ERIC BERNE – A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Early years

Eric Berne, then named Leonard Eric Bernstein, was born on 10 May 1910 in Montreal, Canada. He was born into a Jewish family, who lived in a pleasant area of Montreal where half the residents spoke English and the other half French (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1978).

Berne’s father, David Hillel Bernstein, was a well-known and respected doctor. He founded the Herzl Clinic, a free clinic, for Jewish immigrants and refugees. Berne’s mother, Sara Gordon Bernstein, was a teacher and journalist, who encouraged the young Berne to write. Berne’s parents were both graduates of McGill University in Montreal. Berne had one sister, Grace, who was five years younger.

Berne admired and looked up to his father, even going out on medical rounds with him on occasions. Perhaps it was hardly surprising that Berne himself would later decide to become a doctor. Berne’s father caught the World War I Spanish influenza in 1918, which developed into tuberculosis. Tragically he died in February 1921, when Berne was only 10 years old. The Berne family had been comparatively well off, living in a beautiful home, with servants, and with their two children being privately educated at the Montreal High School. All this changed when Berne’s father died.

Education and early work history

Berne graduated from McGill University in 1931. He then gained the degrees of Doctor of Medicine (MD) and Master of Surgery (CM) from McGill University Medical School in 1935. He undertook his internship at Englewood Hospital, New Jersey from 1935-36 and from 1936-38 he did a psychiatric residency at Yale University School of Medicine (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984).

From 1938-40, Berne was an assistant physician at Ring Sanitarium, Arlington Heights, Massachusetts, and from 1940-43 he was employed as a psychiatrist in a sanitarium in Connecticut, and concurrently as a clinical assistant in psychiatry at Mt Sinai Hospital in New York. He also maintained a private practice.

In 1943, during World War II, Berne joined the United States Army Medical Corps. He rose from the rank of Lieutenant, to Captain, and then to Major. During his time in the army, Berne was based at several different hospitals within the United States, including Spokane, Washington, Fort Ord, California, and Bingham City, Utah. After he was demobbed in July 1946, Berne decided to relocate to Carmel, California, an area he had grown to love whilst stationed at near by Fort Ord.

Development of Transactional Analysis (TA)

Berne was developing, and using in his clinical work, the concept of ego states from around the early 1950s. At around the same time, Berne began a regular Thursday evening clinical seminar in Monterey, and a Tuesday evening seminar in San Francisco, which he used as a testing ground for developing his new theory and methods.

In 1956, after 15 years of psychoanalytic training, Berne was refused admission to the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute as a fully-fledged psychoanalyst. He interpreted the request for several more years of training as a rejection and decided to walk away from psychoanalysis.

In 1957, Berne had two articles published where he wrote for the first time about ego states. In the first article, entitled The ego image, Berne (1957a) differentiated between the Adult and Child states of the ego, and in the second article Ego states in psychotherapy he described the Parent ego state, introduced the tripartite method of diagramming Parent, Adult and Child ego states, and labelled the theory “structural analysis” (1957b). Berne made clear that his development of ego state theory rested firmly on the foundations already laid by Federn (1952, published posthumously) and Weiss (1950). He concluded that what he was doing that was new was “not necessarily the concepts, but the emphasis and development.” (Berne, 1957b, p. 300) In 1958, Berne had a further article published, entitled “Transaction analysis: A new
and effective method of group therapy”, which established transactional analysis as a new approach within the psychotherapeutic literature, and which added transactional analysis proper (i.e. the analysis of transactions), and the concepts of games and scripts to the newly developed transactional analysis theory.

In 1958, the San Francisco Tuesday evening seminar became incorporated as the San Francisco Social Psychiatry Seminars, in order to raise and handle funds for the publication of the Transactional Analysis Bulletin, which was first published in January 1962.

Berne’s seminal text Transactional analysis in psychotherapy was published in 1961. In 1964, Games people play was published, which led to the popularisation of transactional analysis around the world. At one point, Berne was apparently delighted to hear that this book had outsold Lady Chatterley’s Lover (Lawrence, 1928) in England! (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984)

Also in 1964, the International Transactional Analysis Association was created in recognition of the growing number of transactional analysis professionals outside the USA.

Berne wrote two books on groups and organizations entitled The structure and dynamics of organizations and groups (1963) and Principles of group treatment (1966). His books Sex in human loving (1970) and What do you say after you say hello? (1972) were published posthumously.

Work and writing schedule

Berne had an incredibly busy work schedule. He spent Tuesday to Thursday each week in San Francisco. He ran hospital psychotherapy groups and clinics, lectured at the University of California Medical School and ran two weekly evening social psychiatry seminar groups. He taught the TA ‘101’ (introductory) course on Wednesday evenings, and had private practices in Carmel and San Francisco. He devoted weekends to writing (Cheney, 1971).

