

Making New Meaning With Eco-TA: Using the Aggregate Script Helix to Explore the Contribution of Place to Script Development

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Abstract

This article furthers the conversation around using eco-TA to enrich and expand our perspectives in working as transactional analysts. Although much work has been done to deepen our understanding of how people come to be who they are, we do not yet have a perspective on the complex factors that influence who we think we are at a subjective level that accounts for place and its impact on script development. The author builds on the cocreative work of Summers and Tudor to present a perspective on script in the form of the aggregate script helix as well as an eco-TA frame of reference model to support the application of this thinking in practice. These concepts, much like eco-TA, are still new, and the author notes the importance of holding space for the continued evolution of theory to support the work. Although the author's experience is in the field of psychotherapy, she believes that the theories outlined are applicable across all fields of TA and welcomes reflections from professionals across all fields to further develop these theories.

Seeking to Understand the Self and the Other

As the poet Harley King (2009) wrote, "Nothing stays the same, and nothing changes." The desire to understand the human mind goes back to earliest human history; that much has not changed. Yet how we seek to do this changes constantly. This meaning making has evolved from the belief that individual experience was dictated by the gods, to balancing "humors" for health, to mental illness being viewed as indicating deviance worthy of banishment to asylums, and finally, in more recent history, to understanding that our individual experiences shape us.

Over its 60 years, the desire in transactional analysis to understand how people become who they are has not differed from the age-old quest to conquer the human self. Theory around script development has evolved over these decades. Eric Berne (1961) described script as an "extensive unconscious life plan" (p. 23), and this concept of an unconscious, predetermined way of being in the world set the stage, and challenge, for us to attempt to answer three questions: How do we understand what the plan is? Why is that the particular plan we ended up with? And how can we change that plan?

In 1966, in "Script and Counterscript," Steiner presented the script matrix, which showed how nonverbal injunctive messages are given to the child by the parents, thereby creating a script residing in the Child ego state (Berne, 1961) and compelling the child to be what the Child ego states of the parent desires. Steiner explained that often, contradictory explicit messages are also given to the child by the parents' Parent ego states, into the Parent ego state of the child, thereby creating the counter-script, described as "the contraposition of the Parent against the demands of the script" (Steiner, 1966, p. 133). Steiner's original theory provided some structure to how we see the script developing in relationship to parents and was significant in our understanding of how we become who we are.

Noting the impact of the wider societal group on script development, James and Jongeward (1971/1996) introduced the idea of cultural scripts as "the accepted and expected dramatic patterns that occur within society. ... Determined by the spoken and unspoken assumptions believed by the majority of the people within that group" (p. 70). They also introduced the notion of subcultural scripts, which were defined by characteristics such as location, ethnicity, religion, and sex. This began to move the theory away from the idea that parents were the sole contributors to a child's script because it recognized a wider context, thus providing a more holistic accounting for the variation in factors that impact a person's views of self, others, and the world.

Drego (1983) suggested that the cultural impacts of script were held in the Parent ego state in three sub ego states. Using Berne's terms, she suggested that "etiquette" comprised the "culturally inherited beliefs, ideologies, values, rules, moral codes" (p. 224) as the Parent in the Parent (P3); "technicalities" were "culturally inherited knowledge, skills, techniques ... economic processes ...

organizations, distributions of political power, etc.” (p. 224–225) represented as the Adult in the Parent (A3); and the Child in the Parent (C3) was the “character” or “culturally inherited ways of experiencing and of acting out [feelings] ... and the culturally inherited ways of sabotaging or deviating from the cultural etiquette” (p. 225). This model demonstrates the complexity of script, accounts for wider social and cultural context, and begins to move away from the idea that script is inherited only from parents.

