

# TA Tribe

ONLINE TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS TRAINING AND SUPERVISION  
FOR ORGANISATIONAL PRACTITIONERS  
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## PSYCHOLOGICAL GAMES

### FOCUS PAPER

In 1964 Eric Berne wrote a book called “Games People Play” and it became a bestseller, much to his surprise. He recognised that human beings repeated patterns of behaviour which served to keep their script in place and were played over and over again throughout their lives.

As infants, when we are looking to make-meaning of our environment, make sense of all of the billions of bits of data which come our way as we develop from birth, to a toddler to an infant and then a junior etc we form what is known as our [FRAME OF REFERENCE](#).

Imagine a picture frame with a thick border – we file away information about ourselves into the framework: gender; religious beliefs; values; ideas about what the world is like; what “people like us” do and think etc.

The organisation of all this information is contained in our [INTERNAL EGO STATES](#), it is conditioning which gives us a structure and framework in which to operate. We take on board both positive and negative views of others along with our own immature perceptions of situations and what it might mean.

At a very young age, through the absorbing of all this information, we write a [SCRIPT](#) for ourselves. We make decisions about who we are, what the world is like and how we need to be in that world. We then progress through the different stages of our lives, still gathering the information – but now it is filtered through a layer of our lived experience, our perceptions, our family values.

We now have a distorted view. We ‘bend’ information to make it fit the decisions we made often long ago. If we decided people are not to be trusted we might hesitate to make new friends; if we decided that we would only be liked if we behaved perfectly, we set incredibly high standards for ourselves and harshly beat ourselves up when we make mistakes. If we were harshly treated by parents or parental figures, we expect our teachers to treat us the same way. If they don’t do this – we act out to provoke their disdain so that eventually they crack, and treat us harshly. We can then feel ‘satisfied’ that our expectations have been met. Sadly, we do not see that we have created our own reality.

Many, many people are not aware of their frame of reference and do not realise they are making important decisions as a grown-up based on information received as a child. They go through life in their script, to the final act and epilogue.

**RACKETS** and **PSYCHOLOGICAL GAMES** are ways of maintaining our script. The main difference between them is that rackets are internal mechanisms: a closed-loop way of thinking that involves no-one else. Games are played with other players, and they involve a switch (a changing of roles with those others). They are observable and their progress can be plotted around The Drama Triangle (see below).

Running rackets and playing games helps us to maintain our **LIFE POSITION**, our script, our frame of reference. We manipulate our environment, and those around us to fulfil our **STRUCTURE HUNGER** – it may be unpleasant or even painful, but it is familiar, and what I am used to .....

### **FEATURES OF GAMES**

- Start with a ‘con’ (the ulterior transaction that begins the game)
- Connect with a ‘gimmick’ (the aspect of a person who gets drawn into a game that makes them susceptible to the ‘con’)
- They are familiar patterns of behaviour
- Played for strokes
- Played when there is no contract
- Mostly played unconsciously
- Two players, sometimes 3 and sometimes more
- There is a switch of roles, a shift in the dynamic
- There is an ‘ouch’ moment – a negative payoff or gain
- Played by people who find it difficult to connect in authentic ways with others

Focussing on the behavioural aspect of psychological games, the first thing to be aware of is that we play our games with another person, and it may be that a third person joins the game, or maybe even more people. Some will be passive ‘watchers’ of the game as it develops – they may think they are not involved but the very act of being in the audience means that they are indeed playing a part.

When we have those conversations where we come away feeling confused, or hurt, bewildered or self-satisfied – it might be that we were caught up in a game. When we **DISCOUNT** another’s feelings or competence, perhaps we were in a game. When we verbally attack, or jump to another’s defence – it might be that a game is playing out.

All human beings play games – it does not mean we are bad or mean people!

Some games are very mild and inconsequential, and other games are so severe that they may finish in a court of law, or in a hospital such is the serious nature of the dynamics.

Some games are over in seconds, and some last a life-time – couples and family members play their ‘favourite’, ‘tried and tested’ games with each other. Think about family Christmas get-togethers – in many families it is not very long at all before the old dynamics are in flow and people are arguing!

