

HOW VITAL IS THE ITAA?

I felt despair on reading the ITAA president's lead article in the December Script (2008), which was heightened a few pages later as I read the article from Dan Cauble (2008) commenting on training and exams. My feelings were triggered in part by the content – board members resigning, complaints about the CTA requirements – resonating with similar situations and their impact in my national association, alongside similar stories I've heard about other TA organisations. However my emotional response was also to the subtexts of these two articles.

The suppressed pain and hurt at the attack on his leadership skills seemed to suffuse Petriglieri's article, and rage at the exam leadership seem to permeate the attack in Cauble's piece. Both articles fumed with frustration at the ITAA membership or the leadership or maybe at times both. Such frustration feels very familiar to me in my relationship to the ITAA, prompting me to inquire using my organisational TA thinking: what is up with our organisation if members typically feel passive and/or frustrated? To what extent is this a symptom of the vitality of our organisation? And what might this mean for ITAA's future?

It is easy to forget that it is OUR organisation – membership is **voluntary** for most, although it (perhaps confusingly and unhelpfully) may be **obligatory** for some in order to maintain a national professional licence. It is also an organisation run by elected representatives: so membership of the executive is **conditional**. Berne (1963) highlighted such categories of membership carry significant psychological meaning for each of us and, I would suggest, collective meaning also. (For example, my informal research amongst transactional analysts indicates that 'Don't Belong' is a commonly carried scripting – so the half-in/half-out way that many of us choose to belong to ITAA may well fit our proclivities). This creates diverse psychological meanings for each member who bring, and as Berne suggested may have to give up, their own proclivities or inclinations in order to belong to an organisation, plus their own different cultural frames of reference. (For example, some of us live in nations which set great store by 'democracy' even though the Greeks who came up with the notion noted some of its problems, and suggested that benevolent dictatorship might be more beneficial for everyone concerned).

Elected government is the closest parallel to an organisation such as the ITAA, and provides insight into the practical and psychological implications of membership organisations in the tensions between the executive and the citizenry. Often in such systems many members passively don't vote or participate, and then create uproar when the elected executive does something the individual disagrees with; the executive may experience minimal or grandiose power and authority, may have differing ideas about how they represent voters, may have disagreements amongst themselves, and may not have the professional competences for their new organisational role.

It would be easy to ask what has been going on to lead to these two articles in the December Script – however I have learnt that such delving into past events often serves primarily to persecute the individuals involved and amplify the game playing dynamics, rather than grapple with the contextual systemic issues which give rise to and aggravate such games, and are buried in the texts and context of these articles. If

game theory is used, then the organisational perspective provided by Summerton (1993) points to the payoff for the organisation as the outcome of enactments between Snipers, Scapegoats, Saviours, Stage managers, and Spectators. So what is the payoff for yet another TA organisation to yet again overflow with energy absorbed in blaming individuals or groups? It is neither ethical, useful or valid to consider individuals taking on specific drama triangle roles within organisational contexts merely due to their personal pathology, especially when we have theory and practice to think more complexly about such phenomenon – we all have the capacity to act ‘badly’ when enmeshed in powerfully co-created contexts such as organisations where such enactments strengthen the underlying culture (Berne’s analysis of culture suggested the *character* delineates the acceptable aberrations to the *etiquette*). Yet such out-of-date drama triangle analysis is often prevalent in our organisation – aggravated perhaps by the common contemporary Western ‘blame culture’ which has arisen out of over-emphasis on individualism.

Such payoffs are embedded in the culture of an organisation: the ‘*character*’ of the culture as described by Berne (1963), and which is almost impossible to describe or measure – and yet is a ‘felt-known’ experienced often simultaneously and with immediacy by those in contact with the systemic culture. This cultural *character* emerges from the interplay of the Structures and Dynamics of the organisation, and is carried at the psychological level, often out of awareness, by the membership. It infuses all their activities within the organisation, and in so doing is passed on, like organisational DNA, largely unchanged, to new recruits, often through informal communication, gossip and ulterior transactions. Berne’s 1963 organisational writings were largely unedited and are at times opaque, yet full of rich ideas about culture and systems which I interpret and update here.

Berne suggested the founder of an organisation hugely impacts the culture it develops, and features of his script are likely to become part of the ‘*character*’ level of that culture. The founder also impacts on the Dynamics of the system, which is the cultural ‘*etiquette*’ – in other words, the co-created, mostly unspoken, often non-conscious, agreements about how to behave in the system, including which games are acceptable. The founder is also likely to be significant in setting up the original Structures for the organisation (these include vision, values, mission, canon, objectives, policies, procedures, roles, sections and groupings, leadership, representation, boundaries, power, authority, tasks, resources, equipment, finance, recruitment and selection, information and communication channels) which form the tangible ‘*technics*’ aspect of the organisational culture and justify the acceptable games.