Although TA theory continues to evolve, most of it still accepts as its norm that parents are the main contributors to the child’s sense of self and tends to rely on Steiner’s theory of exploring only the interpersonal (specifically the interactions between parent and child). However, in 2014, Marshall wrote the following about protocol: “A green vitalizing of the body/mind offers a very direct access to these traumatized elements as they reveal themselves in an intensified form. Effectively, here we have a portal into the subsymbolic world of our protocol” (p. 1). And so, TA literature began to account for place.

In my paper here, I use an illustrative case study to explain my thinking around the impact of place on script development and how I propose to expand some established theory to encompass this element.

My Journey With Janet

Janet, a 40-year-old, White, cisgendered woman approached me for support with low mood and loneliness. She arrived promptly for her first session, and in the process of getting to know each other, she showed none of the symptoms she had shared in our earlier telephone conversation. I was surprised and unsettled by this change in her demeanor. Early in our work, Janet continued to arrive on time and spoke in an even tone about life events she found difficult and how she had overcome them. She seemed careful to avoid expressing the impact these events had on her feelings or to allow an opportunity for questions or reflections from me. I gently, and occasionally firmly, confronted (Berne, 1966) the disconnect between her presenting problem and what was being shared in sessions. She would explain that she felt better already. I questioned this because my feelings suggested otherwise. I sometimes felt confused about the nature of our work (i.e., when it would start) or angry with Janet for wasting my time. Occasionally, I felt entirely incompetent. Reflecting on this, I tried different ways of engaging but failed to get any closer to Janet.

In thinking how we might move forward, I reflected on my own experience of working outdoors and its impact on my personal and professional development. Research (Ulrich et al., 1991) has linked being in unthreatening natural environments with a stress-reducing or restorative impact. Being in a less predictable space offers me an opportunity to slow down and connect to where I am, to become more aware of what is real and present. Working outdoors can meet the components of a restorative space (Kaplan, 1995) and provide a place to support holding directed attention (James, 1892). Working outdoors provides an opportunity for me to experience the work at a felt rather than cognitive level and to develop a new perspective. I feel this benefit in a professional capacity too. A change in the physical location I am working in can bring inspiration, new ideas, and a new felt sense of what is happening within the client.

With this in mind, I wondered whether something about being in my therapy room with me stimulated the rigid version of Janet I was experiencing. I suggested that she and I meet at an outdoor space close to my practice for a walk-and-talk session. She happily agreed, and after a conversation about what to expect, we made plans for our next session.

Janet arrived in a lower mood than I had seen her in before. We walked side by side while we did our ritual pastiming (Berne, 1972), and I asked her about her week. She began to cry. She reported finding work difficult, being overwhelmed with responsibility, and feeling guilty for neglecting her husband and children while she stayed in her office working into the evenings.

I was not expecting such overt emotion in a public space when there had been so little in the privacy of my therapy room. What if others overheard our discussion? Or, if coming across another person, Janet felt shame or embarrassment and retreated into her defenses? During this time, I wished we were in the safety of my room where I could control the external variables, provide tissues, and process without the influence of an uncontrollable landscape. However, Janet seemed more comfortable with me than I had found her before. Alongside my concern, I held in mind Jordan and Marshall’s (2010) ideas about how the psychotherapy frame may be challenged in moving outdoors. I reassured myself that this was work for which Janet had contracted (Berne, 1966) and decided that the best course of action was to respect Janet’s autonomy (Berne, 1964).

As our walk took us to the river, Janet told me how much she used to love walking along the river with her grandfather and his dog when she was a child. She told me stories of spotting imagined

animals, being carried on his shoulders, and how they would explore. I felt deeply connected to her in her vulnerability and sensed that this was an important memory. I asked her to tell me what was significant about those experiences. She reflected that it felt like the only time someone was interested in being with her and how loved she had felt. Her parents had old-fashioned gender roles, both had busy jobs working long into the evening, and her mother was expected to then manage household duties as well. Janet's time at home was mostly spent in isolation, except for when she was expected to help with chores. All of that made the time she spent with her grandfather even more precious to her.