Games are an aspect of unconscious processes which flow between people – the unconscious, unseen and sometimes unaware aspects of our script which lead us into these dynamics. The process is aided by transference phenomena (a peculiar process whereby unconsciously we project the face of someone from our past, onto someone in our present and relate to the new person, as if they were the figure from our past).

And the thing is, while we may feel weirdly energised by them, we do not feel good in ourselves when we play. It may be that the game generates excitement, gives us something to tell our best friend about – but accumulated playing can leave us feeling empty. Game playing is not a psychologically healthy behaviour and those who play a great deal can be left feeling lonely, empty and with a sense of not being able to sustain strong relationships.

Any place where human beings gather are breeding grounds for unhealthy games to be generated. In the workplace, people with all sorts of different frames of reference, experience, backgrounds, ages etc come together with the stated aims of achieving organisational goals. But games can get in the way so much that they do not achieve, and the atmosphere is deadly, and the absence rates go up as people fall prey to stress conditions, depression, anxiety etc. Or the turn-over of staff is so great that only people whose personal responsibilities etc mean they feel they can’t leave stay put ..... with a sense of feeling trapped which is not great for motivation!

Before we all lose the will to live .... Let’s look at why human beings play games.

As mentioned above, we play games to serve our script – they confirm our view of our place in the world, a place that we decided was ours when we had an immature capacity for understanding the complexities of being human. So if our decision was that we were useless, unable to do things successfully for ourselves – it may be that we create situations where we are expecting others to ‘look after us’ etc.

Another reason we play games is because we have a **HUNGER FOR RECOGNITION**. This hunger is ‘measured out’ in units called **STROKES**. We all have a ‘quota’ of strokes we have somehow decided is our daily requirement – we would rather have positive strokes, but negative ones will do if that is all that is on offer. Games generate negative strokes.

Berne (1964) listed so-called advantages of games:

**EXTERNAL PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ADVANTAGE:**

Playing means we can avoid being authentic, we avoid saying what we really feel

**INTERNAL PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ADVANTAGE:**

We tell ourselves we are right to see ourselves this way

INTERNAL SOCIAL ADVANTAGE:	The drama of the game gives us a ‘kick’
EXTERNAL SOCIAL ADVANTAGE:	The game gives us something to talk about
BIOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE:	The game is a source of strokes, which we need for healthy development physically and mentally
EXISTENTIAL ADVANTAGE:	The result of the game justifies our frame of reference

The more self-aware we are, the more we are able to see alternatives to game-playing. The more we stay out of games, the more stress-free our lives become – and that has a positive physical impact.

In order to see those options, we need to be able to analyse the roles and the moves in a game. We need to be able to get our strokes (units of recognition) in healthy ways which are life-affirming and relationship building. We need to develop coping strategies too, for when our ‘battery’ is low and we have lost sight of the good things in our lives.

The good news is that we can identify actions to support ourselves when life gets challenging. This may help us to avoid ‘infecting’ our relationships, our peace of mind, our sleep .....

### THE NAMES OF THE GAMES

*Games People Play* lists many games which Berne named, helping people to understand the dynamics. Below is a sample of those listed.

NAME OF THE GAME	PLAYER	CONVERSATION
YES, BUT ...	Susan	<i>“It’s not fair, my boss has turned my project down!”</i>
	Jane	<i>“Ask her for feedback, so you can improve the offer”</i>
	Susan	<i>“Yes, but – I don’t think she will listen”</i>
	Jane	<i>“You don’t know until you try”</i>
	Susan	<i>“Nah – it is a bad idea - you don’t understand”</i>

POOR ME	Ali	<i>"I'm not going to go for the Team Leader job. People like me always get overlooked for promotion"</i>
	Acey	<i>"Well, how about I help you draw up a plan?"</i>
	Ali	<i>"You're not in charge of me – I can draw up my own plan!"</i>

