

My story – two stages of psychotherapy - Impasse theory and transference

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

Transactional Analysis Psychotherapy – Impasse Theory and Transference

by
Dave Spenceley TSTA

Cultivating a freely aroused emotional sensibility the analyst welcomes news from within himself that is reported through his own intuitions, feelings, passing images and fantasies. In order to find the patient we must look for him within ourselves; Bollas

My Story: I qualified as a Transactional Analyst psychotherapist in 1990, however my first experiences of TA was in the late 1970's within the world of Christian counselling. While my friends were at the electric onion disco at the age of 17 I was enthusiastically reading I am OK – You are OK, and Games People Play which made a great deal of sense to my young, idealistic self, and were central to the formation of my own script story.

Prior to TA psychotherapy training I had a 3-year flirtation with being a psychoanalyst, being a member of a psychoanalytic psychotherapy group and a place reserved on a well renowned psychoanalytical training course in Manchester. With hindsight I was fortunate that I had to wait a year before the place was available because one stormy night a colleague who was sheltering in my office suggested I attend the TA 101 course (official introduction to TA) with Lilly Stuart in London.

A few weeks later I found myself heading south to London for a life changing 101, rapidly followed by further courses and therapy groups. To my delight and astonishment, I was learning an exciting theory and an effective approach to psychotherapy which much to my surprise I and my clients actually understood. I learned and made changes in my life, I met wonderful therapists and I really believed they could do just about anything. A little idealisation fuelled my enthusiasm to train in TA rather than psychoanalysis and while I am no longer caught in an idealising transference I do continue to delight in being a Transactional Analyst and have never regretted my decision.

On a visit to the Freud museum in Vienna I imagined: I was visiting “my great grandfather’s office”. I felt the connection with my own and TA’s psychoanalytic past and was moved and grateful for the pioneering work of Freud and others. The impact was especially intense as I read a postcard from Freud to Paul Federn who was later to become Eric Berne’s analyst. Reminding me of the direct connection from myself to Freud though my own trainer’s connections to Berne and his connection to Federn.

In my own approach to psychotherapy I have always been interesting in integrating effective approaches including different schools of TA alongside various approaches in which I have some training; Person Centred Counselling, Gestalt and NLP while never forgetting my experiences in psychoanalysis and the centrality of the relationship, transference and counter transference matrix which is co-created within the therapeutic encounter. Therefore, working both in and through the transference relationship has

What is TA psychotherapy? By Dave Spenceley TSTA
www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

My story – two stages of psychotherapy - Impasse theory and transference

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

always been central to my understanding of TA psychotherapeutic, training and supervision practice believing that is in and through the empathically attuned therapeutic relationship that learning and healing occurs.

Two Phases of psychotherapy: Light from one perspective is a wave and from another perspective light is a particle.

- Psychotherapy is like a particle when we deal with specific problems, using techniques and creating strategies to deal with these problems of life and relationship.
- Psychotherapy is like a wave, two people or a group forming a wave of movement with intensity in relational experiences which in turn leads to transformational change in each individual.

The therapeutic endeavour: During the first session I always say something along the lines of the following:

First: I am very interested in getting to know you, listening carefully to your story, seeking to understand the reasons why you have decided to come for therapy with me, and why now. During the early stages of the work I am interested to explore with you what it is you are wishing to change in your life, and how you would like to be after therapy has finished.

If there is a particular problem that has brought you to therapy, then the initial goal will be for you to find strategies in order to deal effectively with that problem or problems. For example, if you are afraid of going shopping we will be looking for strategies which will enable you to be comfortable in yourself while going shopping.

- Theoretically I think of this first stage of therapy as exploring and resolving 1st degree impasse(s), strengthening the Adult ego state boundaries.
- Berne described this as gaining social control and symptom relief.

Secondly: I am very interested in how you are in your life: Your motivations, fantasies and desires, how you live and why. How you think, feel and how you make decisions about what you do and don't do. I will be noticing with you the way in which your life outside the therapy room is reflected in how you are in your relationship and work with me.

As the therapy progresses how you are in our relationship will increasingly become the focus of our explorations and the psychotherapeutic work. The goal is for you to make lasting changes in your life which will enable you to manage and contain your future life.

- Theoretically this is understood as exploring and resolving embodied 2nd and 3rd degree impasses.
- Berne described this as psychoanalytic / script cure.
- This phase of psychotherapy is focussed on deconfusion of the Child ego state and constructing a healthy Parent ego state.

