

# To Be A Therapist?

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## **Abstract**

**This autobiographical article describes how the author came to practice TA and Gestalt, after which she developed her own approach—existential pattern theory and therapy. She describes some important prior experiences and how she came to work exclusively in Europe for the past 14 years. The author muses about how early experiences in her grandfather's living room and the fact that fortune-telling gypsies were her only role models of independent women had a determining impact on the "career" aspects of her script.**

## **In Quest of a Role Model**

Throughout my school years, which were at an English high school in Istanbul, Turkey (where my parents had moved from Romania when I was five), I had no career goals other than to earn my own living. This was in contrast to my middle-class Balkan culture, in which girls were expected only to become "marriageable" to a wealthy husband. But what if he left you? My father often groaned about having to support two such helpless "deserted" nieces.

However, I could not find a single role model of a woman who supported herself, other than the maid and the rigid British "spinsters" who taught at my school. Only the gypsy fortune-tellers around us seemed free and earned their own living, however much they were despised.

I graduated from high school at 15 and chose secretarial training rather than university. Thanks to my knowledge of languages, acquired as a child in Istanbul, I got a job with the distribution office of Warner Brothers' films in Bucharest. Shortly after, my father died, and in

spite of my mother's protests about my holding on to this job, thereby ruining my prospects of a "good" marriage, I did stay and eventually got Warner Brothers to transfer me to Paris, gladly departing from anti-Semitic Romania.

Thinking in several languages and "escape from" rather than "going to" were always dominant themes in my life. As a very young child I would "escape" from the ministrations of my mother and aunt to the "sanctuary" of my grandfather's office at the other end of the house. As president of the local Jewish community, he interviewed parents of boys who needed help to emigrate to the United States before draft age, since Jewish soldiers were ill-treated in the army; so the living room was filled all day.

My early experience of being unconditionally accepted in a roomful of strangers (because they wanted to gain favor with my grandfather) may be why later I always felt comfortable running workshops, even though after age five I led a rather lonely life as an only child, with parents who were isolated in a foreign community.

## **Psychology and War**

In Paris my horizons widened. Still without specific goals, I enrolled at the Sorbonne, took classes at the Institute of Pedagogical Psychology (where Piaget taught) and at the Psychoanalytic Institute, which welcomed students as full members, in contrast to how such institutes were later set up in the United States under the monopolistic stranglehold of the AMA.

I passed my psychology finals in spring 1940, just before the Blitzkrieg brought the German armies to the gates of Paris. We were given our handwritten degrees in the basement of the Sorbonne, which served as an air-raid shelter.

There followed numerous other wartime

flights and episodes—including my employment at the American Consulate in southern France—before my mother, stepfather, and I traveled for 21 days to New York over the mine-laden Atlantic just before the United States entered the war.

### **A Haven in the United States**

As an impoverished refugee in New York I found out, once again, that language and typing skills could support me better than psychology. I worked for the Brazilian commercial attaché until I got the scholarship help that ended with my social work degree from Bryn Mawr. By that time I did think of psychotherapy as a profession; after all, it is close to fortune-telling!

Fast-forward to marriage and a move to Washington, D.C., where my two children were born. As babies, first Brian, then Deirdre challenged my smug confidence in my psychological skills, for these collapsed in the face of screaming infants, experimenting toddlers, or, later, determined two-year-olds. (My concept of a specific inborn expressive drive that cannot be tamed by strokes dates back to many such sobering experiences.)

### **Wasn't the Civil War Just Ancient History?**

With similar naiveté I integrated the Alexandria Family Service Agency in 1949 after I was hired there as executive director. In organizing appointments, I asked that all families with children be scheduled for mornings, when toys could be spread out in the waiting room, and that adults be scheduled for afternoons. I did not understand why a staff member kept asking me, "Are you sure?" At the board meeting a few weeks later, I proudly described how we were more efficient with this new schedule. After the meeting, the president came up to me enthusiastically: "What skill, to achieve racial integration by changing the waiting room system! Only a few of us kept insisting on changing our segregated system. The debate went on for months without action, and now you just did it! Nobody dared protest when you emphasized efficiency rather than morality!"