MILLSTONE	Sky	Relies on, or falls back on an infirmity of some sort and uses it as a reason for her helplessness or inability to think.
	Mary	Provides help, Sky demands more and more of Mary's time.
	Mary	<i>"Could you do some of this now please – I am short of time this afternoon?"</i>
	Sky	<i>"Charming! You can't really expect me to do that, not with my weak chest/bad back/condition!"</i>
	Mary	<i>"Oh, I have had enough of this!"</i>

SEE WHAT YOU MADE ME DO?	Marley	Asks for advice
	Stephen	Flattered, gives it
	Marley	<i>Puts Stephen's advice into action Results are not what Marley wanted</i>
	Marley	<i>Your advice was rubbish – see what you made me do!"</i>

IF IT  
WEREN'T  
FOR YOU  
...

Kim Has not visited Mum (Doris) for a couple of weeks

Doris After no apology and little attention from Kim  
*"If it weren't for you I would have had a career!"*

Kim *"You know I am working two jobs at the moment!"*

Doris *"But you still find time to visit your best friend don't you? And after all I have done for you ...."*

GOTCHA!

Alex Answers the trainer's questions, supports the trainer's ideas.

Trainer Flattered to the edges of his competence in the area – says something he is not quite sure of ...

Alex *"Oh really? That doesn't quite match up with what you said this morning, does it?"*

Trainer *"I have several years' experience in this area – you have only just been introduced to it!"*

BLEMISH

Rosemary *That was a lovely apple pie*

Mandy *Thank you!*

Rosemary *Shame about that burnt bit ....*

Mandy *What burnt bit?! I tried really hard and that's all you can say?*

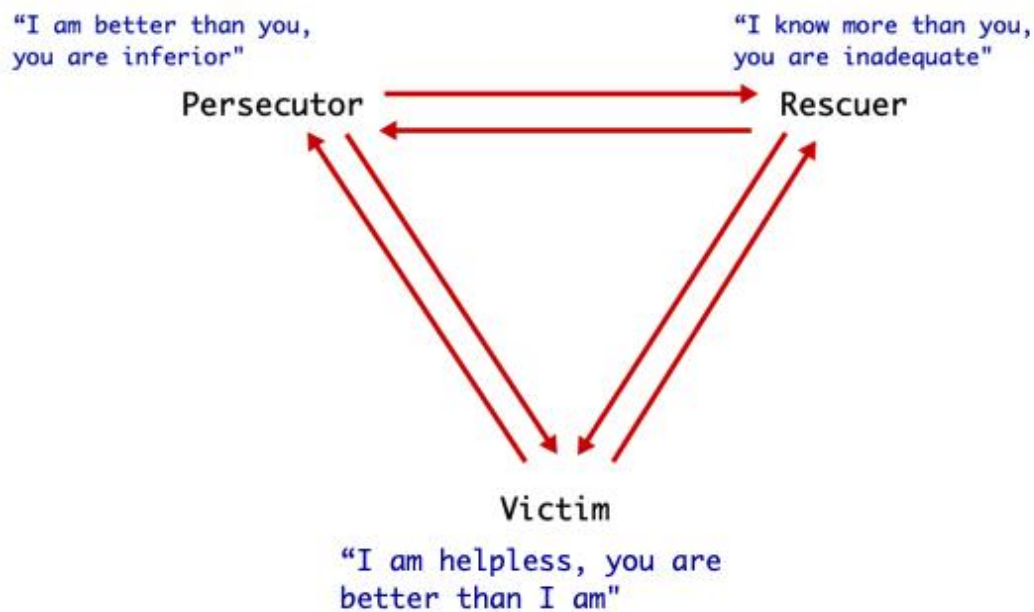
Rosemary *"Don't make such a fuss!"*

## THE DRAMA TRIANGLE

Berne (1964) defined games as:

*"an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined predictable outcome"*

In 1968 Steve Karpman devised an elegant model to apply to the process of games which he called **THE DRAMA TRIANGLE**.



The difference between a **RACKET** and a game is that a game is played with another person, and in a game there is always a **SWITCH** of roles.

We can initiate a game from any one of the positions shown on the triangle, and we will all have our 'favourite' place to either start a game, or from where we allow ourselves to get drawn into a game.

