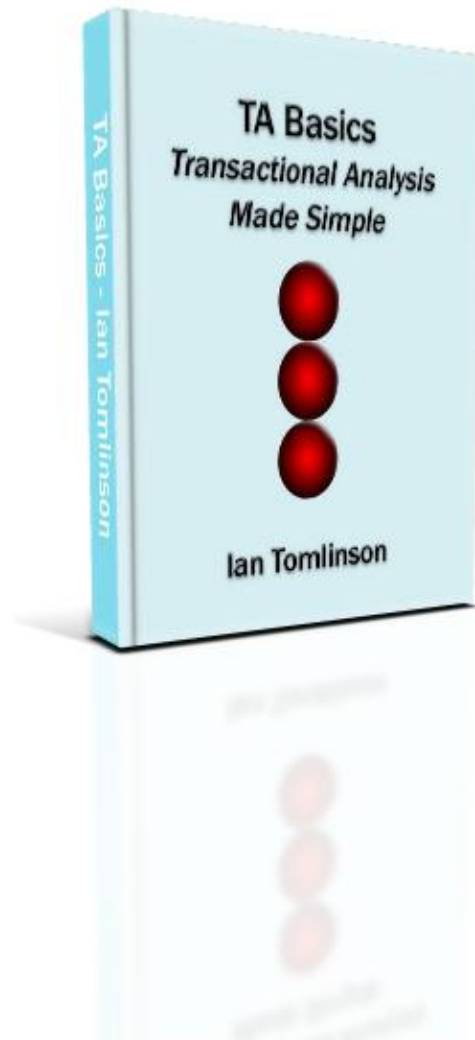


TA Basics

Transactional Analysis Made Simple



By Ian Tomlinson

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Introduction

I have written this guide to give those new to TA a simple explanation of the fundamental ideas in TA. This could be useful for you if you have just started in therapy with a transactional analysis psychotherapist, if you are starting a TA 101, or if you are interested in the model and want to explore the basic concepts.

I put this guide together from a series of blog posts I have written. Whilst it's great to read blogs it's not always convenient to have information in that form and if you want to keep the posts and peruse at your leisure then things get tricky (unless you have an iPad - I'm jealous!). So here is a nice book that you can print off and read in bed, in the car, whilst having your hair done (wow – paper is a great thing and I'm sure it will catch on and become big one day)!

One of the reasons I love TA so much is because it has a great framework to hang ideas about human personality onto. No one is pretending it has all the answers. No theoretical model out there has. For me it's a good start though, and it allows my poor old addled brain to start to understand how we humans are wired up and why we do such peculiar things.

Eric Berne (1910-1970) was the founder of TA and a general all round good egg. He started off as a Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst, but, to cut a long story short, got fed up with the slow pace and big complicated words of psychoanalysis and created TA instead. Thanks Eric, you saved me from having to buy a chaise longue and smoke a pipe (though I do have a beard and am known to say “tell me about your father” here and there).

I have put the chapters in a logical order so the information builds on itself. Reading chapter one should help you understand chapter two etc.

I hope you enjoy my guide and invite you to email me at ian@manchesterpsychotherapy.net with feedback and if there is any way in which I can help you. Enjoy! *ian*

Chapter 1 – Core Principles

Transactional Analysis is one way of understanding human personality. It was the brainchild of Eric Berne who trained as a psychoanalyst but became disillusioned with the methods he was expected to follow and wanted a more equal approach to the therapist/client relationship.



There are three basic philosophical assumptions in Transactional Analysis:

1) **People are OK.** This roles off the tongue easily but I think it's important to examine what this means. This is the fundamental acceptance that regardless of what you do, no matter what you think, or despite your feelings you are a worthwhile, valuable person in your own right. You are special. Everyone is special. We are all as important as each other.

How amazing is that as a first principle?! This principle carries itself directly into the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client. We are both equal. We share the responsibility of cure. To make sure that both therapist and client are sure of what their goal is, TA therapists work with contracts - a clear written down agreement between both parties stating the goal of the therapy taking place.

2) **We can all think.** If we have all got the capacity to think then we have all got the capacity to work out what we want and work out how to get there. The therapist's job is to support and guide you in this task but you do not need anyone else to decide for you. You know what's best for you.

