

# Richard Erskine, a Look at the Author

Patrizia Vinella  
p.vinella@performat.it



On the occasion of the tenth edition of the PerFormat National Conference “*Building health: breath, movement, sociability*” held in Pisa, Italy (October 14-15, 2017), we had the pleasure to offer our audience a video interview with Richard Erskine. Caterina Romaniello interviewed him in Rome on the occasion of his last seminar held in Italy on the relational methods of integrative psychotherapy.

In the interview Richard Erskine takes us on a fascinating journey from his early years as a transactional analyst up to the present time, sharing with us the memories of his first contacts with Berne and the TA of the origins and immersing us in the Californian cultural atmosphere of the sixties.

As we deem this material of the greatest interest for our readers, we are proud to present it in this issue of *Pathways in Transactional Analysis*, in both the video and written transcript versions (English and Italian).

Richard Erskine is a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (TSTA), and he is Training Director at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy, which he established in 1976. He has specialized in the treatment of obsession, dissociation, and schizoid processes. He first approached TA at the end of the sixties while studying psychoanalysis

and Gestalt therapy; his many publications widely contributed to the development of early TA and provided a thought-provoking perspective on Berne's theory.

Twice a recipient of the *Eric Berne Memorial Award* for the developments of TA theory and methods, Erskine won his first award in 1982, together with Marilyn Zalcman, for their development of the Racket System concept; he also won a second Berne Memorial Award in 1998, together with Rebecca Trautman, for a series of articles related to the integration of TA into other theories.

The work produced by Erskine and Zalcman in 1982 brought about a reorganization of the very concept of Racket System, which in the previous TA literature included different definitions and conceptual nuances; several authors, such as English, Goulding, and Berne himself, assigned different meanings to the same term thus making it difficult to envision a univocal and encompassing definition of the related concept. Erskine and Zalcman reorganized the concept in the form of a system which works as a model to identify and treat intrapsychic and relational phenomena related to Racket, viewed as “a self-reinforcing, distorted system of feelings, thoughts and actions maintained by script-bound individuals” (Erskine & Zalcman, 1982, p. 53). The use of this model facilitates script analysis practice, being related to observable manifestations in the here-and-now.

Erskine's subsequent contributions, many of which written with Trautman, are devoted mostly to the development of TA integrative theory. The main features of this approach revolve around the therapists' commitment to respecting their clients' integrity and favoring their positive life changes by emphasizing the importance of the therapeutic relationship and contract, the latter seen as a keystone for the understanding of the relationship with ourselves and others.

Taking his cue from Berne's concepts of *stimula*, *recognition*, and *time structure hunger*, Erskine developed a TA motivation theory by emphasizing the need for relationship as a primary experience motivating human behavior (Erskine, 1998).

His work brought about the development of a practical approach to the therapeutic relationship aimed at reaching out to the client's experience at a deep level by using three structured sets of relational methods: inquiry, attunement, and the therapist's involvement (Erskine & Trautmann, 1996). This approach aims at creating the relational conditions necessary to clients in order to become aware of their deep repressed dynamics, to interpret them, and to modify their limiting consequences (Gregoire, 2007, p. 49).

Integrative TA aims at the process of personality integration by helping clients in raising their awareness of the fragmented and fixed parts of their ego states so that they can integrate them in their Adult ego state. TA provides the theoretical and methodological foundations of this theory, which integrates with a set of other theories, such as psychodynamic, client-centered, behavioral, family, Gestalt, Reichian body psychotherapy, and object relations theory (Erskine & Moursund, 1988).

According to Erskine (1975), TA psychotherapy becomes integrative when cognitive, affective, behavioral, and physiological aspects of the clients' personality are approached in order to plan a therapeutic treatment based on their openness or closeness to contact in these different areas. These concepts have been later applied to the diagnostic categories by Ware (1983), and Stewart & Joines (1986).

Erskine's work (1991) also brought about an interesting development of the transference transaction concept. Starting from Berne's writings (1961), he developed a reflection on transference and based his ego states theory on the distinction between transference and non-transference. According to Erskine, confronting transference manifestations or interpreting them exclusively as psychological games contrasts with an integrative therapeutic process which does not aim at eliminating these manifestations and rather explores their non-conscious relational meaning (Gregoire, 2007, p.60).

In the interview Erskine offers us fresh glimpses of the atmosphere surrounding Eric Berne, the birth of TA and the exchanges with the

other theories which at the time were developing in the US, such as Gestalt theory, developed by Fritz Pearls, himself a friend of Berne's. Narrating his experience as a transactional analyst, Erskine acknowledges how TA offers a choice of theories and methods which can provide guidance for therapists and counselors in the exploration of the cognitive, behavioral, affective, psychological, and relational levels for the client's development: despite the differences among the various TA approaches developed from Berne's time to these days, Erskine emphasizes the values of the common ground represented by the basics of TA philosophy and by a set of key concepts such as strokes, contract, and, above all, script (Erskine, 1980). Those who haven't met him personally will appreciate his strong, charismatic personality, his therapeutic power, and his human value. I wish that this interview could provide a stimulus, mostly for young therapists and counselors, in order to study in depth Erskine's thought and practical approach to the helping relationships.

Enjoy watching and reading it!

## References

- Berne, E. (1961). *Transactional Analysis in psychotherapy. A systematic individual and social psychiatry*. New York: Grove Press.
- Erskine, R. G. (1975). The ABC's of effective psychotherapy. *TAJ* 5, 163-165.
- Erskine R., & Zalcman M.J. (1979), The Racket System: a model for Racket analysis. *TAJ*, 9, 51, 51-59.
- Erskine, R.G. (1980). Script cure: Behavioral, intrapsychic and physiological. *TAJ*, 10, 102-106.
- Erskine, R.G. (1991). Transference and Transactions: Critique from an Intrapsychic and Integrative Perspective. *TAJ* 21,2, 63-76.
- Erskine, R. G., Trautmann, R. L. (1993). The process of integrative psychotherapy. In Loria, B. R. (Ed.), *The boardwalk papers: Selections from the 1993 Eastern Regional Transactional Analysis Association*

*Conference* (pp. 1–26). Madison, WI: Omnipress.

Erskine, R. G., & Trautmann, R. L. (1996). Methods of an integrative psychotherapy. *TAJ* 26, 4 p. 316-328

Erskine, R.G. (1998). The Therapeutic Relationship: Integrating Motivation and Personality Theories. *TAJ*, 28, 2, 132-141.

Erskine, R. G., Moursund, J. P., & Trautmann, R. L. (1999). *Beyond empathy: A theory of contact-in- relationship*. Philadelphia: Brunner/ Mazel.

Erskine, R.G. (2016). *Transactional Analysis in contemporary psychotherapy*. London: Karnac Books.

Gregoire, J. (2007). *Les orientations récentes de l'analyse transactionnelle*, Les Editions d'Analyse Transactionnelle, Lion – [www.editionsat.fr](http://www.editionsat.fr).

Joines V., & Stewart I., (2002). *Personality Adaptations, A New Guide to Human Understanding in Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Chapel Hill: Lifespace Pub.

Ware, P. (1983). Personality adaptations. *TAJ*, 13, 11-19.