If we choose to initiate a game from the **VICTIM POSITION**, we may attract someone who plays Persecutor, or someone who plays Rescuer. We may start from this position if we have low self-esteem, if we do not take responsibility for our feelings and actions, if we expect other people to make our lives work better for us.

From here, when such a person is low on strokes, they seek to top themselves up by giving out invitations such as Marta might with *"It's not fair, things never work out well for me"* or *"I can't do spreadsheets so I am not even going to try!"* Three colleagues in the team

might 'refuse' or avoid the invitation, but maybe John responds from the Persecutor point with something like *"You are always complaining, you act like a child!"*

Perhaps this is where the switch of roles happens – John is pushed down to the Victim point as Marta swaps roles to the Persecutor point with a response like *"Well I saw the mess you made of the production spreadsheet last week – you're no good at it either!"*

This exchange could continue, or Munira who is witnessing it might join from the Rescuer point with *"Leave her alone, what gives you the right to judge?"* aimed at John when he is in the Persecutor position and before Marta can speak. Marta then turns on Munira and from the Persecutor place says, *"Who asked you for your opinion?"*, pushing Munira from Rescuer to Victim. And so it goes on .....

If like Munira we start a game from the **RESCUER ROLE** it could be that we like to be seen as the 'nice, friendly, helpful' one and at an unconscious level may think that we only deserve strokes when helping others. It may be that we see ourselves in a superior position of knowing more than others and feel the need to share what we know. We may not realise that we are **DISCOUNTING** other people's abilities when we fuss over them or rush to help without being invited.

If like John we start a game from the **PERSECUTOR ROLE** – we may feel frustrated, only see things from our frame of reference and feel the need to demonstrate how clever we are. We **DISCOUNT** other people's feelings, and are not always aware that our sarcastic comments hurt.

Games are usually written up as unconscious – we give out the invitation or get sucked into a game without conscious awareness. We are not in the 'here-and-now' enough to fully understand the impact of our behaviour. Some people play games consciously – they tease people (Persecutor) to get a certain response and they are aware of what they are doing. Consciously people might whine (Victim) in order that someone else does an unpleasant job for them. Or, sometimes a person might have a hidden agenda *"look how helpful I am, you must promote me"* (Rescuer).

Games as written up by Berne have a switch of roles and are played unconsciously, although he did describe **ANGULAR TRANSACTIONS** (Adult to Child) as conscious invitations. From a practitioner's point of view, helping others to identify their unconscious games as the mechanism whereby they get into difficulty with other people is a very supportive route to take. Even more so when we help them to get strokes in healthy ways instead of playing games.

The 'ouch' feeling, or negative pay off as Berne puts it is in the switching of the roles – it is the weird excitement of the drama, the sense of 'what is going on now?', maybe even a sense of shock.

These sensations, which can be felt bodily, are racket feelings – we run our rackets internally, and then manipulate others with our invitation to games in order to feel that

familiar feeling. We can then tell ourselves we are right to think the way we do, to tell ourselves we are unlovable, or cleverer than most, or stupid etc.

*“... a racket, then, is a feeling out of all possible feelings that is habitually turned on by a given person as his payoff in the games he plays” (Berne, 1972, page 167)*

So – if we pay attention to our frame of reference, our script decisions and rackets ... our life position can shift and we will not play as many games. It will take some reflective thought, but we can change our behaviour once we are fully aware of what is lurking beneath the surface, ready to pounce when we are least aware .....

## ILLUSTRATION - 'KICK ME' GAME

We sometimes escalate a game invitation until it hits its mark. If we want to stay out of games, we need to see the invitation and deal with it from a conscious place.