In all he wrote eight psychotherapy-related books during his life time and over 56 articles and book chapters (10 of these were co-authored). He was also editor of the Transactional Analysis Bulletin from 1962 to 1969, and consulting editor in 1970.

Berne also travelled widely, e.g. Fiji, India, Lebanon, Singapore, Syria and Turkey, primarily to research the psychiatric institutes, hospitals and practices in these countries.

Relationship with psychoanalysis

In 1941, Berne began training as a psychoanalyst at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and became an analysand of Paul Federn. Berne’s analysis with Federn appears to have been cut short when he joined the United States army. After the war, he resumed his psychoanalytic training in San Francisco where he became the analysand of Erik Erikson from 1947-49.

It is likely that at least in part Berne’s 1956 application for membership of the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institutes was refused as his thinking, on both the ego and on intuition (Berne, 1977), was not in keeping with the Freudian ‘party line’.

Allthough Berne decided to end his psychoanalytic training, in his writing he continued to use Freudian concepts when he had no developed theory of his own in a particular area, and he compared and contrasted Freudian concepts with those he himself was developing. Until the end of his life, Berne continued to use the Freudian methodology of the couch and free association in his individual psychotherapy work (Steiner, 1974; Solomon, 2010), although with an increased emphasis on script analysis, rather than on psychoanalysis, as the years progressed. His group work was very different and particularly emphasized the theory and methodology of transactional analysis.

A reply to a critique of transactional analysis in 1969, succinctly sums up Berne’s attitude towards Freudian theory:
“As to the Freudian … elements in transactional theory, I think … Freud … [was] right, and I think I am right too, so I am not ready to discard any of us. Therefore, there has to be a way to get us together, which may take another ten years to do more elegantly than I have done it so far.” (Berne, 1969, p. 478).

**Wives and children**

Berne married three times in all.

First he married Ruth McRae. They had two children Ellen, born in 1942, and Peter, born in 1945. By the time Peter was born, Berne and Ruth were already separated. They were divorced in 1946.

Then Berne met a divorced socialite, Dorothy De Mass Way, in 1947. Dorothy had three children from her first marriage: Robin; Janice; and Roxana (who was tragically killed in a car accident when she was aged fifteen). Dorothy and Berne married in 1949 and had two children together: Eric Junior (Ricky) in 1952 and Terence (Terry) in 1955. They divorced in 1964.

When Berne was 56, in 1967, he married Torre Peterson Rosenkrantz. They were married for only a short time and were divorced in early 1970.

Berne’s long-term relationship with Dorothy and his shorter relationship with Torre appear to have both been adversely affected by his gruelling work schedule.

**Berne’s personality**

Berne was an astute observer and studier of human beings and their behaviour. This aspect of his personality clearly developed early, for example, Berne’s sister (Grace) recalled that as a student Berne would spend hours at the Montreal docks observing the alcoholics (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1978).

Berne has been described variously as: “playful, scientific, intense” (Dusay, 1971, p. 43); “devilish, witty, naughty”, “very shy” and “of genius capacities” (Steiner, 1971, p. 46); “a constant source of encouragement, enthusiasm, and support” (Harris, 1971, p. 59); and “a man of many moods” and “direct and straight” (Levaggi et al, 1971, p. 64 & p. 69). People often had strong reactions in response to Berne, they tended to either love him or hate him.

According to Steiner (1971), Berne had an irrepressible sense of humour, which was particularly evident in his writing. For example in his article entitled ‘Who was condom?’ (Bernstein, 1940) Berne wrote about the contraceptive, the condom, and whether a man called Condom ever existed!

He was confrontational and provocative, particularly regarding the psychiatric profession and practices of the time. For example, in his last keynote address given in June 1970 at the Golden Gate Group Psychotherapy Society (Berne, 1971), with the spoof title ‘Away from a theory of the impact of interpersonal interaction on non-verbal participation’, Berne was critical of the antipathy of the psychiatric profession’s attitude towards curing their patients.

Berne worked hard and played hard. He enjoyed “jumping up and down” parties (Steiner, 1971, p.47) after the weekly seminars in San Francisco, playing poker on Friday evenings with his Carmel friends, and swimming and constitutionals on his favourite Carmel beach on Sundays with his friends and children.

**Final days**

Berne had a heart attack on 28 June 1970. He was hospitalised and was expected to make an almost full recovery. He even spent time correcting the proofs for one of his books. Just over two weeks later on 15 July 1970, he experienced a second heart attack and died.

Eric Berne was only sixty when he died.

**References**