For many clients entering therapy it may not feel this way when they start. Some feel confused and unsure and are looking for the therapist to tell them what to do. The therapist will work with the

client on clearing this confusion. It's a bit like wiping condensation off a mirror so we can see ourselves once more.

3) People decide their own destiny and have the power to change these decisions at any time. If we got to where we are today because of the decisions that we made then it's within our power to change these decisions. We can be who we want to be and achieve our goals if that's what we choose to do.

I'm not suggesting that this is always easy. Small changes may start the process and build up to larger changes when it feels safe. It's about getting around the barriers to change together. Sometimes they need kicking down, sometimes we go round them and sometimes we realise that although they look like they are there, when we examine them up close, they are not there at all!

Chapter 2 – Ego States

Ego States, Urges and Me

The Apple iPhone 4 will be available to buy from the 24th June and I am very excited! I want to run to the nearest Apple store and get in the Queue already. I want to hand over my £200 and sign up for that 2 year contract despite the fact that when I look at it, when I *really* think about it, the iPhone 4 isn't really much different from the iPhone I own now.



For me it's the same with the Apple iPad. I have been down to the store and held one in my hands. I have caressed its smooth, glassy body. I have imagined myself sat on my sofa, surfing the web like I've never surfed before! I realise I am what's referred to distastefully on the internet forums as "An Apple Fan boy". There is definitely something about their products that increases my desire to splurge large amounts of my hard earned cash. What's going on?

It doesn't really matter here whether we are talking about an iPhone, iPad, a new car, a new hand bag, clothes or even tasty chocolate biscuits. There is something in our human make up that allows us to become fixated, all be it temporarily. Most of the time for most people it's not a problem provided we stay within the limits of what we can afford, but what can we do to quell these urges when they threaten or physical, emotional or financial health?

What can we do to quell these urges when they threaten or physical, emotional or financial health?

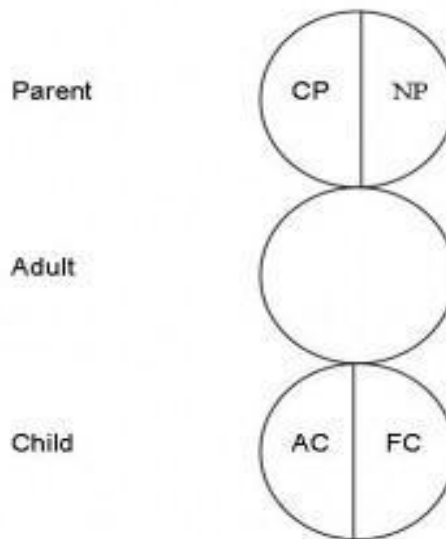
In [Transactional Analysis](#) we often look at human personality from the perspective of ego states. The ego state model is useful because it gives us something to hang our ideas onto. It's a model of

personality. At the risk of upsetting many TA therapists, I am going to boil the ego state model down to the simplest level possible (TA aficionados are welcome to post comments, please keep the swearing to a minimum!).

Our thinking, feelings and behaviour can be divided into several parts. These are known as **Parent, Adult and Child ego states**. The normal convention is to capitalise when discussing ego states and use lower case when referring to real parents, adults and children (I know, it's not a real word but I kinda like it!). The ego state model I am writing about is referred to as the functional model – how we use the ego states to relate to others and ourselves.

Our **Parent ego state**

pretty much repeats what we heard from our childhood caretakers. It is full of information from them about how to view the world and how to react to it. This information can be Nurturing (NP) or Controlling (CP). There are positive and negative aspects of Controlling and Nurturing Parent.



It's good to have a Controlling Parent to tell you to stop and check before crossing a road but not so good to hear that Controlling Parent in your head all the time telling you that you are doing things wrong. The Nurturing Parent that allows overindulgence in chocolate (or iPads) can be doing you a disservice, but the Nurturing Parent that tells you or someone else who has been working hard to take a break can be very useful.

Our **Adult ego state** is able to take in the here and now reality of the situation. It processes information and regulates most of the things we do. When we follow instructions or drive a car, our Adult ego state is happily and fruitfully engaged.