1	Trainee agrees to join a workshop		
2	Trainer sends an intake form, and asks for trainee to book a 30 min 'chemistry' session		
3	Trainee returns form, does not book session	Con	Trainer does not respond to the con
4	Five days before workshop, trainer emails explaining the need for the session		
5	Trainee emails, I can make time now	Con	Trainer does not respond to the con
6	Trainer sends Zoom link		
7	Trainee does not 'arrive'	Con	Trainer does not respond to the con
8	Trainer sends email asking him to rebook		Trainer starting to feel annoyed
9	He does, call is held next day. Trainee displays "Hurry Up" speech patterns and seems distracted		
10	Workshop takes place. Trainee "You got stuck in a parallel process"	Con	Trainee (Persecutor) invites Trainer (Victim) into game
<b>GAME PLAYED</b>			
11	Trainer: feels shaken	Con/ Gimmick matched	Trainer's gimmick "I am not good enough"  Trainer accepts game invitation

12	Trainer to trainee: “There wasn’t one – are you sure you have TA experience?”		Trainer – Persecutor  Trainee – Victim
<b>GAME AVOIDED</b>			
13	Trainer: “Oh, that’s interesting, I didn’t experience myself as stuck. Say more about what you saw”		Trainer invites trainee into the here and now, to use his Adult thinking abilities

The “Kick Me’ player invites from Victim – they say things or do things that unconsciously test out the other person.

If they find someone to play with – they may escalate the game until they find the point at which the other person ‘takes the bait’, and bites.

The Kick Me player has manipulated that person into playing his or her game. They can now tell themselves they were right – this is what I can expect from the world.

In the example above, the con was offered and escalated from move 3 to move 7. The con finally hits its mark at move 10.

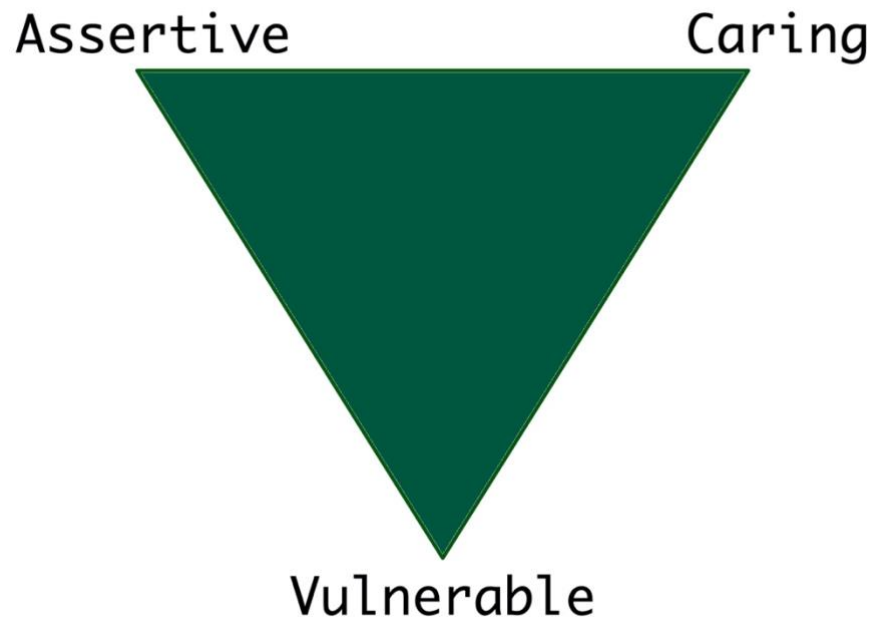
If trainer and trainee move on through to move 12, the game has been played.

If the trainer avoids getting stuck in the game with a response such as at move 13 – all may be well.

But not necessarily ..... the trainee may retreat, only for the game invitation to pop up again later! Some people still have a way to go before they even approach being game free and they may simply have too much invested in their need to get negative strokes to give up easily. So, the trainer (or whoever) needs to maintain their okayness, using a positive inner dialogue and staying in the here-and-now. They need to have their coping strategies available, some useful interventions (*‘I have a different view ....’* or *‘I am noticing some agitation between us – I wonder what that is about?’* etc.

