

**Games People Play by Eric Berne, M.D.; Random House Publishing, 2004; ISBN 978-0-345-41003-0**

I read this book after reading *Games Students Play*, when I realized I needed a deeper understanding of the concepts, terminology, and ideas. That is the focus of this review. This book has a lot of text devoted to helping a counselor or therapist manage clients, which is not relevant to my purpose.

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This book was originally written in 1962 and it became extremely popular. Its terms became part of the pop culture in the 1960s and 70s. Today people recognize that “transactional analysis is a serious cognitive-behavioral approach to treatment and that it also has very effective ways of dealing with internal models of self and others as well as other psychodynamic issues.” (GPP, pg vi)

I was interested in the book’s detailed description of the three ego states: Child, Parent, Adult.

Berne described ego states as coherent ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that occur together. Today, we can also conceptualize them as the manifestations of specific neural networks in the brain. Thanks to advances in neuroimaging, neural networks can actually be visualized.

Berne labeled networks that develop early in life as Child ego states. When we activate one of these, we act like the child we once were. Networks which represent the internalization of the people who raised us, as we experienced them, Berne named Parent. When in Parent we think, feel, and act like one of our parents or like someone who took their place. Ego states which deal with the here and now in a nonemotional way are called Adult. When in Adult, we appraise reality objectively and make fact-based decisions, while making sure that Child or Parent emotions or ideas do not contaminate the process.

It should be noted that ego states are real and observable, not hypothetical like the ego, id, and superego of psychoanalysis. It should also be noted that we all have three ego states and that we energize different ones depending on what is appropriate to the time and circumstances. That is, the Adult, which is an ego state or a group of ego states, is not the same thing as a grown-up adult human being.

Once an ego state is recognized, it is more easily recognized again, and this conceptualization gives us a way to describe transactions between ego states within the individual or between different people.

(GPP, pg viii)

The above text is from the introduction written in 2004. What follows is a description from Berne’s original writing.

In technical language, an ego state may be described phenomenologically as a coherent system of feelings, and operationally as a set of coherent behavior patterns. ... Each individual seems

to have available a limited repertoire of such ego states, which are not roles but psychological realities. This repertoire can be sorted into the following categories: (1) ego states which resemble those of parental figures (2) ego states which are autonomously directed toward objective appraisal of reality and (3) those which represent archaic relics, still-active ego states which were fixated in early childhood.

...

The position is, then, that at any given moment each individual in a social aggregation will exhibit a Parental, Adult, or Child ego state, and that individuals can shift with varying degrees of readiness from one ego state to another.

(GPP, pgs 23-24)

He goes on to describe the purpose or value of these ego states to an individual.

Ego states are normal psychological phenomenon. ... Each type of ego state has its own vital value for the human organism.

In the Child reside intuition, creativity and spontaneous drive and enjoyment.

The Adult is necessary for survival. It process data and computes the probabilities which are essential for dealing effectively with the outside world. ... Another task of the Adult is to regulate the activities of the Parent and the Child, and to mediate objectively between them.

The Parent has two main functions. First, it enables the individual to act effectively as the parent of actual children, thus promoting the survival of the human race. ... Secondly, it makes many responses automatic, which conserves a great deal of time and energy. Many things are done because "That's the way it's done." This frees the Adult from the necessity of making innumerable trivial decisions, so that it can devote itself to more important issues, leaving routine matters to the Parent.

Thus all three aspects of the personality have a high survival and living value, and it is only when one or the other of them disturbs the healthy balance that analysis and reorganization are indicated. Otherwise each of them, Parent, Adult, and Child, is entitled to equal respect and has its legitimate place in a full and productive life.

(GPP, pgs 27-28)

The book then describes Transactional Analysis. It starts with defining terms.

The unit of social intercourse is called a transaction. If two or more people encounter each other in a social aggregation, sooner or later one of them will speak, or give some other indication of acknowledging the presence of the others. This is called *transactional stimulus*. Another person will then say or do something which is in some way related to this stimulus, and that is called the *transactional response*. Simple transactional analysis is concerned with

diagnosing which ego state implemented the transactional stimulus, and which one executed the transactional response.

...

Both these transactions are *complementary*; that is, the response is appropriate and expected and follows the natural order of healthy human relationships.

...

The first rule of communication is that communication will proceed smoothly as long as transactions are complementary; and its corollary is that as long as transactions are complementary, communication can, in principle, proceed indefinitely.

(GPP, pgs 29-30)

The book points out that complementary transactions tend to be the ones where the ego states match up, for example the stimulus is from an Adult to an Adult, and the response is from an Adult to an Adult; or the stimulus is from a Child to a Parent and elicits a response from a Parent to a Child.

It then says that communication is “broken off when a *crossed transaction* occurs.” (GPP, pg 30). For example, the stimulus is from an Adult to an Adult, but the response is from a Child to a Parent. It gives a specific instance of this:

The stimulus is Adult-Adult: e.g., “Maybe we should find out why you’ve been drinking more lately,” or, “Do you know where my cuff links are?” The appropriate Adult-Adult response in each case would be: “Maybe we should. I’d certainly like to know!” or, “On the desk.” If the respondent flares up, however, the responses will be something like “You’re always criticizing me, just like my father did,” or, “You always blame me for everything.” These are both Child-Parent responses ... In such cases the Adult problems about drinking or cuff links must be suspended ... Either the agent must become Parental as a complement to the respondent’s suddenly activated Child, or the respondent’s Adult must be reactivated to the agent’s Adult.