Our **Child ego state** can be compliant and well-mannered or rebellious and badly behaved. In TA terms both of these would be classed as “Adapted Child” (AC) as in both situations we are adapting to the environment around us, either positively or negatively. The other way the Child ego state functions in is called “Free Child”(FC). The Free Child likes to run barefoot on a sun drenched beach, play and laugh with those nearby, cry when sad, shout when angry. The free Child is not restricted by what others think.

There are entire books written about ego states, various models and theories about how they work or even if they exist at all so if it is a subject you are interested in I would recommend more research. [TA today by Stuart and Joines](#) would be a good place to start.



So, my Free Child ego state really wants to buy buy buy! My Controlling Parent is saying in no uncertain terms that I am not allowed to splash the cash down the local Apple store because I can't afford it. My Adapted Child follows the instructions of the Controlling Parent and a conflict is set up.

This is a similar thing to what happens when we go on diets. Carole Rayburn wrote an article in the [TAJ](#) explaining the whole sequence – I'm going to paraphrase below:

Our Controlling Parent tells us that we are too fat and we need to cut down on the cakes, sweets, chocolate and other foods that we love to eat and are bad for us. Our Adapted Child complies but is not very happy about it. We put up with this for a certain amount of time or until we reach a target weight. Once we get there things shift. Often

the Rebellious Child clicks in and we go back to our pies, chocolate or crisps. Before we know it we are back to our original weight and feel sad that we have failed, yet again to “Control” ourselves.

Carole suggests that the answer is to stop being so hard on ourselves and nurture instead. Our Nurturing Parent needs to team up with our Child and give permission for the Adult – the sensible part of ourselves, to regulate our weight. Our Child needs to be soothed by our Nurturing Parent and believe that they are not going to be deprived and that there is enough food to go round. Then slowly that need to shovel food into our faces as if it's the last ever time we will be able to have them will subside.

I'm not pretending that this is easy to do. Research by Lister, Rosen and Wright (1985) examining a group of women using this method to lose weight showed that in the initial stages most put weight on. It takes time for that Child part of us to feel safe enough to take this new approach. A good therapist or counsellor would be able to give you support and speed up the Child calming process.

References:

Lister, M. Rosen, K. and Wright, A. (1985) 'An Anti-diet Approach to Weight Loss in a Group Setting'. *Transactional Analysis Journal* 15, 69-72.

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Chapter 3 – Strokes

Facebook, Twitter and the Stroke Bonanza

I have just rejoined Facebook again after a long time away and along with Twitter and LinkedIn it's having a surprising effect on me. Lots of smiles! As a naturally private individual I have thought long and hard about joining the plethora of people already involved with social media sites. Over the past few months though I have made a conscious decision to get out there and connect with more people.



There's much debate about the ethics of participating on social media sites as a psychotherapist. The [International Transactional Analysis Association](#) (ITAA) group on LinkedIn have been discussing this for the past few weeks and the topic has seen a range of opinions put forward on the morality of it all.

There is no doubt though that social media sites cannot be ignored. According to social media experts Brian Halligan and Dharmesh Shah, there are more than 200 million active users of Facebook with half of them logging on every day. Its fastest-growing demographic of people are those in the 35 years and older category. So why are they so popular?

In TA terms Social media sites provide a constant and pretty endless source of strokes. Eric Berne, the founder of [Transactional Analysis](#) defined a stroke simply as "a unit of recognition".

Here's some facts about strokes:

- Strokes can be physical, e.g. a pat on the back, or verbal, a quick "hello" or a lengthy conversation.
- Strokes can be conditional; "When you clean your room I think you're fantastic", or unconditional; "you're fantastic".
- Strokes can be positive "you're great" or negative; "you stink".

As social animals humans crave strokes. We will pretty much do anything for them. If we can't get positive strokes then negative ones will do. For most of us, the only thing worse than being treated badly is being completely ignored. This explains why solitary confinement is the worst punishment a prisoner can be subjected to and why children who receive no praise quickly find that behaving badly gets them attention.

Both my LinkedIn and Facebook accounts are now regularly churning out positive strokes for me and I love it! It's great to make contact daily with people I've known for years and I also love contributing ideas to discussions on LinkedIn and engaging with people I know less well. I'm finding the exchange of ideas thought provoking and can see how social media sites, with their groups and fan clubs, provide instant communities and a feeling of belonging.

