Photographs courtesy of Beren Aldridge

A community that is Growing Well, page 14

CONTENTS

Psychologically Informed Environments and TA

BEREN ALDRIDGE of Growing Well, a farm-based working environment, asks whether the TA community might offer the world a slice of our PIE.

THE TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS community has a long history of creating group experiences that live the values of our theory. Experiences where, in Woolams and Brown's classic formulation (1978):

- everyone is OK
- cooperation and mutuality are fostered through contracts
- positive strokes are freely offered
- we take responsibility for our decisions.

If you are reading this you've probably been to a TA conference or attended a TA training or group, and come away with the glow that those positive strokes, mutuality and OK-ness lend to us all. Maybe, like me, it was these experiences that attracted you to get more involved in TA.

Living the values of our theory to enable positive experiences comes as second nature to most TA gatherings. As enthusiasts and practitioners we embody our theory and values; we know what to say after hello and how to say it!

What the TA community has implicitly understood for many years is beginning to be explicitly discussed in mental health and social service settings around the world. An increasing number of organisations are understanding that they can improve the lives of their staff and service users by instilling in their services and their environments a consistent way of thinking about behaviours, and inviting those involved to act from a core set of shared values. A term that is gaining increasing currency to describe the outcome of these efforts is the 'psychologically informed environment' (Johnson & Haigh, 2010) or PIE.

Why the PIE?

The concept of the psychologically informed environment first surfaced in UK government guidance on how frontline services should better meet the emotional and psychological needs of their service users (CLG, 2010). As Johnson and Haigh write:

'...wherever...psychological thinking can be translated meaningfully into a carefully considered approach to re-

designing and managing the social environment, then we have a PIE.' (Johnson & Haigh, 2010)

When I read this article, a number of years ago now, I realised that what I had loved most in my life was spending time in psychologically informed environments. My TA training group, the kibbutz where I met my wife, the residential school for special needs children I had worked in, my home and family; they all ran within a consistent model of behaviour and a core set of shared values (respectively: TA, communism, anthroposophy, unconditional love).

I also realised that the experiences in life that I had loathed and fought with had lacked adequate attention to the psychological processes in their environments; a for-profit residential school, a bachelors degree, working for an old fashioned mental health charity.

What my kibbutz had, and my degree lacked, was an agreed and consistent way to behave with one another and a set of underpinning values that made sense to all of the participants. One of the defining aspects of living or working in a PIE is that people know psychologically why they are doing what they do:

'...the definitive marker of a PIE is simply that, if asked why the unit is run in such and such a way, the staff would give an answer couched in terms of the emotional and psychological needs of the service users, rather than giving some logistical or practical rationale, such as convenience, costs or Health and Safety regulations.' (Johnson & Haigh, 2010)

The TA community does this instinctually. I imagine that if we interviewed participants at the next UKATA conference about why the event was structured as it is, we wouldn't hear things like:

'Rachel told us to do it that way' or 'We've always done it like that.'

I think we'd hear comments like:

'We always give positive strokes to people'; 'We all agreed that this way was best' or '...because no-one is more important than anyone else.'

The radical nature of TA, even fifty years on from its inception, is that it offers both a psychological theory

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(Ego states, transactions, drivers, transference, injunctions, impasses etc) and a philosophical value position from which to work from (I'm OK/You're OK, people can change etc). Not every popular psychological model offers this.

Therapeutic Communities, PIEs and Transactional Analysis – children of social psychiatry
All of us know that TA has its roots in the radical, social psychiatry movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Berne, 1961). What we are less familiar with is that the widespread development of therapeutic communities (TCs) was another child of this movement.

TCs are residential environments (such as hospital wards, care homes or schools) or services that people visit regularly (such as structured day groups) which view treatment as 'located...in the normal interactions of healthy community life' (Rappoport, 1960). TC participants interact with staff in such a way that appreciates the importance of relationships to individual mental health and recovery (Jones, 1968).

They have a strong emphasis on service-user involvement and empowerment and the accountability of professionals (Johnson & Haigh, 2010). They are environments which apply a consistent psychological view of human behaviour, and work to rules and boundaries that have been mutually agreed between staff and service users.

The concept of the PIE has been developed to help translate the many valuable aspects of work within TCs to other structured environments (Johnson & Haigh, 2011).