(GPP, pg 31)

There is a distinction between the types of complementary transactions.

Simple complementary transactions most commonly occur in superficial working and social relationships, and these are easily disturbed by simple crossed transactions. In fact a superficial relationship may be defined as one which is confined to simple complementary transactions. Such relationships occur in activities, rituals and patterns. More complex are *ulterior transactions* – those involving the activity of more than two ego states simultaneously – and this category is the basis for games. Salesmen are particularly adept at *angular transactions*, those involving three ego states.

(GPP, pg 33)

The idea of the salesman's angular transactions is that the transaction may be Adult-Adult at the *social level* but Adult-Child at the *psychological level*. The salesman directs the overt statement to the Adult of the person to whom he wishes to sell something, but the underlying implication is to the Child in order to manipulate the person to buy.

There is also a *duplex ulterior transaction* that involves four ego states, often seen in flirtation, where the comments are Adult-Adult, but the psychological implications are Child-Child.

There are distinctions between procedures, rituals, pastimes, and games. They all serve to help us structure time. In particular,

A game is an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome. Descriptively it is a recurring set of transactions. often repetitious, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation; or, more colloquially, a series of moves with a snare, or "gimmick." Games are clearly differentiated from procedures, rituals, and pastimes by two chief characteristics: (1) their ulterior quality and (2) the payoff. ... Every game ... is basically dishonest, and the outcome has a dramatic, as distinct from merely exciting, quality.

(GPP, pg 48)

While there are games that are consciously planned, "What we are concerned about here, however, are the unconscious games played by innocent people engaged in duplex transactions of which they are not fully aware, and which form the most important aspect of social life all over the world." (GPP, pg 49).

There is a structure or scheme to analyzing games. The steps are:

1. Thesis – "a general description of the game, including the immediate sequence of events" (GPP, pg 52)
2. Antithesis – the moves or reactions that are needed to undercut the payoff or to stop the game.
3. Aim – the general purpose of the game, or its alternatives
4. Roles – who is playing which part, as based on the ego states used in the game
5. Dynamics – the driving force behind the game
6. Examples – to help understand the game's origins and to assist in the formal description; often referring to children's games because that is often how the adult games are formed
7. Transactional paradigm – a description of the social and psychological levels that reveal the ulterior transaction
8. Moves – the behaviors or transactions used by the players
9. Advantages – what the players get out of the game playing; could be biological, existential, social, or psychological
10. Relatives – complementary, allied, or antithetical games

The book also addresses the function of games in more detail.

Because there is so little opportunity for intimacy in daily life, and because some forms of intimacy are psychologically impossible for most people, the bulk of the time in serious social life is taken up with playing games. Hence games are both necessary and desirable, and the only problem at issue is whether the games played by an individual offer the best yield for him. In this connection it should be remembered that the essential feature of a game is its culmination, or payoff. The principal function of the preliminary moves is to set up the situation for this payoff, but they are always designed to harvest the maximum permissible satisfaction at each step as a secondary product.

(GPP, pg 61)

One important point: most games are identified and described by therapists, as seen in people who play destructive games. There are also constructive games. For example, “to go around asking for advice about how best to help people. This is an example of a jolly and constructive game worth encouraging.” (GPP, pg 80)

A “good” game might be described as one whose social contribution outweighs the complexity of its motivations, particularly if the player has come to terms with those motivations without futility or cynicism. That is, a “good” game would be one which contributes both to the well-being of the other players and to the unfolding of the one who is “it.”

(GPP, pg 163)

The thesaurus of games I found worth reading, both to see what games my students might play and to understand what games I might play or have encountered in my life, but I am not going to try to list them in this review.

The book then discusses the significance of games.

1. Historical – “Games are passed on from generation to generation. ... Games may be diluted or altered from one generation to another, but there seems to be a strong tendency to inbreed with people who play a game of the same family, if not of the same genus.” (GPP, pg 171)
2. Cultural – “‘Raising’ children is primarily a matter of teaching them what games to play.” (GPP, pg 171)
3. Social – Social time needs to be structured. It can be filled with pastimes and/or intimacy, but pastimes can get boring and intimacy is often scary or socially forbidden. Playing games can be a compromise activity.
4. Personal – “People pick as friends, associates and intimates other people who play the same games. Hence ‘everybody who is anybody’ in a given social circle ... behaves in a way which may seem quite foreign to members of a different social circle.” (GPP, pg 172)

**My Response to Games People Play**

It met my need in that it gave me a better understanding of the terminology, concepts, and ideas presented in the *Games Students Play* book. I feel that, as an amateur, I can now reflect on my teaching experiences and start identifying the games my students have played and be aware of any that arise in the future. I also feel that I can examine my own reactions from the ego state perspective and attempt to respond appropriately to the student games while also reducing the chance that I might be playing a game with the students.

I was grateful for the knowledge that there are good games, as I was beginning to think that game playing as a social interaction could only be destructive. Seeing the various types of game significance helped with my attitude toward games, too.

Chapter 15 gives an example of an Adult-Adult conversation that contained certain words or phrases which I thought would have sparked an argument or petulant Child reaction. The book includes a discussion as to why they didn't cause problems, pointing out the Adult analytical aspect of the conversation. I appreciated this because it is helpful to know the difference between the Adult response and the Child response.