I was too surprised to tell him the truth, which was that I had not realized that there was still segregation in Virginia. A few months after we

integrated our service, the Alexandria Mental Health Clinic did also; I was told our "courage" had "inspired" them. As in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the Child often knows best.

### **Child Abuse for Treatment!**

Fast-forward again as our family moved to Chicago, where I got what was supposed to be a part-time job with the Ridge Farm Treatment Center for emotionally disturbed children. After working with some boys lodged in a particular dorm, I became convinced that the sadistic sexual material they were describing had to be based on current experiences rather than only on past ones or on fantasy. This was 1954, when the psychoanalytic establishment assumed that gory sexual material was fantasy. It seemed unbelievable that two "fine" houseparents might be sadistic pedophiles, so for a while Irene Josselyn, my psychoanalytic supervisor, questioned the validity of my material. But ultimately, when the director, to whom I had also reported my concerns, threatened to fire me, Irene presented our data to the board.

Overnight both the director and the two staff members running the dorm in question packed up and left, after having intimidated the kitchen and maintenance staff, who were recent immigrants, so most of them also left precipitously. The institution would have had to close, which I found intolerable, particularly when we now had some children who had been traumatized even more severely than before. When the remaining staff rallied behind me, I agreed to temporarily become the full-time executive director. We kept afloat with the help of board-member volunteers and part-time college students until replacements could be hired.

My sudden shift to daily 14-hour workdays was hard on my own children, even though I had an excellent housekeeper at home. It took more than a year, instead of a few months, for the board to find a new director so I could leave. It had been an adventuresome period of which I was proud, but after that I wanted better control over my work hours. Thus I started private practice in association with a child psychiatrist.

As an aside, I must interject my concern about the current situation in the United States where working mothers find themselves in similar

conflicts between high-stress or crisis job demands and the needs of their children. Even when good provisions are made for them, children suffer more than we might believe from extensive parental absences. Certainly there are no perfect solutions when different needs must be jostled. However, in Europe the discrepancy between a woman's responsibility for both the demands of her job and her children's needs is acknowledged more openly and there are more social and legal provisions for both.

### From "Solid" Private Practice to TA, and More

After ten years of private practice I became discouraged at how long it took for patients to progress in psychoanalytically based individual therapy. I myself had been in years of psychoanalysis with no discernable results. I sought out one consultant after another on my cases; they kept assuring me that my work was good and that I should not be so impatient about outcome. (I now know I was right to be so concerned. This method, like "supportive therapy," often simply maintains complementary racketeering between patient and therapist.)

Just when I considered switching to an administrative job, a colleague lent me Berne's (1961) *TA in Psychotherapy* with the comment, "This book is written by another critical, disenchanting therapist like you!"

I read the book as if it were a detective story. At last! Here was a better form of treatment! Impulsively I dialed the San Francisco number given me by information, and there was Berne himself on the line! (I heard later that I happened to reach him at the only time I could have in San Francisco—just before the Tuesday seminar.)

My encounters with Berne are described elsewhere (English, 1981; Jorgensen, 1984). Here I will add that eventually the Haimowitzes, Ted Novey, myself, and a few others started the Chicago TA Study Group, and not long after I spent a few months in Carmel as the first student of a new institute established by Berne, David Kupfer, Bob Goulding, and Mary (then Edwards) Goulding. To this day I remain grateful for all I got from Berne and Kupfer. David Kupfer was a great therapist and teacher, and it

is pathetic that because he left no writings behind, his name is falling into obscurity.

I met Fritz Perls while in California, after which a group of us in Chicago arranged for him to set up a three-year training program for us; eventually this led to the creation of the Chicago Gestalt Institute.

However, the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis, heretofore my main referral source, informed me that they would send me no further patients unless I promised not to place them in "those TA groups." So, even though my TA and Gestalt training were highly valuable for me and my patients, for a while they led to a considerable drop in income.