In an age when real community is on the wain and relationships suffer as a result of our busy lives, social media sites can provide a stroke fix that can be a benefit to us all. I'm pretty sure that most people are sensible enough to realise that face to face relationships are also very important and should be valued and nurtured and that can be done if people use social media sites sensibly.

In fact I would argue that sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, if used well, can enhance our face to face relationships as we communicate with our friends more frequently online. I also acknowledge that e-safety and boundary issues do raise their heads when using social media sites, maybe this is where common sense needs to come into play?

Chapter 4 – Transactional Analysis Proper

How To Shut Your Boss Up In One Sentence

Now I want to start this post by saying your boss isn't all bad, I mean we are in the land of I'm OK, you're OK, right?

But it has to be said, sometimes (s)he does go on a bit! So it's only right that we help out and save a bit of time by trimming the conversation somewhat. I'm sure you get my drift!



Transactional analysis is not called that for nothing. When we look at how two people are communicating and breaking it down into each single transaction to work out what's going on, we call this Transactional Analysis Proper. This chapter is going to outline the different ways in which we transact and how we can use this information to manage the transactions we have.

What's to manage you may ask? Well once you understand how we communicate with others you have the power to prolong conversations for as long as you like or stop them dead in their tracks. You want to keep the conversation going with that great looking girl/guy at the party? No problem! You want your boss to get off your back so you can get some work done? Just follow the rules and your wish will come true!

Now the definitions.

A transaction is;

"an exchange of strokes between two persons consisting of a stimulus and a response between specific ego states".

(Woollams and Brown, 1978)

Eric Berne came up with the **rules of communication** to help us understand the different ways in which we can transact with each other. So hold on to your thinking hat and let's have a look at these rules:

Rule 1: When transactions are complimentary they can go on indefinitely. What does this mean? Well, when we talk to someone from our Parent ego state we may be inviting them to respond from their Child ego state. If they do, all well and good, the conversation can progress. As long as the Parent – Child dialogue continues without any shift in ego state from either party the conversation can go on endlessly.

This might look like....

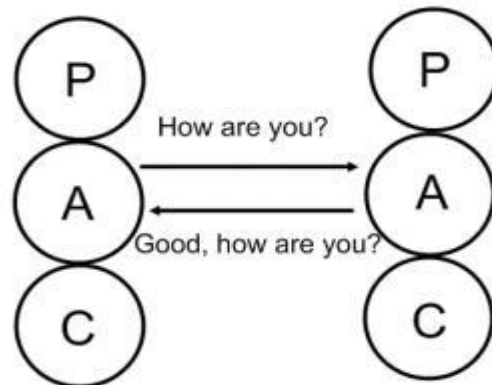
A – “Sit down in your seat.”

B – “I don't want to.”

A – “You will do as you are told.”

B – “You're always telling me off, I didn't do anything.”

A- “Don't answer me back cheeky boy.”
Etc, etc, etc



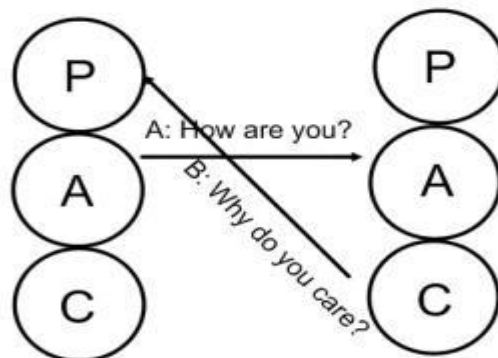
Why is this useful to know? If you are in a situation where you want to make friends or find out more about someone then keep your transactions complementary. If they invite an Adult response, respond from your Adult. If they come from Child, play with them and come from your Child. You're likely to make a good connection in this way and increase the friendly feelings the other person has towards you.

Rule 2: When transactions are crossed, the conversation cannot progress. So, when Jenny asks Jim “how are you and Jim replies “why do you care?” there's not really anywhere else that conversation

can go without one of the participants shifting ego state. The Adult question has been crossed with a Child response – game over. It would be the same in the following example:

Pete – “You’re late again! You better make the time up!”
(Controlling Parent inviting Child response)

Paul – “How dare you speak to me like that? Never shout at me again!”
(Controlling Parent response)



It’s likely that in this example, Pete would be rather taken aback and probably not know how to respond. He would have to reassess the situation and either change ego state to Child (say sorry maybe) or push on in Parent. Either way the conversation will stop and start in a jerky fashion.

