
Transactional Analysis

There are few models of psychotherapy that have flared in popularity and waned as quickly as Transactional Analysis. Eric Berne introduced the world to Transactional Analysis as a model of psychotherapy with the publication of *The Games People Play* in 1964. TA was a deliberately post Freudian, or extra Freudian as Berne would point out, in that it expanded on Freud's concepts that were the most popular in the early sixties and simplified them to be comprehensible to non professionals at the same time. Game theory, the idea that math models could explain interactions in biology and consciousness, had been developed in the early 1950s during the cold war. The fact that this theory was entering public consciousness during Bernes first papers theorizing TA cannot be discounted as a strong influence on the conception of TA and as a reason for its popularization.


TA's assumptions about the psyche were closely highly reflective of the zeitgeist of the mid 60's, and this partially explains its meteoric rise . *The Games People Play* was immediately a best seller upon its release. Despite criticism at the time that the book was "pop psych" that made the general public feel like they could play psychoanalyst, *The Games People Play* commanded respect in the academic community as well until the late seventies. TA was, at its zenith, an extremely popular model for both traditional psychoanalytic practitioners and even experiential and Gestalt therapists. The decline of the model can be attributed partially to Berne's hesitancy to disavow any practitioner using the TA model. TA suffered many setbacks to its credibility, most notably when TA practitioners became notorious using the method as a part of pseudoscientific rebirthing movement, injuring and killing several children.

Perhaps it is fitting that a model of Psychotherapy assembled from pieces of the popular culture, lives on in popular culture more than it lives on in clinical culture. Even though the International Transactional Analysis Association still accredits professionals who use the model, at the time of this writing there are only 22 credentialed TA practitioners left in the world, and all of those accredited practice in the US. Redecision therapy, and narrative therapy, are the most widely used styles that borrow heavily from Berne's model.

Much of the language of Berne's model and his ideas occupy space in the worlds of business, industrial psychology, and family and relationship theory. All though there are few purists left it is not uncommon for eclectic therapists to use the language of TA to help clients parse the patterns in their relationships.

The theoretical framework of TA assumes both that there are subconscious "games" that explain common repeated human interactions and that persons will inhabit one of three egos states during these games. The ego states that Berne describes are:

Parent - The parent ego state contains the beliefs and behaviors that we have been taught are correct. The parent ego state is not the same for all patients because it contains the attitudes and opinions of their own caregivers and not all caregivers behave the same. The



parent ego state inflexible and legalistically enforces the standards of patients caregivers on themselves and other parties during times of stress and confusion.

Adult - The adult ego state contains what patients have learned from their own experience. The adult ego state is the most desired and adaptable state because it is capable of borrowing useful behaviors from the child and parent ego state while ignoring the self defeating behaviors and needs of these states. Inhabiting the adult ego state during our interactions with others is the goal of the TA. Clients cannot act on the things that they have learned in therapy unless they have access to this state.

Child - The child ego state is comprised of what we feel. The child ego state is reactionary and wants to indulge base emotions. It wants to express anger, sadness and fear in the active state. The child ego state leads patients to take direction to others and seek to be understood, even when that behavior is not in their best interest.

Games

The games in TA are “transactions” in which all parties are following an unconscious script towards a desired predictable outcome where each party will receive an unconscious reward. Here the reward will be the fulfillment of needs from the parent or child ego states. The games of TA are all played without our adult awareness and the rewards received by the parties in the game are agreed upon unconsciously by all parties of the game when it begins.

One of the most common games that Berne identified was *If it Weren't for You*. In this game, Person A has a subconscious fear of pursuing some goal. Person A selects Person B as a romantic partner, knowing that they the requirements of their relationship will prevent them from pursuing their goal. Person A not only receives the reward of avoiding their fear, but also gets to vent their frustration with themselves onto a willing target. Berne identifies over a hundred games in his TA books. Transactional analysis practitioners were trained to look for the games being played in when client's came into sessions and bring them into the clients awareness.

I have never found it helpful to try and fit my clients interactions onto the requirements of any of Berne's games. However, I do find it useful to make clients aware that what another person says they want is not always what they want. Patients who are experiencing problems with colleagues, family members, and spouses can often have better relationships when they become aware of what it is that people actually want, and want to avoid, in the transactions that they have with them.



Therapist instructions:

I use TA with clients in order to get under the surface level dynamics in their relationships. I find the language of TA useful for helping clients understand the needs that they and the other parties in their lives may be bringing with them into interactions. The TA model ignores the tendency of psychoanalysis to look for the reasons in childhood that each need exists. There is no need to look for the source of or analyze the neuroses that we may be bringing into relationships. TA allows clients to make plans for how to anticipate and avoid common pitfalls in relationships and communication without a tremendous amount of time or insight being expended.

