

Autonomy – some of the Early Material

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Author's Note: The following is extracted from a workbook on Individual Development (the topic for October), written by me as part of the TA training I provide via workshops and webinars for those seeking TA qualifications, including an MSc and the CTA. See www.pifcic.org for more details.

In 1987, a guide to TA literature produced by Novey (1987) had no separate entry for autonomy, listing it only on page 34 under the heading of Script vs autonomy. The following is a collection of ways in which autonomy was dealt with in the early literature.

Within the *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* there are occasional mentions of autonomy but the word appears to be being used in its normal sense rather than having a specific transactional analysis definition. The only exception appears to be Mannel (1968) who refers specifically to it as the equivalent of being in Adult ego state, commenting that Parent represents conformity and Child is about social cooperation.

Berne (1964) did not index autonomy in *Games People Play* but had a 3-page chapter entitled Autonomy and a 1-page chapter entitled Attainment of Autonomy (4 pages out of a total of 173 pages in the book). He wrote that:

“The attainment of autonomy is manifested by the release or recovery of three capacities: awareness, spontaneity and intimacy.” (p 158)

He described awareness as the “... capacity to see a coffeepot and hear the birds sing in one's own way, and not the way one was taught... requires living in the here and now, and not in the elsewhere, the

past or the future” (p. 158)

“Spontaneity means option, the freedom to choose and express one's feelings from the assortment available (Parent feelings, Adult feelings and Child feelings). It means liberation, liberation from the compulsion to play games and have only the feelings one was taught to have.” (p.160)

“Intimacy means the spontaneous, game-free candidness of an aware person, the liberation of the eidetically perceptive, uncorrupted Child in all its naivety living in the here and now.” (p. 160). This definition appears to define intimacy in terms of awareness and spontaneity, rather than as a separate construct.

Berne also wrote here about one-sided intimacy, giving as an example the behaviour of professional seducers.

Berne (1970) indexed the topic in *Sex in Human Loving* as Autonomy, illusions of. He wrote that:

“man is born free, but one of the first things he learns is to do as he's told, and he spends the rest of his life doing that. Thus his first enslavement is to his parents. He follows their instructions forevermore, retaining only in some cases the right to choose his own methods and consoling himself with an illusion of autonomy . . . the road to freedom is through laughter – no joke magazines in slave-holding countries like Nazi Germany. Sun Tzu demonstrated military discipline by beheading harem girls who giggled so the rest obeyed orders. . . . This freedom to select methods for arriving at the predetermined goal helps to support the illusion of free choice or autonomy. e.g. Cinderella scripted to be a winner, sisters to be losers but all did it in their own ways. . . . It is built-in that the Parental instructions will work like an electrode, so that the person will end up following them almost automatically with little or no chance to decide for himself. It is also

built-in that he will think he is exercising free will. . . Some people know their behaviour is determined by what parents told them at an early age.” (p. 177)

Steiner (1971) in *Games Alcoholics Play* did not index autonomy and referred on page 125 to awareness, spontaneity and intimacy without mentioning autonomy.

Berne (1972) did not index autonomy in *What do you say after you say Hello?* but he referred to the uncontaminated part of Adult in his diagram of contaminations as the “true autonomous area... [which] is actually free to make Adult judgements based on carefully gathered knowledge and observation. It may work efficiently in a trade or profession, where a mechanic or a surgeon uses good judgment based on previous education, observation, and experience.” (p.154).

Berne went on to say that “Insofar as he recognises and separates these three areas [uncontaminated parts of P, A, C] he is autonomous; he knows what is Adult and practical, what he accepts that came from others, and what he does that is determined by early impulses rather than by practical thinking and rational decisions.” (p. 155)

Berne also suggested that we should regard only the area of Adult without contaminations as the ‘True Autonomous Area’ and not the area of the complete circle of Adult that includes the shaded parts of the contaminations. He described dividing the smaller area of true autonomy by the larger area that includes contaminations to produce a figure that he proposed be known as the Degree of Autonomy.