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

My story – two stages of psychotherapy - Impasse theory and transference

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

- Rather than describing this as being script free as Berne would have done I understand the process as creating a healthy script narrative to guide you in your life.
- As the core competencies of TA say so well: Healing the hurt of the past in order to live fully in the present.

During both phases I use specific techniques and approaches from the TA however the goal is always to enhance the empathically attuned exploration of your experience.

Fish and Fishing:

- The first phase of therapy is ensuring you have a fish and so you don't starve today. This is like going to the local shop to buy a fish
- The second phase is about learning all you can about how to catch fish so you will never starve, building a fishing boat, learning where the fish live, understanding the hidden currents, the life and dangers of the deep as well as learning to captain the fishing boat all of which makes for a long term project!

According to research clients can expect to achieve socially observable changes within the first 12 sessions, and often more quickly. While the second phase will take as long as we need.

A new theory of impasses: *Transference is an externalisation of the intrapsychic impasse.* The Goulding's and then Ken Mellor described how the impasse is a "stuck" place caused by a conflict between competing needs and demands of the Parent and Child ego states. I have found no better way of understanding and analysing the developing intra-psychic process as it is enacted by clients and psychotherapists in their co-created experience in the transferential process.

- In addition to the Child – Parent impasse as described by the Gouldings and Mellor there are also impasses between competing Parent ego states and different Child ego states and therefore impasses can be between any two ego states of a person.
- Impasses are expressions of the dysfunctional aspects of life script.
- Games / symbiosis / racketeering are all externalisations of the impasse in relationship with others.
- Transference enactments are an externalisation of intrapsychic impasse.

Examples: Parent – Parent impasse: A client with a fearful mother and demanding father experiences an internal dilemma when faced with a decision... they have the internal demanding Parent introject competing with their fearful Parent introject. This impasse can be explored in many ways and in addition to the traditional P-C conflicts there also be multiple levels of experience in the client's experience:

- *1st degree impasse:* the client can hear the mother and father competing voices in their head... the resolution is to make an Adult decision based on external reality checking.
- *The second degree impasse* will be reflected in a P1(mother) > P1 (father) conflict. It is not at this point appropriate to differentiate these two aspects as P1+ or P1- in reality either side might be experienced as either positive or negative. The client will experience this as a struggle between competing aspect of themselves... they will have a sense of a magical grandiose – often

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

My story – two stages of psychotherapy - Impasse theory and transference

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

catastrophic outcome. This will be expressed in the language of a very young child and will also be experienced in physical / somatic feelings.

- *The third degree level* PO (mother) > PO (father) will be experienced none verbally, and so can only be understood and made meaning of through unconscious expressions of transference, body experiences and dreams... A further assumption I make is that these are keys to change.

4 Transference types in relation to impasse theory. *A simple understanding of transference processes can be that transference is experiencing the present as if it is an external expression of an internal impasse. Transference is an unconscious process with the goal of resolving the intrapsychic impasse.*

First Degree impasse leads to transference processes in which the client can normally recognise the transference in response to questions such as – “Am I reminding you of your mother” or by saying something like “I am feeling angry – I am wondering if you are angry?”

The client can then move to resolving the impasse / transference using Adult.

- 1) **Be another:** In this process the client invites the therapist to be a key figure from their past and can be idealising or demonising.
- 2) **Be like me:** In this the client invites the therapist to experience themselves as the client experiences him / herself. In this way the client can experience being understood and identified with. (described as concordant transferences)

Second and third degree impasse leads to transference processes in which the client is unconscious of their transference process and experiences the transference as a real embodied experience and does not recognise the transference in response to Adult questions. Therefore, the transference process needs to be accepted and worked with in Child / Parent embodied exploration and deconfusion work leading to resolution of the second and third degree impasse.

- 3) **You are another:** in which the transference is powerfully experienced so that the client perceives the therapist as the other person.
- 4) **Be me:** In this projective identification process the client projects themselves (and their unexpressed / unconscious impasse) into the therapist and invites the therapist to then resolve the impasse.
 - The client induces in the therapist an impasse which corresponds to their own state which they are unable to experience for themselves. The therapist allows / invites this process to take place and resolves (metabolizes) the impasse, transforming and surviving which the client then re-internalizes, creating a new metabolized / transformational experience for the client.
 - The therapist then becomes a healthy new Parent figure for the client and the client's Child can work through their confusion.

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

My story – two stages of psychotherapy - Impasse theory and transference

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

- All the while this is only possible if the therapeutic relationship is contained / maintained by the working therapeutic alliance which acts as a container – and therefore through this whole process there is also a strengthening of the Adult ego state boundary.

