



# The Space Between the Gaps: Understanding Professional Vulnerability Through a Five-Gap Model

Holly Simmonds BSc(Hons), UKCP, UKATA.

## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the Five-Gap Model, a reflective framework developed to foster awareness and understanding of professional vulnerability within therapeutic and helping professions. Drawing upon Transactional Analysis (TA), relational practice, and reflective clinical experience, the model conceptualises vulnerability as emerging through the interaction of five interconnected 'gaps': role conflation, external pressures, under-resourcing, knowledge gaps, and unresolved personal issues. Rather than framing vulnerability as individual weakness or pathology, the model emphasises the relational and systemic conditions that shape practitioners' experiences over time.

The article explores 'the space between' these gaps - the shifting relational and psychological terrain where ethical strain, uncertainty, emotional activation, and reflective opportunities emerge. Through a TA-informed lens incorporating drivers, discounting, ego states, and relational awareness, the Five-Gap Model aims to encourage reflexivity, compassionate self-awareness, and ethical responsiveness in practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Professional vulnerability is often discussed indirectly within therapeutic professions, typically emerging through conversations about burnout, ethical complaints, compassion fatigue, boundary difficulties, or practitioner wellbeing. Yet vulnerability itself remains difficult to define and, at times, uncomfortable to acknowledge

within professional cultures that continue to value competence, resilience, and certainty. This paper introduces the Five-Gap Model, a reflective framework developed to support practitioners in recognising and understanding how vulnerability may emerge gradually within professional practice, often through blind spots in awareness that develop over time. The model conceptualises vulnerability not as personal failure, but as the cumulative impact of internal and external pressures interacting over time.

The title of this article, *The Space Between the Gaps: Understanding Professional Vulnerability Through a Five-Gap Model* reflects the understanding that vulnerability often develops not solely within one identifiable issue but within the relational spaces between competing demands, roles, emotions, systems, expectations, and unresolved experiences. It is within these spaces that practitioners may begin to feel psychologically stretched, ethically uncertain, emotionally overwhelmed, or professionally isolated. The model emerged from my own experiences as a psychotherapist, supervisor, and trainer, alongside observations of the complexities many practitioners encounter in contemporary therapeutic practice. While grounded in Transactional Analysis (TA), the framework is intended primarily as a reflective and educational tool rather than a diagnostic model.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIVE-GAP MODEL

The Five-Gap Model was developed

through reflection upon recurring themes observed in professional practice, supervision, training, and personal experience. Across these contexts, vulnerability rarely appeared as a sudden event. Instead, it often evolved gradually through accumulations of stress, relational strain, systemic pressure, uncertainty, emotional activation, and unmet support needs. The framework identifies five areas in which professional vulnerability may emerge:

1. Role Conflation
2. External Pressures
3. Under-resourcing
4. Knowledge Gaps
5. Unresolved Personal Issues

Although presented separately, these gaps are not fixed or isolated categories. They frequently overlap, oscillate, and intensify one another. For example, a practitioner experiencing under-resourcing may simultaneously encounter knowledge uncertainty, emotional exhaustion, and heightened susceptibility to role confusion. The purpose of the model is therefore not to eliminate vulnerability, but to support earlier recognition, greater reflexivity, and more compassionate responses to the realities of professional life.

## THE FIVE GAPS

### 1. Role Conflation

Role conflation occurs when professional boundaries and responsibilities blur, often subtly and incrementally over time. Practitioners may find themselves stepping beyond their formal role,

assuming additional emotional responsibility, leadership, safeguarding authority, or organisational functions without adequate support or clarity. Within helping professions, relational dynamics can easily reinforce such patterns. Practitioners perceived as competent, reliable, or emotionally containing may gradually become over-relied upon by colleagues, organisations, or clients. From a TA perspective, role conflation may reflect driver-influenced adaptations such as Be Perfect, Try Hard, or Please Others (Kahler & Capers, 1974). Under pressure, these adaptive strategies may unconsciously encourage practitioners to overfunction relationally while discounting their own limitations or needs.

### 2. External Pressures

Therapeutic practice can often be interconnected with individual, systemic, and organisational frameworks, particularly when a practitioner is in placement. Funding limitations, productivity targets, waiting lists, safeguarding requirements, institutional cultures, and administrative expectations all shape clinical work. The Five-Gap Model conceptualises vulnerability as partly arising from the tension between professional values and systemic realities. Practitioners may experience ethical dissonance when organisational demands conflict with relational or clinical judgement. Berne (1961) emphasised that behaviour occurs within social systems and relational transactions rather than solely within isolated individuals. Organisational TA further highlights how systems themselves may shape communication, authority, dependency, and professional functioning (Hay, 2009). External pressures may therefore influence not only workload but also practitioners' internal experiences of adequacy, safety, responsibility, and ethical confidence.

### 3. Under-Resourcing

Under-resourcing encompasses not only material limitations but also the depletion of emotional, psychological, supervisory, peer, relational, and reflective resources essential to safe practice.

Many practitioners work in both solo and larger clinical settings, where time pressures, emotional labour, administrative burdens, and financial constraints gradually erode reflective capacity. Reduced supervision, professional isolation, excessive caseloads, and self-neglect may contribute to compassion fatigue and burnout. The Five-Gap Model views under-resourcing as particularly significant because diminished support often reduces practitioners' ability to recognise emerging vulnerability in

themselves. Relational TA emphasises the importance of co-created relational safety and mutual recognition (Erskine, 1998). Without sufficient professional support structures, practitioners may become increasingly isolated within emotionally demanding work.