Having seen such progress in the work after changing the location, I wondered what removing myself as a human influence might allow for Janet. We started to make time for Janet to be alone in the environment, to be with me at the start and end to transition into and process the sessions. This phase of the work was important and illuminating. It created the possibility for Janet to be in relationship with the place as it became more familiar to her. The result was that she obtained a deeper understanding of herself through metaphor, imagination, perspective change, and safety. I do not think this would have been possible either in a room or outdoors with me or another person accompanying her.

For example, here is how a metaphor provided insight for her. During our processing at the end of a session after Janet had spent some time alone by the river, she tearfully described seeing the remains of a bird's nest. Her emotion was because she connected with how difficult the life of a female bird is: a short time with mother, then ejected from the nest to begin a life of hard work, alone, building nests, raising young, and surviving. The stimulus of the nest allowed Janet to represent to me her inner feelings about her own life.

Over time, Janet and I began to understand that her experience of being at home had involved her working hard. While her parents were busy, she was encouraged to do schoolwork or additional learning alone in her room. The gender roles her parents modeled for her were around women working and taking care of the home, while the man worked and then rested. This was reinforced by the expectation that Janet herself support her mother with household duties, which Janet felt was because of her gender. She carried into her own family the belief that women in the home had to work hard, and she repeated the pattern of isolating as a way of soothing herself when she felt overwhelmed. In bringing this to awareness and experiencing connecting with the freedom she once enjoyed with her grandfather, Janet began to understand that the option to work less was available to her, and the reduction in pressure she created for herself in our outdoor work could be available to her in other places.

I came to recognize my early negative feelings about Janet as being concordant and complementary countertransference (Racker, 1968): feelings of anger that Janet felt toward her parents for their inability to connect with her and feelings of wanting to contain her when she showed emotion outside, much as her parents had likely felt while trying to manage their responsibilities alongside parenting. I noticed that some of the fear I experienced in taking our work outside originated in my own fears of being exposed in a large, open space. This additional layer of understanding Janet, based on who I was in relation to her in these different spaces, added a depth and richness to the work that allowed me to empathize and connect with her more deeply.

Jordan (2015) wrote that "the natural environment became the therapist for the therapist" (p. 121), and I wonder whether the way I was held in the outdoor space allowed a new meaning making in me about my feelings toward Janet. In feeling held by the place, I was open to feel a deeper sense of empathy toward her, and when potentially sensed by her, this allowed her to connect with me to enable the deeper part of our work.

As I reflect on the work with Janet, I am inspired by Marshall's (2016a) observation about the impact of working outdoors: "The Adult ego states of both client and therapist are infused with this green potency assisting them in tolerating and making sense of their experience within the therapeutic process" (p. 37). I consider whether Janet and I may have been working sometimes from our "Adult Ecostates" (Marshall, 2021, p. 35), that is, states that can be flexible and changing depending on the environment at hand. I note the awareness that Janet's work brought to both of us along with the change that occurred between us and in each of us as a result of our outdoor work.

Eco Transactional Analysis and Accounting for the Impact of "Where"

Giles Barrow, an educator, and Hayley Marshall, a psychotherapist, initiated bringing an environmental and ecological lens to the TA community (Barrow & Marshall, 2020b). They view eco-TA as an eco-systemic perspective that can be applied across all fields of transactional analysis. In the 2020 and 2021 eco-TA episodes of the podcast *3 People in Your Head* (Taylor & Fleming, 2020,

2021), Barrow and Marshall described the movement as a frame by which to understand the human and more- than-human experience, one that widens the perspective of a given field to include the ecological and environmental. They expressed interest in understanding what happens to people psychologically, spiritually, and existentially when they position themselves as an integrated part of the places they inhabit and what happens to the work when it is done in an outdoor space.