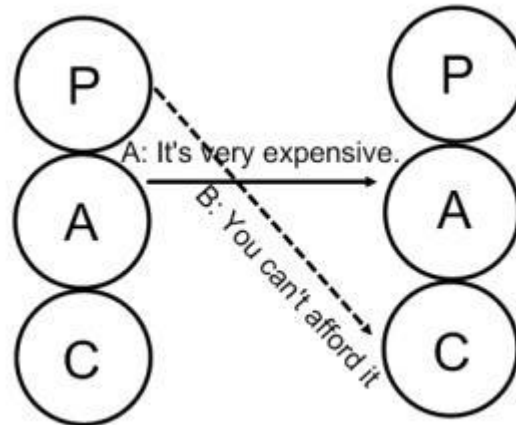
Why is this useful to know? If you want a conversation to stop then cross the transaction you have just received. Be aware though that you may pay for doing this. Your relationship with the person you are talking to will probably suffer. An exception to this is when you respond to a transaction with intimacy. Action/feeling statements are great for doing this and invite intimacy from the other person. This then is the key to shutting that boss of yours up. If you are getting fed up of the ranting, just cross the transaction and wait for the confusion to spread across his face - but be careful, it might be a quick route to the dole queue!

Rule 3: In an Ulterior transaction, it is the psychological message that is heard. An ulterior transaction is when we say one thing but mean another. It’s the other message that gets picked up.

The most well known example is “want to come in for coffee?” after a night out with a new partner. That invite is unlikely to be about

discussing the richness of mocha (unless you're Tom Hanks in "Big").

Salesmen are great at using ulterior transactions. "it's very expensive" is a great way of closing a sale with customers who have an issue around seeming cheap. They will hear the ulterior "you can't afford it" and respond from Child, buying the item to prove that they can.



Why is this useful to know? When someone has just used an ulterior transaction you are likely to hear the message and feel the ulterior. This is where your intuition clicks in. Give yourself permission to listen to your intuition; it may save you from doing something that is against your interest. If you are a salesman, you can use this technique to sell more widgets – do it ethically though eh?!

Knowing the three rules of communication can help greatly with getting our message across to other people. They give us the power to manage communication, to stop conversations that aren't going the way we want them to and to [build relationships](#) successfully with others.

Chapter 5 – Time Structuring

The Fear Of Boredom – How We Manage Time

How do you manage your time? Are you any good at it? Well, according to TA theory there are six main ways in which we keep ourselves OK when dealing with time. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. Many of them we do simply to be recognised as an OK human being.



Why am I telling you all of this and what does it have to do with the fact that you feel angry/sad/scared/happy about things that are going on in your life at the moment? Well one of the ways in which we manage time is by playing games. Game theory is so interesting and significant in our lives that I'm going to write a chapter on it all by itself. This chapter is there to give you the background and explain where it fits in with the rest of the theory.

Time structuring is an important subject in TA and one that I find fascinating and poignant. I'm rubbish at dealing with boredom. I also like to be stimulated by what I'm doing and so when forced to go to meetings that are dull or training courses when I already know the material I get very fidgety. Berne explained this by saying that human beings like to avoid the "pain of boredom". We have to structure our time to avoid it and he called this "structure hunger". He went on to say that what we are really after is stimulation in the form of strokes so we have to set up situations so we can get them. A stroke is seen in TA terms as "a unit of recognition".

The six ways in which we manage our time are (from lowest emotional risk to the highest).....

Withdrawal

We all withdraw at times in our lives and it can be a great way to process our thoughts and work things out for ourselves. When we withdraw we are getting no strokes from anyone else. If we withdraw for too long or too often we can become stroke deprived and this might lead to loneliness or depression. Withdrawal puts no demands on us to be intimate and so there is no emotional risk involved.

Rituals

A ritual is carried out when we exchange strokes in a predictable way. When we walk passed our colleague at work and say "Hi, how are you?" we are engaging in a ritual. Quite often we are not actually enquiring as to how the other person is and they know this, so the exchange may go:

Bob: "Hi, how are you?"

