge of “holding” the above tensions and channeling their energy toward progressive aims (Wood & Petriglieri, 2005).

Transactional analysts constantly witness how truly life changing the falling apart of a script’s integrity can be—or the flat-out “betrayal” of Parental injunctions. This is why making a life, reworking a script—and shaping an organization, for that matter—all require the artistic gift of suspending cynical disbelief and

giving permission to the capacity to follow faithfully, if uncertainly, unborn possibilities. Retaining our openness for surprises is as fundamental as having a vision.

This leads me to a poignant feature of the Steiner-Novellino letters that I find touching: both authors, while arguing fiercely, have retained the desire to surprise each other with wit. For that, as well, they should be commended. Their dialogue stimulates us to reflect on our theories, on our institutions, and on ourselves—with hope.

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