Another enormous benefit I gained from Berne was that in a most unorthodox manner, described elsewhere (English, 1981), he cured me of a writing phobia that had blocked me for more than 30 years. He then published my first professional article (on episcrits) in the October 1969 *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*.

### Developing My Institute in Philadelphia

In 1970 my husband's new position necessitated our move to Philadelphia. There I launched my Eastern Institute for TA and Gestalt. I still treasure the last letter Berne wrote me, shortly before his death, congratulating me in his inimitable way on becoming the TA "satrap" of Philadelphia. However, since work there was slow at first, I also continued some work in Chicago, where I still had clients, and then added workshops on the eastern seaboard.

Although my husband and I separated in 1972, by then my institute was doing so well that I remained in Philadelphia, although both my grown children moved to California. After he started practicing as a lawyer, my son, Brian, took on the role of my business adviser. At his urging I started seeking a potential partner for my institute so that I could spend time also in California.

### Tragedy and Loss

My life was going too well! On October 26, 1977, a month before his planned wedding, Brian died in an accident.

Under this devastating stress and wanting some respite from administrative work, I agreed

to a staff member's formal participation in my institute as codirector. The agreement was based on earlier discussions, but without Brian's legal know-how to guide me, I did not recognize the effect of certain changes in the agreement. The contract I signed obligated me to funnel my receipts from work in the United States into the institute and forbade me from competing with it by working and earning independently from therapy or workshops.

Although I resumed doing workshops a few months after Brian's death, generating fairly substantial receipts for the institute, I was minimally reimbursed. Whenever I sought an accounting of the institute's receipts or an explanation for the small amounts I was paid, my associate became hostile, and mediation attempts were rejected. Finally I resorted to what became a long and arduous lawsuit. I won a Pyrrhic victory in November 1981 when the court returned the institute's name to me, but by then all its funds had been depleted and its reputation damaged.

Meanwhile, at the January 1979 ITAA meeting in San Diego I was honored with the Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award. I gave a heartfelt speech, yet otherwise I was in the throes of despair and planned to kill myself on leaving the hotel. The pain of Brian's death, which I had at first defended against too rigidly in accordance with my character structure, was now compounded with the pain of losing my institute, in which I had invested so much of myself, and a sense of futility. I wanted to "escape," this time from life itself. To have finally received an award that I had so wished for while Brian was alive only underscored my feeling that I was now at the end.

I owe my life to a colleague who intuited that something was seriously wrong with me (although I appeared fine outwardly) when he saw that I had forgotten the bronze award plaque on a seat in the auditorium. He kept banging on my hotel door until I let him in, confronted me about my plans, changed his own travel schedule, and stayed with me until he was sure I would not kill myself later.

### **Working in Europe, and Back to the States**

While waiting for my lawsuit regarding the

institute to be resolved, the prohibitive clause of the contract made it impossible for me to earn anything independently from referrals or workshops in the United States. Fortunately, there were plenty of opportunities to work in Europe. By the time the court finally ruled in my favor and returned the institute to me, my career had blossomed in Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy. So, with some ambivalence, rather than try to revive the institute in 1982, I chose to close it and to continue traveling regularly to Europe out of Philadelphia.

The beginning of work in Europe had been incidental, in 1973, as a result of an invitation from the Fritz Perls Institute of Germany to conduct a two-week workshop for them at a Yugoslavian resort. As a refugee from Nazism, I realized that to accept such an invitation would test my humanist beliefs. I was (and am) convinced that a proportion of people, any people, may be vulnerable to extreme fundamentalist credos that can justify mindless violence in the name of a phony "ideal" or "truth." (We see this around us all the time.) Economic and geopolitical circumstances can either inhibit or facilitate the elevation of an "exalted Leader" who promises to implement such beliefs. If he or she and a narrow group manage to take over tyrannical power, then additional bystanders get sucked into their phony belief system while others are cowed by fear. After that, monstrous shadow phenomena are let loose and escalate.

