

Eric Berne: the life and work

Ann Heathcote, whose research focuses on Eric Berne, gives us a brief biographical sketch

Leonard Eric Bernstein was born on 10 May 1910 into a Jewish family living in Montreal, Canada.

Berne's father, David Hillel Bernstein, was a well-known and well-respected doctor, who founded the Herzl Clinic, a free medical facility for Jewish immigrants and refugees. In the 1918 epidemic, he caught influenza, which developed into tuberculosis, and he died in February 1921 when Berne was only ten years old.

Berne's mother, Sara Gordon Bernstein, was a teacher and journalist, who encouraged the young Berne to write. Berne had one sister, Grace, who was five years younger.

Anti-Semitism was rife in Montreal and the Bernstein family certainly experienced anti-Semitic 'attacks'. For example, Berne's mother lost her job as a teacher at a Protestant school, when the school board

discovered she was Jewish, and the young Berne experienced being spat at by local youth (Jorgensen and Jorgensen, 1984). Prevailing anti-Semitism in both Canada and America at this time may well have precipitated Berne's decision to change his name to Eric Berne, around 1943. It may also account for Berne's rebellious behaviour, which later was particularly evident towards the psychiatric profession and its practices.

Education and early work

Berne graduated from McGill University in 1931, and went on to gain the degrees of Doctor of Medicine (MD) and Master of Surgery (CM) in 1935. He narrowly missed out on obtaining one of only two places available each year for Jewish interns in the Montreal hospitals, and consequently moved to America in 1935 to undertake an internship at Englewood Hospital, New Jersey (1935–1936). From there he went onto a psychiatric residency at Yale University School of Medicine (1936–1938).

On completing his residency, Berne obtained the post of an assistant physician at Ring Sanatorium, Massachusetts (1938–1940), after which he was employed as a psychiatrist in a sanatorium in Connecticut and, concurrently, as a clinical assistant in psychiatry at Mount Sinai Hospital, New York (1940–1943). He also maintained a private practice.

In 1943, Berne joined the Army Medical Corps of the United States Army, and rose in rank from lieutenant to major. He was demobbed in July 1946 and decided to relocate to Carmel, California.

Relationship with psychoanalysis

In 1956, after 15 years of psychoanalytic training, Berne was refused admission to the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute. He was apparently asked to do a few years' further training. It is likely that Berne was refused admission at this time because his thinking, both on the ego and on intuition (see Berne, 1977), was not in keeping with

the Freudian 'party line'. Berne decided to end his psychoanalytic training.

Berne 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 was developing himself. 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), although with an increased emphasis on script analysis, rather than on psychoanalysis, as the years progressed. His group work was very different and concentrated on the theory and methodology of transactional analysis (TA).

Development of transactional analysis

From the early 1950s, Berne was developing, and using in his clinical work, the concept of ego states. 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 (1957b). Berne made clear that his development of ego state theory rested firmly on the foundations 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: 300) (see Stewart in this volume).

By the time Berne's (1961) book, *TA in Psychotherapy*, was published, the main theories of transactional analysis had been conceived and written about. These were: ego state theory; transactional analysis proper (the analysis of transactions); game; and script theory.

In 1964, *Games People Play* was published, which led to the popularisation of



Ann Heathcote BSc (Hons) Psych
Ann is a certified transactional analyst (psychotherapy), who lives and works in the UK. She is currently engaged in researching the life and work of Eric Berne, with a view to writing an up-to-date biography of his life and theoretical development.

transactional analysis around the world. Berne also wrote two books on groups and organisations entitled *The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups* (1963) and *Principles of Group Treatment* (1966). *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 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, Berne wrote eight psychotherapy-related books during his lifetime and over 56 articles and book chapters (ten of these were co-authored). He was also editor of the *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* (1962–1969) and consulting editor (1970). He also travelled widely, including to Fiji, India, Singapore, Syria and Turkey, primarily to research the psychiatric institutes and practices in these countries.

Berne's personality

Berne was an astute observer of human beings and their behaviour. He has been described variously as 'playful, scientific, intense' (Dusay, 1971: 43), 'very shy' and 'of genius capacities' (Steiner, 1971: 46), 'a constant source of encouragement, enthusiasm, and support' (Harris, 1971: 59), 'a man of many moods' and 'direct and straight' (Levaggi et al, 1971: 64, 69).

According to Steiner (1971), Berne had 'irrepressible humor', 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



Ursula Steiner

Eric Berne with his godson, Eric Steiner. The photo was taken at Berne's 60th birthday party, two months before he died.

the antipathy of the psychiatric profession's attitude towards curing their patients.

Berne worked hard and played hard. He enjoyed 'jumping up and down' (Steiner, 1971: 47) parties 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 Sunday afternoons with his friends and children.

Final days

Berne experienced a first heart attack on 28 June 1970. He was hospitalised and was expected to make a near full recovery. He even spent time correcting the proofs for one of his books. Just over two weeks later, on 15 July 1970, Berne had a second heart attack and died. He was 60. **P**

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