So what is the culture of the ITAA? Some of the embedded paradoxes I have heard about and noticed myself are we like to publicly talk about I’m OK and You’re OK whilst in our collegial cliques pointing out how ‘we’ are more OK than ‘them’. We are intellectually creative and playful, whilst being rivalrous and at times vicious about other’s ideas. We rejoice in our rebelliousness, complain that we are outsiders to academia, and have little to do with other psychologies. We emphasise autonomy, and then seem to interpret this as self-reliance and individualism rather than bear to acknowledge ongoing fellowship and global interdependence, and we honour and then minimise the differing social systems and values from other parts of the world. We delight in our global network yet subtly retain a distinctly US flavour (for

example the font, layout, and paper-size of the Script are different from much of the rest of the world). There is an apocryphal story that the reason that the 'I' got into the TA Association is when Berne noticed there was one Canadian amongst the (biblical) 13 who initially came together! Whether true or not this is powerful myth, and there is much in the felt-sense of the ITAA which seems American rather than international and which has been reflected in the *technics* in the past. Whilst there have been considerable changes in more recent years (for example, the increase in international make-up of the board, many more articles from different nationalities, and awarding the EBA more internationally) these changes in themselves do not necessarily directly shift the psychologically held *character* of the culture.

And there is a particularly significant systemic paradox: the ITAA is about the psychology of communications – transactions – and yet has no structure for the Board of our organisation to keep the members informed with any immediacy (only through the posting out of the Script), let alone engage in dialogue. Likewise we have no forum for the membership to share their concerns with each other and the Board. I discovered there would be no elections in a conversation at the end of the August Jo'burg conference – I now understand that this was the issue raised in a letter from Jim Allen and Bill Cornell to the board in June, mentioned in Petriglieri's October 2008 Script article. The lack of elections and the thinking behind it is a matter for the whole membership to consider what meaning this carries for our organisation (even when the association's rules are that this is acceptable) – however the membership was ignorant. In the 21st century with internet technology it is a simple matter for members to be e mailed; and for there to be an email forum where members can raise issues concerning the organisation to each other and the board. I have heard that e mail is not used by the ITAA because there are a few members who are not on-line and therefore to do so is discriminatory! This seems to me to reflect some further aspects of the cultural *character's* shadow: the time warp of naïve political correctness the ITAA sits within, and an embedded injunction of lets not really succeed as a vital psychology in the world. Perhaps not succeeding is the payoff for the organisation.

As any organisational consultant knows, planning to change a system's culture in specific ways is not possible. Re-engineering the Structures by bringing in behaviour policies or providing training to alter the Dynamics largely result in little change in the cultural *character* which is embedded largely out of awareness within individual members (Drego 1983 describes the *etiquette*, *technics* and *character* of culture as introjected into the Parent ego state and forming part of the fantasies in the Parent-in-the-Child 1996). So for example a company may bring in equalities training for staff and new recruitment procedures, and the fundamental character of the organisation continues to carry a felt-sense of discrimination – only now its likely to be covert not overt, communicated through ultorials and gossip. Disturbing the cultural frame of reference may trigger changes – however the resulting outcome cannot be planned ahead. Time will also bring about cultural change – as the wider context evolves then there is pressure on the organisational boundaries, which may be increasingly open to cultural changes, or which may then become less permeable, as with the rise in technology in the wider world and the resistance by the ITAA to use this in communicating with members.

However over the past half century, resilience theories have pointed to the decrease in

vitality in the identity and function of individuals, organisations, societies and ecosystems which resist change and disturbance. Their capacity to self-organise then weakens, richness and diversity decreases, and so resilience to deal with external or internal change lessens, and thus survival is then at risk. The thresholds – or tipping points (Gladwell 2000) – for survival may in themselves change, without anything else seeming to change. Resilience thinking (Walker 2006) is useful to consider physiological and psychological being, as well as the rise and fall of organisations and societies (Tainter 1988) and is a compatible and useful addition to transactional analysis in all fields.