Barrow and Marshall (2020a) described eco-TA as

an approach for understanding human and more-than-human experience that is forged in connection with the ecological context in which it occurs. Furthermore, ... this interconnected process incorporates the embodied agency of both human and the more-than- human participants in the encounter. It is, to be more succinct, the practice of transactional analysis in alliance with Earth. (p. 6)

Within this frame, I am particularly interested to understand what becomes activated in script in different places with different people. I am fortunate to be a member of the first cohort in eco-TA training, which began in 2020 and is facilitated by Barrow and Marshall. As a result, I have had the opportunity to develop my application, practice, and thinking about this way of working in relationship with like-minded colleagues and informative landscapes.

Challenging How We Think About Script Through the Lens of Eco-TA

As I reflected on the perspective that was emerging for me through my eco-TA training, I looked to the script helix (Figure 1) (Summers & Tudor, 2000, p. 34), which demonstrates how “we can ... consider script influences in terms of ... polarities and the continua between them” (p. 34). It “is itself a personal construct ... [that] becomes a co-created series of matrices, rather like a constantly changing helix of relational atoms, spinning around us, by which we tell, retell and reformulate the stories of different influences on our continuing development” (p. 34).

In Janet’s case, we might see in her experiences with her mother and the meaning she made in her female-focused experiences the sense that women must work hard and that they have no time for loved ones. In our work together, there was then my influence and the question of how I had time for her. In Janet’s history, we see that her father was unsupportive of her mother and disinterested in Janet, yet her grand- father was keenly interested in being connected with her, creating conflict around what it means to Janet to be important and female.

The representation within the scrip helix feels aligned to the concept of eco-TA because of its adaptability. The many, often conflicting, influences and an ever-changing script, shaped by the impact on us in relationship, and the responding impact we have on the other, begins to tell the story. However, it still misses the impact of place.

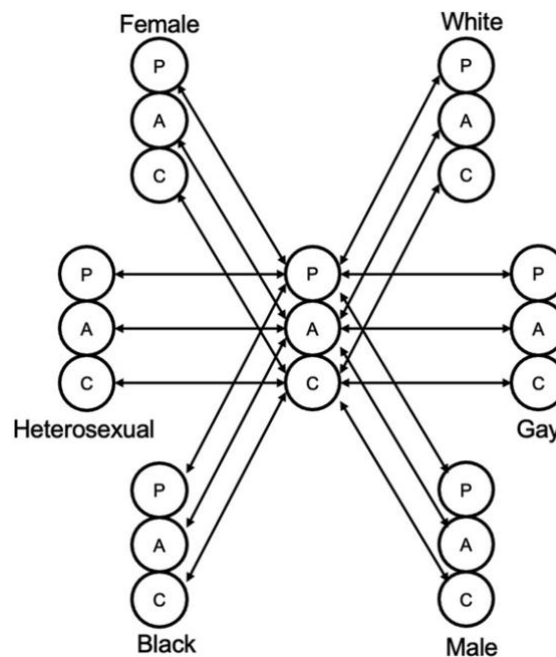


Figure 1. Script Helix (from Summers & Tudor, 2000, p. 34).

My initial thought when applying the script helix to my work is that polarities no longer feel adequate to conceptualize the full spectrum of influences. Instead, I see influences categorized into themes, for example, gender as a theme rather than male versus female. Then what might be viewed as polarities instead account for all gender expressions without assuming any hierarchy and starting from a position of neutrality and curiosity.

From an ecological perspective, I propose considering place, in addition to self and other, as an important influence on the construct of self. In my adaptation of the script helix, which I call the aggregate script helix (Figure 2), I show a spectrum of meanings made of a multitude of influences within themes and, importantly, accounting for the influence of place. I use the term “place” to illustrate where each inter- action occurs, which contributes to the subjective experience cocreatively. It impacts the subject much as the subject impacts it.

The self is at the center of this model, and the ego state models around it represent themes. The themes I have included are not exhaustive, nor is the number fixed at six. I chose to include themes that are common across British society, but it is important to be flexible in the construction of this model based on the individual. Accommodating subjective experiences and different or additional themes may be more relevant. I have encompassed the entire model within place, representing what I believe is the primary source of impact. Even when there is an absence of another, we exist in place, and so we will still be constructing meaning.