Steiner (1974) indexed autonomy in *Scripts People Live*. He commented that “Decisions which lead to healthy personality development must be both timely and autonomous. Thus, in proper script-free ego formation, the date of

decisions is such that it provides for sufficient information, lack of pressure, and autonomy.” (p. 85). He includes a chapter entitled *Child-Rearing for Autonomy*, wherein he commented about raising children to have a maximum amount of autonomy, bringing them up to discover what it is they want, not interfering with their spontaneity, awareness and intimacy, suggesting an example of letting the child decide its own bedtime and letting them learn that autonomy does not include the freedom to cause inconvenience to others; and that raising children for autonomy requires a larger community which is supportive and understanding of the process.

He went on to provide 10 Rules, which can be summarised as:

- Do not have a child to whom you can't extend an 18 year guarantee of Nurturing and Protection.
- Provide the child with freedom to fully exercise the faculties of intimacy, awareness, spontaneity.
- Intimacy is defeated through the Stroke Economy.
- Awareness is defeated through Discounts.
- Do not lie to your children, ever, either by omission or commission.
- Spontaneity is defeated by arbitrary rules applying to the use of the body.
- Do not Rescue and then Persecute your child.
- Do not teach children competition.
- Do not allow your children to oppress you.
- Trust human nature and believe in your children.

Holloway (1974) wrote that “Autonomy can be described as the ultimate

individuation and implies that the person is capable of the full use of options in attaining strokes from multitudinous others and that specifically excluded is the option of a single fixed dependent relationship (including a fantasised dependency). Ongoing dependency, especially beyond childhood, is only granted in exchange for obligation. Obligation is accompanied by resentment and resentment prevents intimacy. Autonomous functioning, therefore, is the condition which permits of intimacy while dependency precludes intimacy between adults." (p. 15-16). Holloway goes on to suggest two broad categories of contracts, for social control and for autonomy, referring to rededication therapy is an approach to achieve the latter.

Baute (1975) introduced the idea of the 'autonomy chair'. Writing of how some clients announce they are leaving a therapy group before the therapist believes they are ready, Baute explains that confronting this may be seen as the therapist attempting to block the client's autonomy. The technique of the autonomy chair is that the group member sits in the particular chair and asks the group whether they believe he/she is free of whatever was the subject of the therapeutic contract. "The group and the therapist confront the person in the "autonomy chair" with observations, impressions and questions concerning his behavior." (p. 181). Meanwhile, the therapist is alert to whether any games are being played around the chair technique, by the group members or by the therapist themselves. For instance, group members may be angry at someone getting well if they have not done so themselves, or the therapist may not want to part with a group member who seems to be doing well and for whom the therapist feels 'Pygmalion pride'. Baute explains that the use of the chair is voluntary. No personal attacks are allowed but challenges are

encouraged, as are 'I' rather than 'You' comments. The focus is on the person in the chair and they are expected to respond to each question or statement; any processing of transactions is done with others later.

Goulding & Goulding (1978) wrote that when a child makes a decision to accept information, they forfeit their autonomy. They described their goal as *immediate* [their italics] autonomy for the patient, with patients making their own decisions rather than relying on the therapist in the role of the parent. In Goulding & Goulding (1979) they added that they ask the client to claim their autonomy whenever they give it up, by owning that "Each person makes himself feel and that no-one makes another person feel." (p.5). They also identify on page 85 some words that deny autonomy: try; can/can't versus will/won't; make feel, discount when applied to discounting others – each of us decides whether to consider ourselves discounted; it instead of I; you instead of I; we instead of I; maybe, perhaps.

Baute (1979) claimed that autonomy had come to mean individualism and privatism, with transactional analysts being blind to the oppressive conditions and personal alienation that mean that much of the human race has no opportunity of achieving autonomy. He proposed that two concepts, a sense of community and human responsiveness, are needed beyond intimacy and autonomy, and commented that "as long as TA is a belief system that does not recognize its own loopholes, it functions as a middle-class tranquillizer and an endorsement of the status-quo." (p. 170)

Bary (1979) also wrote about the way in which TA therapists emphasise that freeing up "process, autonomy and spontaneity, is touted as entirely positive. In rebuttal, many accuse TA of encouraging hedonism at the expense of values and value-

oriented living. Much of the current popular press is devoted to critiques of the “me generation” and the fads, such as TA, which contribute to the phenomenon of the “me generation.” (p. 179). She goes on to explain the desirability of youthful hedonism and the need to relinquish it in a way that promotes stability of the life plan and joy and satisfaction in living, which requires autonomous choosing of values and life plans as opposed to submission to others’ values. She describes how the natural Child operates out of a me-first orientation, tied to the moment, and that “this autonomous but diffuse and hedonistic orientation gradually adapts to varying degrees to others’ rules for living as the adapted Child and Parent ego states are formed. In adolescence, when the cognitive machinery has matured to an adequate degree, making a fully functional Adult available, the person is ready to throw off this parental programming, re-evaluate and question old beliefs and attitudes, and after a period of turmoil and doubt, make new, personally-derived choices about previously held positions.” (p. 179).

