

TA “As effective as other approaches” suggests University research study

The Berne Institute wishes to record grateful thanks to the European Association for Transactional Analysis (EATA) for their generosity in retrospectively funding this research project.

There is a body of material about TA theory and methods of therapeutic application. However, evidence about TA outcomes appears to be largely anecdotal and composed of case studies as compared with empirical literature that tests the effects of TA in experimental trials. The Berne Institute sought to establish the current academic and therapeutic evidence base for the effectiveness of TA counselling and psychotherapy, set within the context of TA as a discipline developing outside of mainstream academia.

Key questions of the review:

- o What is the effect of TA on client outcomes?
- o How does the treatment effect of TA compare with other types of psychotherapy?

Method

A paucity of evidence was predicted, and this prediction was borne out by a preliminary search. For this reason a wide-ranging, inclusive search method was employed. The aim was to retrieve any available evidence about TA outcomes. Studies were included provided they concerned the application of a TA intervention, demonstrated a reasonably clear, replicable method, and had used a pre- and post test measure to gauge effect, any reasonable attempt at measurement was deemed sufficient for inclusion. Search dates for evidence were set at 1950 – September 2007, to encompass all available evidence since TA’s inception.

These inclusion criteria were utilised in all four search strategies, which were carried out in the order listed.

- o Search strategy 1: Word of mouth
- o Search strategy 2: Electronic bibliographic databases
- o Search strategy 3: Web review
- o Search strategy 4: Specialised TA databases

Findings

1. It seems that TA may be most effective when used as a group therapy as opposed to one-to-one,

and is probably as effective as other psychotherapies for many presenting problems.

2. The evidence-base remains scant and of relatively poor quality, despite calls for improvement by previous reviews.

3. What evidence base exists is insular and not subjected to the quality reviews of the wider academic and health communities.

Research evidence-based practice: the future for TA?

A current, conclusive evidence base, comprising good-quality, peer-reviewed research studies to support a given practice or approach is considered to be essential by modern health practitioners and service commissioners.

The Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) is often viewed as the gold standard for such studies, but in practice the «true experiment» is an unachievable goal, as real-life situations are often too complex to be investigated in such a rigid fashion. However, the quasi-experiment, in which a realistic degree of methodological control is employed, is acceptable in evaluating the effects of many interventions, such as psychotherapeutic treatments. In such a study, pre- and certainly post-intervention measures are taken, and The Berne Institute wishes to record grateful thanks to the European Association for Transactional Analysis (EATA) for their generosity in retrospectively funding this research project.

TA «as effective as other approaches», suggests University research study the independent variable is clearly identified, with efforts made to control or address any other variables that may produce an effect.

In addition, the expectations of participants and therapists need to be accounted for, and a non-treatment group included for comparative purposes. Ideally participants are randomly assigned to the treatment or non-treatment group. Measures can be objective or subjective, but results are more meaningful if the measures have themselves been tested and found appropriate, reliable and valid. Measures used commonly within health research allow findings to be understood readily by the wider research world and are more likely to be robust than those used in a more narrow context or specifically developed. It is common to use a range of measures, perhaps some more specialist and some more mainstream.

Why is the TA empirical evidence base so scant?

It seems that a significant proportion of the TA research that is being conducted is high-profile within the TA world, but is indeed «beneath the radar» to the wider health and academic community. Of the 19 included studies, 14 were published in the Transactional Analysis Journal, which is not widely accessible outside of the TA world. One likely reason for this situation having occurred is that TA is not taught in mainstream UK institutions, though courses are accredited by UK universities. This limits the access of TA researchers to the wider research community, to opportunities for wider dissemination of their work, and

to the rigours of peer-review associated with this, which ensures quality standard in the wider academic world.

Recommendations for further research:

How might the TA evidence base be supplemented?

1. This exercise will inform a research bid for a larger study to examine TA treatment outcomes. This could be targeted specifically at funding bodies for under researched areas.
2. A first step would be to conduct a large-scale audit-style survey of treatment outcomes in the UK.
3. Dissemination of results needs to be targeted at the wider research and health communities to give it higher profile.
4. Partnership studies with academic institutions would allow access to valuable experience and assistance in meeting research design and publication quality standards and in wider dissemination.

(The Editor of the EATA news writes: in our June 2007 issue we reported that The Berne Institute of Nottingham, England, had commissioned a research study to examine the evidence about the effectiveness of TA. The study – carried out at the School of Nursing, Nottingham University – has now been completed, and we give here a brief summary of its results, prepared by researcher Liz Khalil. The full text of the report is freely available for access on the University web site at:

http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/nursing/research/mental-health/current_projects/berne.php).