I do not believe whole peoples can be blamed for such events, however horrible, although there are lessons to be learned each time as to when we must stand up for others, even when it puts us at risk. I recoil from demonizing whole groups, even when I am tempted to, and never confused Nazis with the German people, perhaps because during my preadolescent years in Istanbul a German teacher, who came weekly for private lessons, was the one person I could turn to for understanding.

Still, it was with trepidation that I conducted my first workshop with a German group. Fortunately my positive self-fulfilling prophecy was confirmed, and we soon related very well. Of course I could not resist teaching them TA in addition to Gestalt. Ultimately this led to a whole new series of TA workshops. Except for

one therapist in Berlin who had had some training in the United States, at the time TA was totally unknown in Germany, so I can lay claim to having introduced it there.

Over the years I made many German friends, some of whom helped me to write my three books in German, two of which were translated into French (English, 1980, 1982, 1987a, 1992a, 1992b). Similarly, I gained friends in several other countries, particularly in France, which, after all, had been my original launching point for psychology.

It became increasingly tempting to move to Europe, yet feeling American was important for me. Last year I decided that I would radically stop all travel and settle where I had wanted to live for years, namely San Francisco, where the view of the bay reminds me of Istanbul and where my daughter lives.

### **My Approach to Therapy, Consulting, and Theory**

My early TA group treatment practice was based on Kupfer's model; it used functional TA with an emphasis on clear treatment contracts. I also used Gestalt techniques whenever there was a need to go deeper, or for identifying survival conclusions (English, 1977a). However, I always made distinct subcontracts with clients before using Gestalt, for Perls's model of the therapist-client relationship differs significantly from TA's. Gestalt puts the client in a double-bind when, after her Adult is invoked to examine transactions, she is then suddenly enjoined to obey the Parent of the therapist by talking to a chair as though it were a person. Also, contrary to Perls, I always made sure that whatever came up in the Gestalt work was discussed at a later session, to integrate new insights into the Adult. Otherwise the same issue is likely to keep recurring under different guises.

Elsewhere (English, 1977a, 1977b, 1977c, 1988) I described both my major objections to classic TA theory with regard to games and scripts and how I modified the theory for my practice.

### **Development of Existential Pattern Theory and Therapy (EPT)**

My approach evolved over the years as I

dropped concepts of TA structure and recognized the impact of unconscious drives, although I define them differently than did Freud. I described my theory extensively only in my last German book (English, 1992b), but I have summarized aspects of it in various *TAJ* articles (English, 1987b, 1988, 1994). Nevertheless, I still find that TA transactional diagrams are very useful for clarifying communication.

### **Workshop Models**

As indicated earlier, after 1980 I no longer did ongoing treatment, and all my work for the past 14 years has been in workshop format, mostly live-in, lasting anywhere from three to six days. Even though each workshop was different, according to contracts with clients or three-cornered contracts with organizations, I distinguish among the following categories:

1. *Treatment workshops* in which I made individual treatment contracts with participants within the framework of the overall setting.

2. *Training/supervision workshops* with theory (TA, Gestalt, and existential pattern therapy), plus fishbowl practice and/or tape supervision. Although I never made formal TA training contracts (because I could never promise consistent availability), and I had a range of therapists or trainers in my groups from a wide variety of disciplines, many TA trainees came frequently to supplement their regular training with other Teaching Members. One such open-ended five-day group went on three times a year for more than 10 years.

3. *Business consultation, mediation, or team work*, usually organized by the training department of a corporation or in partnership with a business consultant.

4. Lastly, and my favorite, *creativity and expansiveness workshops* to identify personal existential patterns, using my own method of working with stories. I calculate that I have worked with more than 2,000 clients in such workshops in various cultural settings.

### **My Own Existential Script Patterns?**

As I look back at my professional activity over the past 20 years, I am startled to realize that I traveled around for so many years without my having planned to do so. Or perhaps I did,

unknowingly, if the script theory I espouse is correct?


Apparently I took on the role model of my childhood—a wandering gypsy fortune-teller who supported herself by getting her palm crossed with silver. However, unlike persecuted gypsies, I was enabled to do so joyfully, in rooms full of receptive strangers, just the way it used to be in my grandfather's waiting room.

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