Bary likens this to Erikson’s (1968) ‘identity crisis’ or turning or choice point, of adolescence. She went on to refer to Marcia’s (1964) expansion of Erikson’s work into four categories of approach to the situation of adolescence:

- Diffusion – where there is no identity, all decisions are in the moment, here-and-now. When extended beyond childhood this means that the person seems weak, easily influenced and immature;
- Foreclosure – where the person is prematurely closed off from the choice process and instead incorporates and accepts their parents’ choices unquestioningly. The compliant adapted Child and the Parent ego states are in alliance.

This may be functional if the parents had good beliefs and opinions but is no help when change in the world occurs;

- Moratorium – this is the process of re-evaluating old beliefs and weighing alternatives, which can occur rationally and calmly but often instead involves rebellion and upheaval because the previous programming needs major opposition to shake it loose. The rebellious adapted Child and the natural Child provide the impetus and motivation whilst the Adult is used to re-evaluate and re-decide. This is what adolescence so often appears to be about but is a problem if the process occurs later in the life cycle or not at all;
- Achieved Identity – major choices have been made by the individual and they are now ready to tackle the other adult life crises which will follow, such as “the intimacy crisis of who and how to love; the generativity crisis of who, what, and how to produce, create, serve, and contribute to the world; and eventually the integrity crisis of how to view the totality of one’s life.” (p. 180).

Whitney (1982) challenges the use of the concept of autonomy as if it characterises personhood, albeit that he then went on to say that personhood is not easily defined. He pointed out that “The word autonomy has its derivation in the Greek word *autonomia*. With reference to a person it means the power or right of an individual to live according to his own will; to govern himself according to his own reason. An autonomous individual is one who has the right to self-government. The biological connotation is that of a separate organism which is not dependent on any other. This information is from *Webster’s*

Dictionary." (p. 210). From this, he emphasised that there are two elements: individual human rights and power; and the person not being dependent on any other.

In terms of the first, he argued that, although the right to autonomy may exist, it has no meaning for a new-born baby or for someone with disabilities who cannot live independently of others - these do not have the power to be autonomous and this means that within TA we are using a term that does not apply to all people. In terms of the second, this would appear to contradict the ways in which we need to be in relationship to others, as indeed is presented within TA in terms of the theory of strokes. Whitney pointed out that when Berne (1964) refers to autonomy in terms of awareness, spontaneity and intimacy, he is contradicting the meaning of autonomy.

Another example of a contradiction pointed out by Whitney is that within a society that bases its values on Christian doctrine, no-one has a right to live according to one's own will. This is based on the work of Jesus who, when tempted, prayed to the Father, "not my will, but Thy will be done" (Mk.14:36)."

Several years later, Kandathil & Kandathil (1997) also related autonomy to Christianity, commenting that "The Christian perspective, as represented by Protestant theologian Paul Tillich and the ecumenical council of Vatican 11, converge in their understanding of what is meant by "autonomy". Both agree that autonomy is possible only within the framework of God's law written in the heart of man" and quoting the second Vatican Council (1962-1965) "For man has in his heart a law written by God." (p. 24)

Denton (1982) contrasted the Adlerian (Simoneaux 1977) concept of 'Gegenspieler' - the one against whom one's life is played – with that of

'Folgenspieler' - the one after whom one models one's life. Denton explained that the child measures themselves against their parents or siblings, who may therefore fulfil the role of Gegenspieler. He cautioned that the therapist may then become the Folgenspieler or 'player to follow' on the way to autonomy. This may be a necessary part of the process but it is also important that the client goes beyond the need for a Folgenspieler if they are to complete the journey to autonomy.

There is plenty more material on autonomy, including my own model of the Autonomy Matrix (Hay, 1997, 2012) this has been a sample of what gets covered.

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