Resilience thinking observations suggests that organisations typically go through four phases: (1) starting up and rapid growth, exploiting available resources. Stories of the early years of ITAA reflect this. Then (2) conservation, where some aspects become locked up, there are fewer resources, and increasing rigidity, committees and rules, and one-size-fits-all solutions. In the 15 or so years I have been in the ITAA this seems to describe how it is. At this stage if there is a disturbance then the response is often attempts to stabilise the system – I saw this occur when the opportunity for re-visioning presented by the EATA split was not seized some years ago. This is what is likely happen if the defection of some members of the board is responded to with replacement without reflection and change. The effect of such stabilisation is to weaken resilience, and prevent the organisation reaching the next phase (3) which is a rapid release, a near-collapse, chaotic and unpredictable, triggered by disturbances and changes. I wonder if the recent walk-out of some of the board members is a trigger for this stage – and if so will we just patch up the superficial problem by persuading people to stand for elections, and so continue as usual? It's important to tolerate - to hold and contain - this phase sufficiently until novelty is introduced, creating innovation and transformation of the organisation in terms of its protocols – that is transforming the Structures (*technics*) and Dynamics (*etiquette*) sufficiently that the underlying cultural *character* is to some extent transformed. Do we have the capacity in the ITAA to do this, and to welcome some real innovation, to let go of sufficient of our old ways? Do we trust that the phoenix will arise from the ashes? It is the working through of this collapse which strengthens resilience and thus (4) the organisation's essential identity and functions continue in novel ways.

Is the ITAA vital enough to each of us as members to participate in and nourish such a flourishing? Does the ITAA culture have enough vitality and resilience to survive and thrive? (Berne suggested the primary task of any organisation is only to survive.) What does it take to make it through stages (3) and (4)? According to resilience thinking the answer to this is:

(a) vision and leadership

(b) social capital ie

-willingness to work together

-desire for the same things

(c) novelty and innovation

I would add a fourth aspect for a 21st membership organisation (although perhaps this is an aspect of (c)):

(d) a simple structure for (electronic) communication between members and board.

This latter could provide a forum for real dialogue about whether we all desire the same things sufficiently from the ITAA to create an organisation brimming with

vitality, as well as locating those with energy enough to make these things real on behalf of us all. For example the usual laborious practice of an occasional postal questionnaire about the ITAA surely cannot provide meaningful enough information for a board to act upon – e mail forums and skype teleconferenced focus groups of members might provide a depth of experience and actionable ideas (including perhaps how we overcome the dominance of the English language which creates such difficulties for members in Latin America, continental Europe, and parts of Asia). It could also provide some momentum to the frequent plea for interim certification en route to CTA, voiced again in Cauble's article, and response to the value of the certification processes we already have. (Using these resilience notions I would argue the 'test' of the practitioner –the CTA and TSTA oral exam - is a test of the resilience of the candidates structural Adult ego state; and the number of required training hours is in relation to preparing practitioners to be sufficiently resilient in being transactional analysts. Its important too to recognise that our exam thresholds have changed in parallel with other changes in the external world: the frequent conference joke that the originators of much TA theory would not pass the exam these days may hold a grain of truth - and is not a reason to lower standards!). We could be offering the TA101 as a teleclass and reach out to Africa and other parts of the world where TA has little presence, plus CPD for members through webinars. Whilst I understand there are legal ties keeping the ITAA finances in California, it would an inspiring marker of ITAA's global reach to move the IT and database activities along with publications printing and distribution to India where there are plentiful high quality and cheaper services.

I realise in this article I am provocatively putting into print my interpretation of some of the things which are whispered around the edges of conferences, or emerge in skype chats or over drinks between colleagues. Some of you readers who have got this far may feel enraged at my doing so, others may be feeling warmly resonant. You might also wonder why I am bothering. I have an investment in contemporary ideas within Transactional Analysis as a useful set of maps for understanding myself and my 'worlds', and a tremendous respect for the breadth and richness of the legacy of ideas created initially by Berne and built on by others. I want TA to be vital in many senses: to spread such concepts further internationally, and invite the depth and richness that other individuals and cultures can contribute to an alive and evolving psychological framework which is of value to daily life and to societies, as well as in the fields of psychotherapy, counselling, education and organisations. I love the collegial connections that internationalism can foster.

ITAA can provide a vision and an umbrella for all this and much, much more – and if ITAA withers then part of me loses vitality too. I hope these reflections will stir those amongst us who have the competences to effectively take on organisational roles within the ITAA, remembering Schmidt's 2007 EBA contribution to TA theory: our skills and competences in our *private* world are distinct from and may not always be transferable to the *professional* world where we continue to learn to be educators, or organisational consultants, or coaches, or counsellors or psychotherapists. However neither our private nor professional competences are central requirements when in the world of roles representing *organisations*, which requires a different range again. One of the pitfalls for voluntary membership organisations is their reliance on amateur support because there is not enough funding to employ professional skills. I hope there are people out there who wish to voluntarily bear the organisational roles

required by a vital ITAA of the future, and who have sufficient experience of such organisational roles and have developed appropriate competences to know what they are doing to ensure our resilience. And I hope that we have a membership who will support and encourage the Board thinking and taking transformative action which is outside of our usual ITAA frames of reference. Hope is an antithesis to despair but in itself is not enough to prevent withering away: a freshness of perspective and action is vital.

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