



PENGUIN BOOKS

## **GAMES PEOPLE PLAY**

Dr Eric Berne, like his father, graduated from the Faculty of Medicine, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, and later moved to the United States, where he had his internship in psychiatry at the New Haven Hospital and

the Yale Institute of Human Relations. He also studied at the New York and San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institutes. During the Second World War he served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps and was discharged with the rank of major. Afterwards he became a consultant in psychiatry and neurology to the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army. He was a practising psychiatrist in Carmel and San Francisco, California, a lecturer at the University of California Medical School, and Consultant in Group Therapy at McAuley Clinic in San Francisco. He was a corresponding member of the Indian Psychiatric Society, chairman of the board of trustees of the International Transactional Analysis Association and editor of the *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*. He also wrote *The Mind in Action*, *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*, *The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups* and *Principles of Group Treatment*. *A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis* and *Sex in Human Loving* are also available in Penguins. While at college he wrote for the Canadian magazine *Forum*, the London *Adelphi*, and other periodicals. He died in 1970.

ERIC BERNE



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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014,  
USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria  
3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New  
Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany,  
Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank  
2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL,  
England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

First published in the USA 1964

Published in Great Britain by André Deutsch 1966

Published in Penguin Books for sale outside the United Kingdom 1967

Published in Penguin Books for sale within the United Kingdom 1968

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ISBN: 978-0-14-193836-3

To my patients and students who taught me more and more and are still teaching me about games and the meaning of life

## **Contents**

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART ONE](#)

[ANALYSIS OF GAMES](#)

[1 Structural Analysis](#)

2 Transactional Analysis

3 Procedures and Rituals

4 Pastimes

5 Games

PART TWO

A THESAURUS OF GAMES

Introduction

6 Life Games

1. *Alcoholic*

2. *Debtor*

3. *Kick Me*

4. *Now I've Got You, You Son of a Bitch*

5. *See What You Made Me Do*

7 Marital Games

1. *Corner*

2. *Courtroom*

3. *Frigid Woman*

4. *Harried*

5. *If It Weren't for You*

6. *Look How Hard I've Tried*

## 7. Sweetheart

## 8 Party Games

### 1. Ain't It Awful

### 2. Blemish

### 3. Schlemiel

### 4. Why Don't You – Yes But

## 9 Sexual Games

### 1. Let's You and Him Fight

### 2. Perversion

### 3. Rapo

### 4. The Stocking Game

### 5. Uproar

## 10 Underworld Games

### 1. Cops and Robbers

### 2. How Do You Get Out of Here

### 3. Let's Pull a Fast One on Joey

## 11 Consulting Room Games

### 1. Greenhouse

### 2. I'm Only Trying to Help You

### 3. Indigence

[4. Peasant](#)

[5. Psychiatry](#)

[6. Stupid](#)

[7. Wooden Leg](#)

[12 Good Games](#)

[1. Busman's Holiday](#)

[2. Cavalier](#)

[3. Happy to Help](#)

[4. Homely Sage](#)

[5. They'll Be Glad They Knew Me](#)

[PART THREE](#)

[BEYOND GAMES](#)

[13 The Significance of Games](#)

[14 The Players](#)

[15 A Paradigm](#)

[16 Autonomy](#)

[17 The Attainment of Autonomy](#)

[18 After Games, What?](#)

[Appendix The Classification of Behaviour](#)

[Index of Pastimes and Games](#)

[Author Index](#)

[Subject Index](#)

## **Preface**

THIS book is primarily designed to be a sequel to my book *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*, [1](#) but has been planned so that it can be read and understood independently. The theory necessary for the analysis and clear understanding of games has been summarized in [Part I](#). [Part II](#) contains descriptions of the individual games. [Part III](#) contains new clinical and theoretical material which, added to the old, makes it possible to understand to some extent what it means to be game-free. Those desiring further background are referred to the earlier volume. The reader of both will note that in addition to the theoretical advances, there have been some minor changes in terminology and viewpoint based on further thinking and reading and new clinical material.

The need for this book was indicated by interested requests from students and lecture audiences for lists of games, or for further elaboration of games mentioned briefly as examples in a general exposition of the principles of transactional analysis. Thanks are due in general to these students and audiences, and especially to the many patients who exposed to view, spotted or named new games; and in particular to Miss Barbara Rosenfeld for her many ideas about the art and meaning of listening; and to



Mr Melvin Boyce, Mr Joseph Concannon, Dr Franklin Ernst, Dr Kenneth Everts, Dr Gordon Gitter, Mrs Frances Matson, and Dr Ray Poindexter, among others, for their independent discovery or confirmation of the significance of many games.