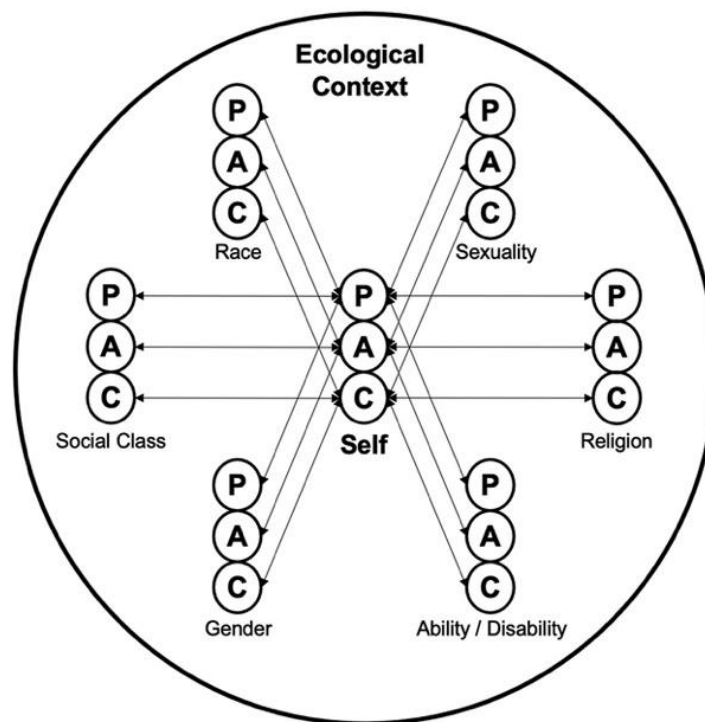


Figure 2. Aggregate Script Helix.

It is important to note that transactions (Berne, 1961) occur within place, which has its own agency that impacts the meaning making process. I see self, other, and place all equally contributing to the meaning making, whether that place be associated with nature and natural beauty, inside the home where we grew up, in an urban city or a rural village. Where we are impacts who we think we are. The combination of self, other, and place where an exchange of transactions occurs verbally or nonverbally between subject and other, and subject and place, is what I refer to as the encounter. Each place holds different significance for the subject and influences the scripting in a subjective way, much like our understanding of how the other impacts the person.

We are constantly in encounters, and the sense of self is ever changing as new sets of transactions create new meaning for the subject. This results in a phenomenon that renders script a living and dynamic process rather than something that can be defined as complete and fully understood.

For example, within Janet’s theme of gender, her key meaning making in relationship with her mother and father was within the home. The key meaning making in relationship with her

grandfather was at a river. In the way Janet related to me both in my therapy room, where she worked very hard to be a good client, and in the out- door place, where she felt able to explore and express herself, we can see the difference in who Janet thought she was as a woman in those places. In addition, I consider her impact on these places and people, on the way in which her environment was changed by her presence, and on others in receiving her verbal and nonverbal engagement with them.

Janet's story is one example of a single client, based on a single theme of gender, and limited to the encounters of note that were described in this paper. As such, it touches only slightly the complexity of the concept I am trying to articulate. I invite readers to imagine what we are sending out to place and other in response to their influence on us, how this changes the place and other, and, in turn, how this changes what we subsequently receive from them.

When we consider the detailed structure of third-order ego states and sub states (Berne, 1969) and apply that to all human parties in an encounter, and then add the idea of place having its own agency, we can start to build a picture of the complementary, contradictory, and complex elements that any one subject will hold under one theme.

My intention with this model is to encourage us to be curious about the impact of the other and the landscape or environment on us and our clients and to explore with clients the meaning that they then make from encounters as a whole while noting the impact this has on us in return.