Mary: "Good thanks, and you?"

Bob: "I'm great thanks."

The exchange will most likely go like this whilst both parties carry on walking and even though Bob is really feeling very worried about the report he has to get in by 5pm that day and Mary has a banging headache that she can't shake. What they are really doing is acknowledging each other's existence and exchanging low grade strokes.

A great way to illustrate this is to remember how you felt when you said "hi" to someone and received nothing back. Most of us feel very put out! We ask ourselves "why didn't she say hello?" and usually spend a few minutes mulling it over. We have given a stroke and the ritual is to get one back. When people don't follow these unspoken rules it evokes feelings in us.

Rituals are a great way to get maintenance strokes but don't really give us much more than that. Human beings need higher quality

strokes in order to feel OK, so if these are the only strokes someone is getting it is likely that they are going to feel lonely and fed up.

Pastimes

When you go to a party and don't really know the other people there what do you talk about? There are certain subjects that feel safe and that are easy to engage others with. Examples include politics, sport, music, fashion, or if you're English, our favourite, the weather!

When we pastime we are merely exchanging strokes with others. We are not trying to solve anything. There is a semi-rigid set of unspoken rules in place and if they get broken (for example, one party becoming intimate or thinking about how a problem can be solved) the pastiming stops. Pastiming is a great way to get to know others and it helps us decide who we want to get closer to and who we want to avoid.

Activities

We are carrying out an activity when we are directing our energy towards external sources. I have managed to alleviate my boredom right now by typing this chapter. My hope is that you are avoiding boredom by reading it (though I'm sure some would disagree!).

Hobbies, jobs, cleaning the house – these are all activities and they can be a great source of strokes. When we get praise for the good work we have done or that shiny big trophy for coming first in the spaghetti eating competition it feels great! So does being paid at the end of the month.

Negative strokes are also available in the form of tellings off by the boss or criticism from our work colleagues. Remember the rules of stroking though. Negative strokes are better than none. Activities usually provide us with a rich source of other people to engage in other forms of time structuring can be carried out, from withdrawal all the way to intimacy.

Rackets and Games

Berne defines a game as "an ongoing series of complementary transactions which lead to a well-defined predictable outcome".

Games are so important to TA theory that they warrant a chapter all of their own. It's important to note that when we play games with others (and I ain't talking tiddly winks) we can produce large quantities of intense strokes. These strokes often start off positive and then become negative as the game progresses and we get our payoff.

Intimacy

Here it is – what we are all after. The most risky and the most rewarding of all the ways of structuring time.

Being intimate with another requires that we are open and honest and we exchange strokes with another without any hidden agenda and completely in the here and now. There is no other form of time structuring going on and we are not looking to exploit the other individual or set something up for later.

Intimacy can be positive or negative and results in true feelings in the free Child ego state. Sometimes it does not involve words at all and it does not just occur with those that you love. You can be intimate with anyone but it does feel a great deal safer with those that you have built a strong relationship with.

Someone who believes themselves and others to be OK is much more likely to be intimate than a person who believes themselves or others to be not OK. Because it feels risky, many people are scared of intimacy and seek their strokes through one of the above methods instead.

Chapter 6 – Games

TA Game theory

Have you ever said to yourself "I can't believe this has happened to me again!" or "why does this always happen to me"? If so, there are high chances you have been involved in playing what's known in the TA world as a game.



We all play games. We play them often. Eric Berne famously said "do not ask whether you are playing a game, ask which game you are playing".

If we can spot our games and nip them in the bud we can move towards intimacy with the people around us and be more contented as a result. The last chapter looked at how us humans structure our time. Berne observed that humans hate to be bored and will carry out one of six methods for avoiding it. Playing games is one of those methods.

Games deserve a whole chapter to themselves because they are interesting, important and demand a fair bit of explanation.

What is a game?

Woollams and Brown* (1978) define games as:

"A series of duplex transactions which leads to a switch and a well-defined, predictable payoff which justifies a not-OK, or discounted, position".

Let's have a look at what that actually means. Firstly, what's a duplex transaction? A duplex transaction (also known as an ulterior, see chapter 4, rule 3) is where we say one thing and mean another.