Mr Claude Steiner, formerly Research Director of the San Francisco Social Psychiatry Seminars and presently in the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan deserves special mention on two counts. He conducted the first experiments which confirmed many of the theoretical points at issue here, and as a result of these experiments he helped considerably in clarifying the nature of autonomy and of intimacy. Thanks are also due to Miss Viola Litt, the Secretary-Treasurer of the Seminars, and to Mrs Mary N. Williams, my personal secretary, for their continued help, and to Anne Garrett for her assistance in reading the proof.

## **SEMANTICS**

For conciseness, the games are described primarily from the male point of view unless they are clearly feminine. Thus the chief player is usually designated as 'he', but without prejudice, since the same situation, unless otherwise indicated, could as easily be outlined with 'she', *mutatis mutandis*. If the woman's role differs significantly from the man's, it is treated separately. The therapist is similarly without prejudice designated as

‘he’. The vocabulary and viewpoint are primarily oriented toward the practising clinician, but members of other professions may find this book interesting or useful.

Transactional game analysis should be clearly distinguished from its growing sister science of mathematical game analysis, although a few of the terms used in the text, such as ‘payoff’, are now respectably mathematical. For a detailed review of the mathematical theory of games see *Games & Decisions*, by R. D. Luce and H. Raiffa. [2](#)

Carmel, California, May 1962

## REFERENCES

[1](#). Berne, E., *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*, Evergreen, 1961.

[2](#). Luce, R. D., and Raiffa, H., *Games & Decisions*, Chapman & Hall, 1957.

## Introduction

### 1 • SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

THE theory of social intercourse, which has been outlined at some length in *Transactional Analysis*, [1](#) may be summarized as follows.

Spitz has found [2](#) that infants deprived of handling over a long period will tend at length to sink into an irreversible decline and are prone to

succumb eventually to intercurrent disease. In effect, this means that what he calls emotional deprivation can have a fatal outcome. These observations give rise to the idea of *stimulus-hunger*, and indicate that the most favoured forms of stimuli are those provided by physical intimacy, a conclusion not hard to accept on the basis of everyday experience.

An allied phenomenon is seen in grown-ups subjected to sensory deprivation. Experimentally, such deprivation may call forth a transient psychosis, or at least give rise to temporary mental disturbances; In the past, social and sensory deprivation is noted to have had similar effects in individuals condemned to long periods of solitary imprisonment. Indeed, solitary confinement is one of the punishments most dreaded even by prisoners hardened to physical brutality,<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>and is now a notorious procedure for inducing political compliance. (Conversely, the best of the known

weapons against political compliance is social organization.)<sup>5</sup>

On the biological side, it is probable that emotional and sensory deprivation tends to bring about or encourage organic changes. If the reticular activating system<sup>6</sup> of the brain stem is not sufficiently stimulated, degenerative changes in the nerve cells may follow, at least indirectly. This may be a secondary effect due to poor nutrition, but the poor nutrition itself may be a product of apathy, as in infants suffering from marasmus. Hence a

biological chain may be postulated leading from emotional and sensory deprivation through apathy to degenerative changes and death. In this sense, stimulus-hunger has the same relationship to survival of the human organism as food-hunger.

Indeed, not only biologically but also psychologically and socially, stimulus-hunger in many ways parallels the hunger for food. Such terms as malnutrition, satiation, gourmet, gourmand, faddist, ascetic, culinary arts, and good cook are easily transferred from the field of nutrition to the field of sensation. Overstuffing has its parallel in overstimulation. In both spheres, under ordinary conditions where ample supplies are available and a diversified menu is possible, choices will be heavily influenced by an individual's idiosyncrasies. It is possible that some or many of these idiosyncrasies are constitutionally determined, but this is irrelevant to the problems at issue here.

The social psychiatrist's concern in the matter is with what happens after the infant is separated from his mother in the normal course of growth. What has been said so far may be summarized by the 'colloquialism': [7](#) 'If you are not stroked, your spinal cord will shrivel up.' Hence, after the period of close intimacy with the mother is over, the individual for the rest of his life is confronted with a dilemma upon whose horns his destiny and

survival are continually being tossed. One horn is the social, psychological and biological forces which stand in the way of continued physical intimacy in the infant style; the other is his perpetual striving for its attainment.

Under most conditions he will compromise. He learns to do with more subtle, even symbolic, forms of handling, until the merest nod of recognition may serve the purpose to some extent, although his original craving for physical contact may remain unabated.