Impasse & Transference theory leading to Psychotherapy in two stages:

The first stage of TA psychotherapy: Leading to social change and strategies for daily living. That is dealing with 1st degree impasses.

Invariably a client enters therapy because of disturbance and stress in their lives, finding ways of managing / containing their lives safely and effectively is their primary concern, they do not need to wait for a long term unfolding of and resolution of the transference their therapy in order to do this. Indeed, many clients will not have the desire or motivation needed to engage in the second phase of psychotherapy.

Often an idealised transference maintains and contributes to the hope and belief that the therapist can be used to find the first level of healing. If the client leaves therapy after successfully making the change, they desire in the first phase of psychotherapy it is very likely that their idealisation of the therapist will be heightened and remain unresolved, I do not believe this is a problem.

Steps in psychotherapy process:

- a. The first priority is to establish and maintain an empathically attuned therapeutic contract and alliance.
- b. Attention to the client's transferential process, on occasions it will make sense to use this transferential process early in the first phase of work, naming the process at other times without naming the process.
- c. During the first phase the emphasis is on "classical" TA approaches such as transactional analysis, game theory, script analysis, racket analysis with the goals of:
 - Understanding and then finding an Adult impasse resolution.
 - Strengthening the Adult ego state boundaries so that the client can continue to function effectively in their daily life.
 - It is likely that this work may take the form the client making a redecision in any of their ego states. In the first phase of treatment this is more likely to be a redecision as described by Berne, the client understands the impasse and the solution in the here and now and makes a new decision in the Adult ego state to solve the problem.
- d. Once the initial presenting problem is effectively dealt with then it is important to review with the client their contract asking if they wish to continue on to the second phase of the work?

The secondary stage of TA psychotherapy: The goal of this phase is to work with the client's unconscious process leading to lasting script change. My understanding is this is dealing with 2nd and 3rd degree impasses, deconfusion of the Child and Parent ego states while continuing the task of strengthening the Adult ego state boundary.

The therapeutic relationship becomes the focus, increasingly fewer techniques are used in the sessions and discussions of the client's story and activity outside of the room becomes less important. The

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

My story – two stages of psychotherapy - Impasse theory and transference

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining

emphasis in the therapeutic work shifts so that the therapeutic relationship and process is itself is the focus. Working in and through the transference will lead to many transformational experiences. The Goal during this phase is for the client to make new meanings for him / herself and in this way for their new lives to take shape and direction.

Often clients find difficulty articulating the issues dealt with in the second phase, they are dealing with their core experience of themselves. Their script beliefs of themselves, others and life... which often only find expression through non verbal unconscious transference expressions, dreams, fantasies and somatic experiences. Following the work, the client may well find it just as difficult to articulate their new self-experience. However, their unconscious transference expressions, dreams, fantasies and somatic experiences will change, often dramatically.

Steps in psychotherapy process: The therapeutic relationship which was established in the first phase becomes the container for the ongoing psychotherapeutic work. The unconscious expressions which are externalisations of second and third degree impasses are welcomed and worked with. Leading to deconfusion of the Child and Parent ego states.

- 1) Depending upon the style of therapeutic relationship that evolves the actual process in the therapy room will take a variety of forms.
- 2) We know that any one technique does not prove to be better than any other in creating transformational experiences.
- 3) At times this may look like the psycho-dynamic / analytic approach, at times it may involve passionate / energetic body work and at other times this may take the form of redecision style work.
- 4) The work may look and feel similar to how the Goulding's approach – working directly with the Child ego state.
- 5) The work may reflect approaches described by Mellor and then later Erskine and Moursund who worked directly with the Parent ego state.
- 6) The second and third level of impasse will be experienced through unconscious expressions of the transference, somatic / body experiences, dreams and fantasies.
- 7) In second level impasse the client might be making cognitive sense of their experiences through limited, magical thinking which maintains their script representation of life, of others and of their own place in the world.
- 8) The third degree level of impasse will only be experienced none verbally, and so can only be understood and made meaning of through unconscious expressions of transference, body experiences and dreams.

Endings – Saying goodbye and celebrating together is an important aspect of the psychotherapeutic journey with both the therapist and client mutually experiencing the grief and celebration involved. My experience is that when a client is ready to leave therapy it is not a struggle to end... However, when the client is struggling to leave it invariably indicates more work to be done.

Dave Spenceley TSTA

This version edited February 2016

www.ta-psychotherapy.co.uk // <http://www.psihoterapieat.ro> // @ytcitraining