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Transactions and Failed Perception

According to the psychological theory called “transactionalism” (see, for instance, R. A. Wilson’s well-known book, *Quantum Psychology*), we are not just receiving data from the world in a passive mode. Instead, as fast as we receive data, we are actively creating a structure we can use to interpret the data received. In other words, we are not *reacting to* the information, but experiencing *transactions with* the data.

According to transactionalist theory, our vision of the world is not just pure perception; transaction involves perception *and* interpretation. Any and all communication and understanding between a person and her world can be considered as a properly balanced transaction involving both elements. This view allows us to construct an interesting model of human experience, along with a classification of aberrations (non-optimum reactions) and psychotherapeutic approaches.

Aberration as a Failed Transaction

Within the transactionalist model, any trouble or aberration of a person can be regarded as an incongruity of transaction, an imbalance between two things – perception and interpretation. The most common type of transactional incongruity is the inability to interpret a certain existing or frequently recurring perception, as described rather thoroughly in Frank Gerbode’s article of 25Feb87, entitled “Pain and Repression”. That creates all kinds of confusions and discomforts. As these transactional errors accumulate, we can get an even worse state.

Let’s see how this can happen in everyday life.

Peter calls his friend on the phone, says “hello” and suddenly receives a very rude response. Peter’s friend responds that way because she is in the middle of a quarrel with someone else, and cannot immediately turn off her negative emotion. But Peter doesn’t know that, so he is unable to interpret what happened, and decides, “I should not call people and say hello at once.” In future, that decision prevents him from normal communication; he feels very nervous and becomes tongue-tied or incoherent when he calls someone. By so doing, he creates more misunderstanding, so the painfulness of this trouble grows, until – using whatever excuse – Peter starts to avoid calling people on the phone altogether.

When a person feels unable to handle a painful experience, the person may engage in premature interpretation, interpretation that begins before the current perception is fully received. Premature interpretation has the function of interrupting the contact with what is being perceived and thus preventing the pain that the person imagines will otherwise occur.

In this instance, we can see “fixed logic” at work, a programmed pattern of action, detectable by its repetitive nature and by the fact that the person cannot complete the activity cycle regarding the troublesome perception. Afterwards, this programmed action

pattern can exert a strong negative influence on the person's behavior. It acts to stop all transactions which begin with what appears to the person as the *same* perception but is actually only a *similar* perception. Such a pattern can act as a substitute for the person and can handle all transactions for the person in a certain fixed way.

Any aberration can be understood using this model.

Psychotherapies

The basic task of any psychotherapy is to handle and repair the cycle of transaction. Note that at this point I am talking about "subjective" kinds of psychotherapies, which are aimed at repairing the cognitive, *interpretative* aspect of transaction.

A transaction can also be spoiled because of a failure of *perception*. To repair this kind of failure, we need to apply "objective" techniques, which have to do with actions purported to have a result in the physical world, rather than just in the mind. There are special workshops in metapsychology that teach one how to apply objective procedures.

Let's take a closer look at subjective procedures, the purpose of which is to repair the interpretative disability mentioned above.

The first and probably the easiest approach is for the therapist to compensate for the viewer's interpretative disability with his own ability to interpret. He can interpret the data *for* his viewer. In order to do so, he needs a high level of charisma and enough empathy with the viewer so that she will agree to accept his interpretations and thus compensate for her own inability to interpret. This is an other-determined approach. It creates dependency and does not assist the viewer to become a whole, self-determined person. Needless to say, such a method of help is completely non-person-centered.

A second approach is to propose a ready-made "interpretation machine", an all-encompassing belief system invented by a charismatic genius or guru. This interpretation machine has to be very well-defined – terms, phenomena and all aspects have to be explained very clearly, so that the only task for a viewer is to translate her own perceptions through the pre-defined mechanics of this "machine". For such an approach to be fully effective, it requires:

1. A self-validating theory that appeals to the viewer's logical side, and
2. A beautiful mythology that appeals to her aesthetic side.

The effectiveness of this approach, of course, depends on how well your theory works as a brainwashing tool. The usual justification for the existence of such theories (which may or may not be religious in nature) is, "It works; therefore it is right." Some of these belief systems have been regarded as person-centered, but they cannot be, because, unfortunately, they also create a dependency - on the theory. Thus, no matter how mild the brainwashing effect might be, such approaches fail to do any better at helping the person to become "whole" or self-determined.

The third and only truly person-centered approach is to teach a viewer how to develop her own ability to interpret. This is an interesting subject in itself, as it appears there is no traditional psychotherapy that teaches the art of "how to know", how to reach the state

of immediate knowingness on one's own. An exception is Eugene Gendlin's more recently developed approach, called "Focusing".

As his ability to use his own powers of interpretation improves, the viewer can move up on his own through these stages:

1. The need to depend on other's explanations
2. The need to depend on other's fixed ways of interpreting data
3. The need to depend on one's own fixed ways of interpreting data

on the way to attaining

4. The ability to know directly, without the interposition of any fixed or other-determined means of interpreting data.

We could call the attainment of this ability a "turning point", but the cycle can repeat many times, and at some point one will reach:

5. The state of "multi-determinism", in which one can see things from different viewpoints at the same time.

If your facilitator knows this goal and leads you there at a sure pace, you're on the right path. The success of your sessions depends, not so much on the procedures you use or the particular themes or questions that you sort out along the way, but mainly on your and your facilitator's attitude, and on your building up the ability to know the contents of your world. A successful viewer, in other words, is one who has a good ability to carry out the full cycle of transaction.

How to Develop the Ability to Transact

The one well-known method to enhance one's ability to transact is to use a technique, such as TIR (Traumatic Incident Reduction – see more on that subject at <http://www.tir.org>), that provides an unhurried mental examination of troublesome situations. A metapsychology-based technique is a systematic way of processing perceptions. In TIR and related techniques (such as Unblocking), we use a repeated review of the viewer's issues, which makes it easier for the viewer to build up his ability to interpret what he perceives.

The act of communicating verbally with the facilitator helps the person to create a semantic structure in which to place her perceptions. This sets the mind onto the task of consciously creating the exact ability that the viewer needs.

Summary

A person's interaction with her world consists of a series of transactions, a transaction being a composite of:

1. Perception and
2. Interpretation of the perception.

Any aberration can be viewed as an imbalance in these two components of transaction.

Psychotherapies are supposed to cure this. Usually they are directed toward the repair of the interpretative part of this imbalance.

The only truly person-centered approach is to teach a client how to build her own ability to interpret. TIR and related techniques are useful in accomplishing this goal.

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