Expanding the TA Frame of Reference

Marshall's (2016b) model of outdoor therapeutic relating presents the intersection of relationship between the client, the therapist, and nature and how relating may change when any of these elements meet. This provides a valuable perspective when exploring what we think we know about the therapeutic relationship.

The eco-TA frame of reference shown in Figure 3 looks at the intrapsychic process with a focus on script formation and understanding dynamic meaning making. It represent beliefs about self, others, and the world as outlined in the racket system (Erskine & Zalzman, 1979) or script system (O'Reilly-Knapp & Erskine, 2010). The levels of beliefs work outside to in.

Noting beliefs about self, other, and place provides insight into the client's reality. Beliefs at this level often discount (Stewart & Joines, 1987) the landscape and relation- ship within which they were formed and so are only the start of our work. This level of belief is where clients may show the most grandiosity (Schiff & Schiff, 1971).

For example:

Janet's beliefs at this level:

Me: "I am responsible and a hard worker."

You: "Women bear the load" or "Men have it easy." There: "Home is for work" or "Nature is for fun."

There: "Home is for work" or "Nature is for fun."

As we move into two elements overlapping, associations can be made between them. "Me and you" provides an interpersonal perspective. "You there" and "Me there" accounts for the impact of place. In supporting clients to think more specifically, we encourage discernment, thus strengthening the Adult ego state. For example:

Janet's beliefs in these intersections:

Us: "Me and my mother had a distant relationship," or "My grandfather and I enjoyed each other's company and were special to each other.":

You There: "My parents were unhappy in our home."

Me There: "I am fun in nature"; "I am lonely at home."

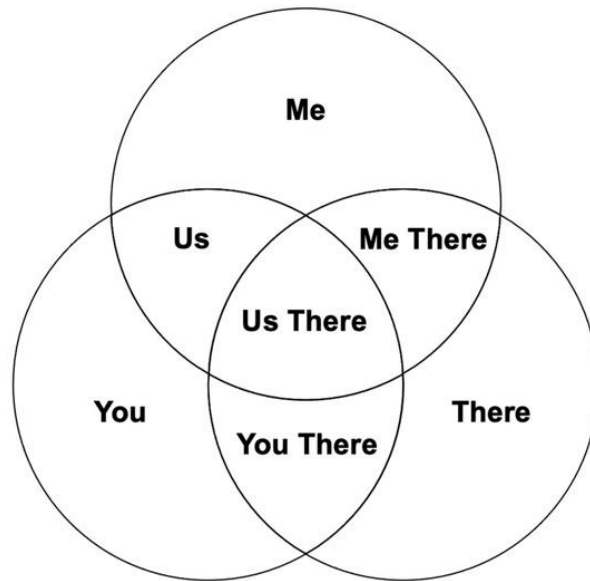


Figure 3. Eco-TA Frame of Reference.

The central point of the model is “Us there,” thus accounting for the full encounter: requiring critical thinking about the influences on meaning made and allowing changeability in beliefs and to be open to new influences creating new meaning.

Linking to the aggregate script helix, every encounter has shaped us in some way, even being with the same person in the same place but at a different time can bring about a different meaning as the fluidity of our sense of self and encounters in between will have impacted us. The same is true for the other and the place. For example:
Janet’s beliefs in encounters:

“The session I spent at the river with my therapist, I was brave, she was understanding, and the riverbank was safe and welcoming.”

A Challenge to the Challenged Frame

Ecotherapy is easily romanticized: We think of unspoiled nature, not another human as far as the eye can see. It is a beautiful image but one of privilege that discounts the rich resources available all around us. Such picture-perfect settings are uncommon and usually not easily accessed. It is important to note that landscape is not a place we go to; it is the place where we are in every moment. In reserving eco-TA for rural areas, we lose one of the key intentions of Barrow and Marshall about how eco-TA is for everyone and belongs to no one, and we exclude many TA practitioners and clients from engaging in this revolutionary way of working.