For clients that are very emotional or reactive in interactions TA can be an effective method to avoid acting on what we feel (child) or what we believe we have to do (parent). Clients should be instructed to act only on what it is that they have learned is effective (Adult) in therapy and from past experience.

Communications Worksheet Pt 1

When we communicate with others during difficult situations.

Think of the situation as a financial transaction. When you go to a restaurant, you want to eat and the restaurateur wants to get paid. Both of you want different things. Sometimes when we think about what someone wants from us, instead of what someone is saying we are able to make our interactions simpler and more to the point.

Games

1. List some situations that you find it difficult to communicate in or people you find it hard to interact with?
2. In your list of situations pick out three examples where you feel like you have had the same conversation over and over. Think of times that you or another person keep making the same requests of one another but the interaction is never resolved. Think of interactions that you dread, find unproductive or where you or another person never feel understood.
3. Write a short script for these interactions. Paraphrase what is said in the repetitive interaction between you and another person.

Transactions

In repetitive or recurring reactions like the one you listed, it is likely that neither party is considering what is actually motivating the other person. Below are some common subconscious benefits that people often try to get or avoid in social interaction.

Things people Pursue:

Respect, to be right, to feel victorious, to have power, to feel smart, to feel superior, to reinforce their position or authority, to have others obey, to have money, to have independence or freedom, to be accepted, to be heard, to be accepted

Thing people avoid:

Feeling foolish, feeling shameful, losing money/possessions/time, losing relationships, losing authority, losing control, losing social status, being rejected, making someone angry

Write your list of three repetitive interactions on to the chart below and think about the things that each party might be unconsciously be pursuing or avoiding in the interaction.

What do you think the other party is really wanting in each interaction? What do you think the person is trying to avoid?

What are you really saying when you talk to this person? What is it you are trying to avoid or trying to get out of the interaction?

Eg. Are you trying to be understood, or avoid making someone angry? Is the other party trying to avoid feeling foolish or feel in control? How can you give the person that in this situation.

Interaction	Things Pursued/Avoided by You	Things Pursued/Gained by the Other Person

1. Does anything surprise you about what is really happening in the interaction. Did you notice that you or the other person actually want something different than you thought they did?
2. Can you think of a way that each interaction could go differently? Is there a way that each person can get what they are wanting in the interaction? Eg. Does it resolve the issue to give up control to someone that is afraid of losing control if it gets you what you want?

Communications Worksheet Pt 2

Complete the Communications Worksheet Part 1 before beginning Part 2.

Some types of interactions in our lives are “loaded”, in that one or more parties bring with them an agenda they might not be aware of. When we are aware of the other wants and needs that ourselves and other people are bringing into interactions we are better capable of what it is that is being said. During many “loaded” interactions we and others often inhabit one of three familiar “ego states” that we use when we are negotiating. These ego states are decision making perspectives that we use when we know we need the benefit of our past experiences. However, sometimes each ego state is not appropriate to every situation where they are taking control. Analyzing our own and others “ego states” during conversations that we is often useful to allow us to break through to better insight into our own motivations and better communication towards others needs.


Ego States

Often in interactions we are inhabiting one of the following ego states.

Parent - The Parent Ego State contains what we have been taught. In certain interactions it is easy for us to fall back on attitudes and opinions that are copied from the caregivers. Often times this perspective is not what we actually believe, but what we feel we are “supposed” to believe, and often what we assume others should believe. The parent ego state has the most disconnect between who we are and what we are doing.

Adult - The Adult Ego State contains what we have learned. This is often the most healthy and adaptable Ego State to inhabit, but the most difficult to hold on to. The Adult holds all of your learned experience that we know through trial and error is what works best most of the time. Much of the job of becoming an Adult is trial and error. We know nothing when we come into the world and are trapped only with our own feelings and our parents rules. The hardest task of becoming an adult is finding out what feelings we should act on and what of our parents rules is who we really are, and which we need to let go of and replace.

Child - The child ego state is comprised mostly of what we feel. The child ego state is reactionary and wants to indulge base emotions. It wants to express anger, sadness and fear in the active state. The child ego state can lead us to need badly to be understood by others, even when that is not helpful. The child ego state makes us feel justified in acting on or extreme emotions and feelings.

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1. Go through the interactions above and think about how much the parent, child, or adult ego state is activated for yourself in that moment.
 2. What ego state might be more helpful in the situation that you find yourself in. Which one is more helpful.
 3. Where do you notice the ego states becoming most active in your life.
 4. When are these ego states not helping you.
 5. Go through the interactions above and think about what ego state the person that you are interacting with is inhabiting. How does this information change your thoughts about the interaction.
 6. What is it that you think the other party in your interaction actually wants from you, or wants to avoid? Is what they are wanting different from what they are verbally asking you for.