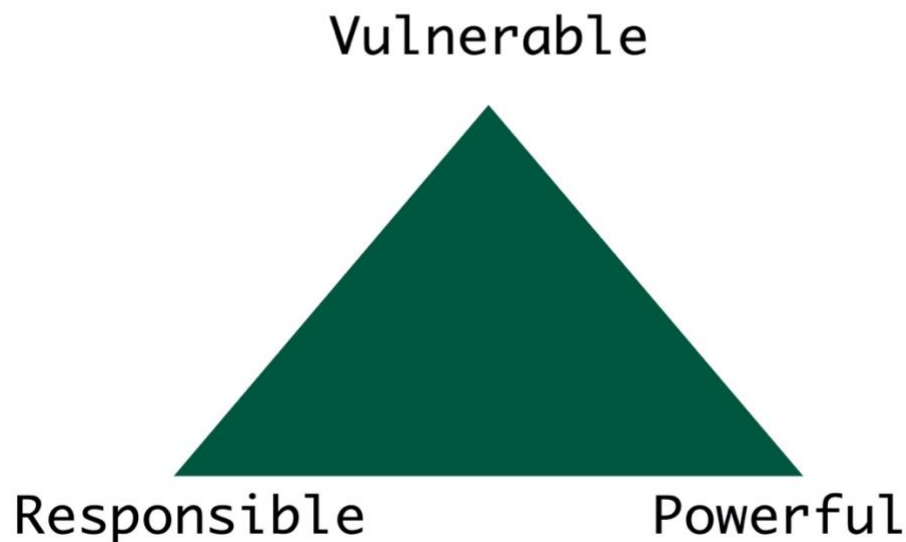
Also useful is to get into the habit of analysing the dynamics of a game after an encounter – where did it start? Did I start it? If so, how? Did I get sucked in? Which role was I playing – Persecutor? Rescuer? Victim? How come?

## THE WINNER'S TRIANGLE



Acey Choy (1990) changed the labels to Assertive, Caring and Vulnerable. She said that assertive people ask questions, are clear, ask for what they want, will say no appropriately, give straight feedback and make reasonable changes to get their needs met. Caring people do not take over, do ask the other what help they need, and do not do things they do not want to do. Vulnerable people have a healthy Internal Adult and use it to think clearly, problem solve, and for reality checking and awareness of own feelings.

## THE POTENCY PYRAMID



Hay (2009) turns the Drama Triangle upside down in The Potency Pyramid to convey the stability that the model offers. She labels the roles which match the initial letters of the Karpman model and says that used in combination, these three roles offer potency.

This is not a dynamic model, as an individual the idea is that we cover all three roles:

**POWERFUL** (instead of Persector) Taking appropriate action, including the protection of those who genuinely cannot help themselves

**RESPONSIBLE** (instead of Rescuer) Taking appropriate responsibility for those elements which are for us to deal with and not taking on the responsibilities of others

**VULNERABLE** (instead of Victim) Asking for help when we need it, showing our vulnerabilities, accepting that others have the right to refuse

Whichever model you use, the idea is that focusing on the behaviours suggested will enable you to stay grounded, in an I'm okay, You're okay place. You will be less likely to initiate or to get sucked into games no matter how strong the invitations. This takes practice!

Think of the TA concepts as facets of a diamond – think of each facet as a TA concept and focus on the problem using that concept. Then move on through other facets (using other concepts, until understanding has been reached.

## WAYS OF DEALING WITH OR STAYING OUT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL GAMES

1. Contract clearly – hold people accountable (including yourself). Ask questions, be clear about what is expected of you, and what you expect of others. Make sure all stakeholders are accounted for. Use your intuition, check out your hunches – are they shy about saying something? Are they worried about bothering you?
2. Be aware of your stroke quota – seek positive strokes in healthy ways. Ask for feedback. Find someone who will listen to you without judging. Take care of your physical and emotional needs
3. Increase personal awareness – reflect frequently, use the TA tools and concepts to analyse the dynamics
4. Give genuine positive strokes – seek opportunities to recognise the efforts and attributes of others
5. Play the game, but do not take the payoff – many games are ‘socially acceptable’ mild banter etc. Try not to take things personally
6. Challenge, speak out – *”What do you need from me at the moment?”* *“I notice you seem frustrated ...”* *“I am feeling unsure of myself here ...”*
7. Apply the Potency Pyramid or the Winner’s Triangle

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