I'm sure that as you read this, you will be able to reflect on your own experiences of TA and TA informed environments. I imagine you'll see that TA offers an ideal basis from which to create a psychologically informed environment.

I have first-hand experience of this. My frustrations with the psychologically uninformed environments I was working in, led me and my colleagues to establish what I now know to be a PIE in 2004, called Growing Well. We used Transactional Analysis as the psychological model for this work.

Growing Well, a farm-based PIE
In the early 'noughts' I had been working in a series of environments that aimed to help people recover from trauma and poor mental health, but whose environments often made matters worse for their participants. Having begun my TA training in 2001 I had a developing sense of how to think psychologically which I was able to share with other colleagues. Together we began to envisage a farm-based working environment that would welcome people with mental health problems. It would be an environment where:

- everybody was OK
- change was possible no matter how poorly someone was
- everyone was equally important
- staff and participants would share decision making
- there would always be a ready supply of positive strokes
- game playing and drama would be confronted within a system of regular supervision for both participants and staff.

Eleven years after it started, Growing Well continues to operate an organic growing business on the edge of the Lake District and welcomes around seventy people recovering from mental health issues each week. These participants run a growing business which feeds 100 local families, they engage in horticultural training and some engage in a therapeutic community which focuses on group therapy rather than work activity.

Without knowing about the concept, what we have done at Low Sizergh Farm is create a psychologically informed environment. The staff, the participants and the volunteer board of directors who run the charity, all embody the core philosophical values of TA that were present when the organisation was founded. The six bullet points above have been taken in to the working culture of the organisation, such that all the participants and staff work from this position each day, without necessarily knowing that they originate from TA.

The organisation remains psychologically informed from a TA position because all the staff receive regular group supervision from a teaching and supervising transactional analyst. Three staff are certified transactional analysts and their work in the therapeutic community directly encourages its participants to use TA theory to better understand their mental health.

Evaluation of Growing Well's service has consistently shown that participants appreciate the outcomes of being in a PIE. As a result of the team at Growing Well carefully considering how they can live the values of TA, the participants feel valued, they feel equal and they feel they have a voice.

Recent evaluation of our therapeutic community by

'[Haigh] suggests that involvement in a therapeutic environment allows us to re-experience... developmental experiences to enable "secondary emotional development".'

Dr Mark Widdowson (Widdowson, 2015) offers evidence that demonstrates how the psychologically informed environment has been experienced by those involved. One participant said: 'In the past I've experienced therapists who take an "expert" stance and you don't feel that it's a joint effort. Here the therapists are more equal and collaborative.'

Another said: 'I've appreciated that no matter what the label, it's the problems that have the impact. We are all equal.'

Also: 'I've found that learning about TA has been really useful in helping me and others to understand what's happening and to make sense of experiences.'

My experiences at Growing Well have convinced me that TA offers an ideal basis from which to influence an environment that supports people. By adding reflective practice that is rooted in TA theory and opportunities to learn about ourselves and our actions from a TA perspective, I believe any working environment can be improved, made more therapeutic and more productive.

The benefit of a therapeutic environment

Rex Haigh is a psychiatrist who has been influential in the development of thinking about the therapeutic community and its child, the psychologically informed environment. He argues that there are five key experiences we can have within any therapeutic environment; five experiences which are key developmental experiences for each of us. He suggests that involvement in a therapeutic environment allows us to re-experience these developmental experiences to enable 'secondary emotional development' (Haigh, 2013).

I find this model maps beautifully onto what we all achieve when we engage in creating experiences and environments that are informed by our TA practice.

Haigh (ibid.) suggests that a therapeutic environment enables us to experience or re-experience:

- **attachment:** a culture of belonging
- **containment:** a culture of safety
- **communication:** a culture of openness
- **involvement and inclusion:** a culture of participation and citizenship
- **agency:** a culture of empowerment.

I would argue that the 'TA glow' I mentioned at the

beginning of this article, that many of us experience at conferences and training events, results from the therapeutic effect of re-visiting these developmental experiences.

That special TA glow comes from the feeling of belonging, the experience of safety, the sense of openness, the engagement in participation and the personal growth that comes from time spent in this way.

We feel comfortable to recapitulate these important development tasks together (in trainings, in conferences, in our workplaces) because we collectively share a psychological awareness and core set of values. I hope this article, by pointing to this process and offering some language to describe it, might inspire you to create psychologically informed environments wherever you are.

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