Only about 8% of our communication is through words, the rest is through, tone, body language and facial expressions. Berne observed that whenever we say one thing (the social message) and mean another (the psychological message), it's always the psychological message that gets heard. A classic example might be the old "do you want to come in for a coffee?" at the end of a date. The social message is about coffee, the psychological message is about sex.

So we tend to open games with duplex transactions, not saying what we really mean, scared that the intimacy involved will get us rejected or hurt. Usually then, the game will proceed to deliver us some positive strokes until the "switch" clicks in.

The switch is the point at which things suddenly feel like they are going wrong. It's the point at which we may feel confused, scared, angry, or whatever our racket feeling usually is. This usually leads quickly to us taking a "payoff". This is a confirmation that whatever negative (untrue) thoughts we have held on to about life are true.

Let's give an example of a game and take it apart using the language introduced above. Let's take the common game "Yes, But".

This is where one person has a problem and another person is invited to solve it. Everything the other person suggests is rejected with a "Yes, I could do that, but..(insert reason for not doing that)". We all know people who play this. We may even play it ourselves.

Whilst it may appear the player is asking for help on the social level, what they are really doing on the psychological level is proving that they can't be helped and no one else can control them. The switch comes when the other person gives up trying. The payoff for the player is proof that no one can help them even though they remain passive. This may be accompanied by feelings of sadness or anger, the feelings that the player learnt were acceptable to caregivers as a child.

The other player in this game may feel helpless and frustrated that they have been unable to help the starter of the game – these

feelings are likely to be very familiar too and reinforce a belief that they are not a very good friend, problem solver, therapist, etc. It takes two to play a game.

Why do we play games?

Games are a way in which we can get strokes without risking intimacy and confirm our beliefs (mostly wrongly held ones) about life.

How do we stop playing games?

The first thing we need to do is identify what games we are playing. Ask yourself what patterns keep emerging in your life? What predictable events occur? What feelings do you often end up having? A good TA therapist will speed up this process dramatically because we play games out of awareness. They will be able to spot the games and bring them into the light where you can chew them over and decide whether you want to keep on playing or you choose to do things differently, avoiding the negative payoff along the way.

In this chapter I have barely scraped the surface of this interesting and deep theory. If it's a topic you want to find more out about, I suggest you read [Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships](#), the book Eric Berne wrote just about this fascinating subject.

Reference:

* Woollams, S and Brown, M (1978). *Transactional Analysis*. Huron Valley Institute Press.

Chapter 7 – Script

Do We Choose Our Own Destiny?

Script is often compared to destiny or fate by those who misunderstand this Transactional Analysis idea. So what does a TA therapist mean by script?



As we grow up, we observe the world and work out how we can survive it. We make decisions when we are young that can stay with us for the rest of our lives unless we challenge these beliefs when we are adults and learn to do things differently.

Script is:

"A life plan based on decisions which limit a person's ability to problem solve and relate intimately with people".
(Erskine, R. 1980).

One of the main roles of a TA psychotherapist is to challenge script beliefs in their clients and help them move towards autonomy.

Many of the decisions that we make about the world are made completely out of our awareness and for good reason. For example, if, as a child, Bob is punished every time he cries, he learns very quickly not to cry or show emotions. He may develop a script belief that men shouldn't cry and feel uncomfortable around men who show their emotions and find it difficult to deal with his own when things get tough in his personal life.

His script decision has kept him safe as a child and was a great way of surviving, but as an adult he is not in danger if he shows his emotions and his inability to do so may well cause difficulty between him and his partner who feels he is cold and remote from her.

Bob's therapist may well bring Bob's script beliefs around emotions into his awareness where they can both discuss where they originated from and how they can be changed if that's what Bob wants.

The result of changing these beliefs for Bob might be a better relationship with his partner, who feels closer to him, and a reduction in stressful feelings as Bob now realises it's OK to feel sad and scared and is able to talk about these feelings more easily with people he trusts.

And that's the key to script – we made the decisions so we can change them. We have that power.

By having our script beliefs brought into our awareness and challenging those that limit us we have the opportunity to lead more spontaneous, flexible and intimate lives.

We choose our own destiny. Our fate is in our own hands. A good therapist helps us realise our dreams that bit quicker.

References:

Erskine, R, Script Cure: Behavioral, Intrapsychic and Physiological. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 1980, 10 (2) 102-106.