### 4. Knowledge Gaps

Knowledge gaps are areas where practitioners encounter situations that exceed their current level of training, experience, or confidence. Such gaps are inevitable in professional development and should not be taken as evidence of incompetence. However, vulnerability may emerge when uncertainty is difficult to acknowledge openly. Fear of judgement, shame, imposter feelings, or pressure to appear competent may inhibit practitioners from seeking additional supervision, consultation, or training. Mellor and Sigmund's (1975) concept of discounting offers a useful lens here. Practitioners may minimise the significance of uncertainty, underestimate risk, or discount their own need for support in an attempt to preserve professional identity. Importantly, the Five-Gap Model conceptualises knowledge gaps as lifelong and dynamic rather than temporary deficits. Ethical practice depends less on knowing everything and more on maintaining reflective openness about the limits of one's knowledge.

### 5. Unresolved Personal Issues

Therapists and helping professionals inevitably bring their personal histories, relational experiences, vulnerabilities, and emotional patterns into their work. While this humanity can deepen empathy and relational attunement, unresolved experiences may also be activated within clinical relationships. The model deliberately avoids pathologising such activation. Emotional resonance, countertransference, identification, and relational pull are normal aspects of therapeutic work. Vulnerability can emerge, not from personal responses per se, but from insufficient awareness, reflection, or support regarding them.

Relational TA places significant emphasis on mutual influence within therapeutic relationships (Hargaden & Sills, 2002). Practitioners are not neutral observers but active relational participants whose internal worlds are likely to be shaped and stirred within therapeutic encounters. The Five-Gap Model, therefore, encourages practitioners to approach personal vulnerability with curiosity rather than shame.

## THE SPACE BETWEEN THE GAPS

Although the Five-Gap Model conceptualises each gap as independently

recognisable and conceptually distinct, they are not psychologically or relationally isolated. The model's central idea is to understand vulnerability as emerging from both the independent presence of specific gaps and the interdependent interplay between them within professional practice.

Professional vulnerability often develops through interaction rather than a single cause. External pressures may intensify under-resourcing. Knowledge uncertainty may heighten role conflation. Personal stress may reduce reflective capacity. Organisational demands may reinforce driver-driven overadaptation. These overlapping dynamics can gradually narrow practitioners' psychological flexibility and reflective space, creating blind spots that make vulnerability harder to recognise. The "space between" therefore refers to the shifting terrain where competing pressures, identities, responsibilities, emotions, and relational demands intersect. It is within these spaces that practitioners may experience ethical uncertainty, emotional exhaustion, relational strain, or diminished self-awareness.

At the same time, these spaces also hold potential for reflection, supervision, dialogue, growth, and transformation. Awareness creates choice. Reflection creates movement. Support creates safety.

## TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS AS A REFLECTIVE LENS

Although the Five-Gap Model is not intended as a traditional TA model, Transactional Analysis provides a valuable interpretive lens for understanding the internal and relational processes involved in professional vulnerability. Berne's (1961) ego state model offers insight into how practitioners may respond to stress through critical internal Parent processes, overwhelmed Child states, or diminished Adult functioning. Driver theory (Kahler & Capers, 1974) further illuminates unconscious adaptations developed in response to relational survival needs. Under professional pressure, drivers may become overused coping strategies contributing to burnout, over-responsibility, perfectionism, or self-neglect.

Script theory (Steiner, 1974) also offers insight into how early relational experiences may unconsciously shape professional identity and responses to authority, responsibility, recognition, and vulnerability. Importantly, the Five-Gap Model does not seek perfection or complete invulnerability. Instead, it emphasises reflexivity, awareness, relational responsiveness, and ethical curiosity.

## CONCLUSION

The Five-Gap Model was developed as a reflective framework for recognising and understanding professional vulnerability in therapeutic and helping professions. By conceptualising vulnerability as arising from the interaction of internal and external pressures, the model seeks to move away from individual blame towards compassionate awareness.

The 'space between' the gaps represents both risk and possibility. It is the space where practitioners may lose connection with themselves, others, and reflective practice, but also the space where awareness, support, and dialogue can create movement and change. Professional vulnerability is not evidence of failure. It is part of being human in emotionally demanding relational work.

The task is therefore not to eliminate vulnerability, but to recognise it earlier, understand it more compassionately, and respond to it more ethically and reflectively. In doing so, practitioners may be better able to safeguard themselves, their practice, and the people they support.

---

## REFERENCES

Berne, E. (1961). *Transactional analysis in psychotherapy*. Grove Press.

Erskine, R. G. (1998). *Theories and methods of an integrative transactional analysis*. TA Press.

Hargaden, H., & Sills, C. (2002). *Transactional analysis: A relational perspective*. Brunner-Routledge.

Hay, J. (2009). *Working it out at work: Understanding attitudes and building relationships*. Sherwood Publishing.

Kahler, T., & Capers, H. (1974). The miniscript. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 4(1), 26–42.

Mellor, K., & Sigmund, E. (1975). Discounting. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 5(3), 295–302.

Steiner, C. (1974). *Scripts people live*. Grove Press.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Holly Simmonds (she/her)** is a UKCP-registered Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapist, Counsellor, Supervisor, and Advanced Transactional Analysis Practitioner based in West Sussex, where she runs The Wave Clinic private practice.

Her work is informed by trauma awareness, relational practice, and Transactional Analysis, with particular interests in early developmental influences, professional vulnerability,

ethical awareness, complex trauma, chronic health-related challenges, and reflective supervision.

Holly's work centres on compassion, curiosity, and reflective practice. She developed the Five-Gap Model as a reflective framework to increase awareness and understanding of professional vulnerability in therapeutic practice. Holly will present this work at the November TA Brighton Conference.