

Making Meaning

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I recently compiled a reflective inquiry project as part of my studies for the MSc in TA Psychotherapy – and it got me thinking about how we make meaning – and how our own versions of meaning-making may impact on our clients, whether these be in therapy, organisational or educational settings.

I was prompted to the choice of topic because I am moving from many years steeped in classical TA, where Berne told us the share the theory with the client, into relational TA, where the focus is on how we can work with the process that occurs when clients unknowingly seek to recreate their early scenes so they can reach a different conclusion. Lest you think this sounds too clinical, common examples within organisational settings occur in mentoring: for some these involve explaining the nature of office politics to the mentee, whereas for others the mentor may be the first ‘grown-up’ to really listen to the mentee, in spite of the mentee presenting like a rebellious child to start with. Such a mentee’s experience of being heard and respected can lead to a spontaneous redecision, albeit one that sometimes occurs only after the mentor has persisted in side-stepping the invitations to behave like a controlling parent.

Having chosen my topic, I began to think about how I (and others) make meaning. Several years ago someone told me I was a postmodernist. I had to ask what that meant! Then I found that in 1997 there was a whole issue of the Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ) devoted to related topics such as postmodernism, constructionalism and constructivism. So I now understand that I resonate with Doan (1997) in recognising that there are many ways to understand our world – as opposed to modernism that thought there could be ‘one truth’.

I have also realised that my reluctance to apply overall diagnostic labels is not just because Berne cautioned against it: it is part of social

constructionism (a close cousin of postmodernism) to challenge and deconstruct stories that people regard as truth. Within my therapy training I have noted that people challenge the DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder that the UK Council for Psychotherapists requires us to use); Rohlf et al (2009) for instance describe many culturally-based problems with the classifications. Closer to home, I have taken a similar challenging approach to TA models and have developed alternative constructions such as the Autonomy instead of Script Matrix (Hay 1997) and several consecutive reworkings of life positions into windows on the world (see below for my latest version, with no promises that I will not develop this even further). Any further changes will be because of a radical constructivist view that questions whether any objective view of the world is possible.

Maturana (1978) argued that structural determinism means that the organisation of our brain determines how we construct what we think we are observing, and Dallos & Draper (2010) remind us that such views are responsible for maintaining inequalities such as “women’s subjugation by men, oppression of ethnic minorities and of those experiencing forms of mental distress.” (p.12). Back in the special TAJ, Allen & Allen (1997) suggested that the constructionist therapist aims to help clients conceptualise themselves differently. For me, this is the intention within all fields of application of TA

23 years later, Summers & Tudor’s (2000) material on cocreativity extended Allen & Allen’s ideas into a recognition that we help clients reconceptualise through the creation of something new that comes into existence as we interact. They write of shared responsibility for the therapeutic process and helping clients to understand differently what they had interpreted previously. Hargaden & Sills (2002) then explain how we do that ‘relationally’ by using our own responses to shed light on the relational patterns so we can respond in a way that shifts the clients perception because it does not match the responses they received in the past.

The ‘Code’

? = I/you irrelevant

- = I/you not okay

+ = I/you okay

++ = I/you more okay

I U = I am, You are

Windows on the World

? +	- +	+ +	++ +	I U
? -	--	+ -	+ ?	

Again, although these writers concentrated on therapy clients, it is easy to see how the same processes apply in developmental TA applications. There will be many teachers who will have made a difference in the life of a child by recognising that child's expectation of, and hence rebellious invitation to give them, a negative response – and who have managed their own countertransferential anger and responded constructively to the child. Likewise, the skilful manager who avoids an invitation to 'rescue' a 'helpless' subordinate and instead structures events so the subordinate has an experience of succeeding by themselves – such as by waiting until the last minute to announce that they are busy to attend a meeting, so the subordinate has no time to protest, goes alone and finds out that they cope on their own.

In addition to our mental maps, there is the impact of culture. Allen (1997) comments that Virginia Satir's existential positions included the context and perhaps TA should have "I count, you count, and the context (s) count(s)." (p.88). We need to be aware of our own culture, how that might match or differ from the client's culture, and how we can ensure that any such differences are brought to conscious awareness instead of contaminating the interactions. For me this is much more than simply about race, colour, creed, etc. Less obvious cultural aspects exist such as how my working class background may be very different to a client's childhood, my organisational experience may be significant when client's talk about work, my schizoid and anti-social characteristics may lead me over-identify with some clients and misinterpret the meaning-making processes of others.

Let's think about these elements within a developmental setting:

- How similar, or not, was your upbringing – in terms of where you lived; nature of your family; access to educational opportunities etc.?
- How similar, or not, are your work experiences – employed or self-employed; small, medium or large organisation(s); business, educational, charity, public service, etc.?
- How similar, or not, are your personal styles – personality adaptations, working styles/drivers, stroke patterns, etc.?

Having been lucky enough to travel much of the world teaching TA, I know first-hand that clashes of working styles can lead to more conflict than different religions, and different stroke preferences (e.g. person, project, performance) can lead to more negative reactions than different nationalities.

There are many ways in which our own maps of the world can end up separating us from our clients rather than enhancing our understanding. Hence we need to pay attention to our own meaning making lest it 'leak' into our clients' minds as we cocreate. To become aware requires 2nd order cybernetics (von Foerster 1995), so we can step outside our frame of reference to review that same frame of reference. This is not easy – it is like asking a fish to understand water.

Hence, we need to develop our skill at reflection and we need prompting by others who are outside our frame of reference (i.e. in their own frame that differs from ours – so not our best friend who is likely to share a similar outlook to ours). We can achieve this by reflecting at three levels:

- Reflection-in-action (Schon 1983) – what are we aware of whilst interacting with the client(s)?
- Reflection-on-action (Schon 1983) – what do we become aware of afterwards, often with the aid of recordings that we can listen to when not engaged with the client?
- Reflection-in-supervision – what do we notice when someone else challenges our inevitable discounting?

To finish, an example to illustrate how a DTA practitioner used the 3 levels to check the impact within their work of their meaning making processes.

In teaching a class (of managers or schoolchildren!) Pat (the unisex teacher), noticed (reflection-in-action) that Chris (the unisex student) was nodding and smiling a lot. Pat recognised feeling encouraged by this, of wishing that more students behaved like Chris, and of stroking Chris for being so engaged in class discussions.

Afterwards, Pat thought about the lesson (reflection-in-action) and realised that two other students had not contributed at all to the class discussions, that some of Chris's comments had contained questionable elements (e.g. incorrect explanations), and that Pat had an unpleasantly familiar feeling of 'here I go again'.

In reflection-in-supervision, Pat recognised the discounting involved, because of Pat's need for strokes, how a different stroking pattern was needed outside the classroom to eliminate 'stoke-dependency on students', and how the 'here I go again' feeling might well be a premonition of a game switch to come (such as Chris or another student becoming Persecutor and Pat ending up as Victim).

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