In a workshop I presented (Elston, 2022), a colleagues posed a crucial question: “How do we make sure not to create an antiurban sentiment with eco-TA?” This consideration is hugely important to me. Encouraging moving this work into a space that values rural over urban would undermine the values this paper is based on.

However, not all landscapes are equal when it comes to the way in which they stimulate people. Writing this from the perspective of a White, middle-class woman, I am aware that a space that feels safe to me may not offer the same protection to others. We live in a world in which, unfortunately, some places feel unsafe because of differences, historical or recent lived experiences, discrimination, persecution, and hurt. For some people, a change of landscape to a place that was the context for painful encounters might not be helpful. Using the frame of reference to change one of the factors about the place may be as gentle as opening the window or bringing an external object inside in order to explore its meaning in safety, sitting alongside instead of opposite.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that all landscapes are not accessible. For someone who lives in an inner city, accessing a stream, field, or open park may not be possible without the cost and time of travel. For some, certain terrains may be difficult or even impossible to access. Does this mean that the value of connection with place is not available? My answer is no. The value of connection with place is available wherever we are. In line with the principles of eco-TA, all things have influence and impact.

My hope is that we use this information to deepen our client's understanding of themselves and to inform the possibilities of a different experience

Conclusion

Early theory in transactional analysis was helpful in providing a shape and structure where there was none. This allowed practitioners to contextualize and understand the experience of our clients, ourselves, and the relationship between us. I have proposed models that I hope offer a "light touch" that leaves room for curiosity, individuality, and the natural changeability of script due to the complexity and myriad of contributors. Crossman (1966) described permission as "a particular transaction that occurs between a therapist and patient at a particular point in therapy" (p. 152). In holding the eco-TA frame of reference, I give both myself and my clients permission to be curious about and respond to what is stimulated in each moment.

As I reflect back to the questions posed earlier in this paper—How do we understand what the plan is? Why is that the particular plan we ended up with? How can we change that plan?—I can begin to form a new answer using the aggregate script helix and the eco-TA frame of reference. In my work, the plan can be understood by accounting for the meaning made in encounters when analyzing the client's script, that is, how it came to be that way by exploring the unique encounters and subjective ways in which meaning was made—and knowing it can be changed by constantly and gently challenging the (eco-TA) frame of reference and making new meaning through new encounters. Yet I feel there is still work to do and variation in perspectives that can support a more detailed frame to hold these questions through the lens of eco-TA as the approach develops over time.

In changing the space within which I work with my clients, or the intensity of my presence, I can gather more understanding of their experiences and the meaning they made from them, thereby supporting them to bring this into their own awareness both explicitly and implicitly. Although this has been helpful to me in my work, I am left wondering what is held in my own frame of reference that is yet to be discovered and that may be influencing these models. And what further may these contribute to the way that I conceptualize theories as I continue to develop personally and professionally? I consider too the application in the fields of counseling, organizational work, and education and how these theories can be further developed to support a more universal application in the wider transactional analysis community.

When listening to my clients and understanding the meaning they have made and are trying to convey to me, I try to determine what has been accounted for in their thinking. I wonder how we can consider the elements of me, you, and there in our practice and begin to routinely bring about specificity of thinking by means of understanding each meaning made in isolation and the various factors that contributed to it, thus bringing about awareness that who we think we are changes in different places and with different people.

Through this knowledge, I am interested in how we can start to make changes in who we are in relation to the client. Do we uphold our tradition of occupying our therapist chair or make the use of space more dynamic? Who might we be to the client there? Or do we change where we are in the work, moving from or within our regular room to a different space and thus also changing who we appear to be to the client? And most importantly, how do we treat all landscapes with the equal value that they hold and engage with where we are?

In knowing that a change to any one of these elements initiates a shift in us all, I believe we have greater potential to uncover different perspectives and experiences in our clients and in doing so deepen and enhance the work. Through the relationship, we can model the different ways in which each person and each landscape can be experienced to support moving toward the ability to hold each encounter as unique.

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