This process of compromise may be called by various terms, such as sublimation; but whatever it is called, the result is a partial transformation of the infantile stimulus-hunger into something which may be termed *recognition-hunger*. As the complexities of compromise increase, each person becomes more and more individual in his quest for recognition, and it is these differentia which lend variety to social intercourse and which determine the individual's destiny. A movie actor may require hundreds of strokes each week from anonymous and undifferentiated admirers to keep his spinal cord from shrivelling, while a scientist may keep physically and mentally healthy on one stroke a year from a respected master.

‘Stroking’ may be used as a general term for intimate physical contact; in practice it may take various forms. Some people literally stroke an infant; others hug or pat it, while some people pinch it playfully or flip it with a

fingertip. These all have their analogues in conversation, so that it seems one might predict how an individual would handle a baby by listening to him talk. By an extension of meaning, 'stroking' may be employed colloquially to denote any act implying recognition of another's presence. Hence a *stroke* may be used as the fundamental unit of social action. An exchange of strokes constitutes a *transaction*, which is the unit of social intercourse.

As far as the theory of games is concerned, the principle which emerges here is that any social intercourse whatever has a biological advantage over no intercourse at all. This has been experimentally demonstrated in the case of rats through some remarkable experiments by S. Levine<sup>8</sup> in which not only physical, mental and emotional development but also the biochemistry of the brain and even resistance to leukemia were favourably affected by handling. The significant feature of these experiments was that gentle handling and painful electric shocks were equally effective in promoting the health of the animals.

This validation of what has been said above encourages us to proceed with increased confidence to the next section.

## **2 · THE STRUCTURING OF TIME**

Granted that handling of infants, and its symbolic equivalent in grown-ups,

recognition, have a survival value. The question is. What next ? In everyday terms, what can people do after they have exchanged greetings, whether the greeting consists of a collegiate 'Hi!' or an Oriental ritual lasting several hours ? After stimulus-hunger and recognition hunger comes *structure-hunger*. The perennial problem of adolescents is : 'What do you say to her (him) then ? And to many people besides adolescents, nothing is more uncomfortable than a social hiatus, a period of silent, unstructured time when no one present can think of anything more interesting to say than: 'Don't you think the walls are perpendicular tonight ?' The eternal problem of the human being is how to structure his waking hours. In this existential sense, the function of all social living is to lend mutual assistance for this project.

The operational aspect of time-structuring may be called programming. It has three aspects: material, social and individual. The most common, convenient, comfortable, and utilitarian method of structuring time is by a project designed to deal with the material of external reality: what is commonly known as work. Such a project is technically called an *activity*; the term 'work' is unsuitable because a general theory of social psychiatry must recognize that social intercourse is also a form of work. *Material programming* arises from the vicissitudes encountered in

dealing with external reality; it is of interest here only insofar as activities offer a matrix for 'stroking', recognition, and other more complex forms of social intercourse. Material programming is not primarily a social problem; in essence it is based on data processing. The activity of building a boat relies on a long series of measurements and probability estimates, and any social exchange which occurs must be subordinated to these in order for the building to proceed.

*Social programming* results in traditional ritualistic or semi-ritualistic interchanges. The chief criterion for it is local acceptability, popularly called 'good manners'. Parents in all parts of the world teach their children manners, which means that they know the proper greeting, eating, emunctory, courting and mourning rituals, and also how to carry on topical conversations with appropriate strictures and reinforcements. The strictures and reinforcements constitute tact or diplomacy, some of which is universal and some local. Belching at meals or asking after another man's wife are each encouraged or forbidden by local ancestral tradition, and indeed there is a high degree of inverse correlation between these particular transactions. Usually in localities where people belch at meals, it is unwise to ask after the womenfolk; and in localities where people are asking after the womenfolk, it is unwise to belch at meals. Usually formal rituals precede



semi-ritualistic topical conversations, and the latter may be distinguished by calling them *pastimes*.

As people become better acquainted, more and more *individual programming* creeps in, so that ‘incidents’ begin to occur. These incidents superficially appear to be adventitious, and may be so described by the parties concerned, but careful scrutiny reveals that they tend to follow definite patterns which are amenable to sorting and classification, and that the sequence is circumscribed by unspoken rules and regulations. These regulations remain latent as long as the amities or hostilities proceed according to Hoyle, but they become manifest if an illegal move is made, giving rise to a symbolic, verbal or legal cry of ‘Foul!’ Such sequences, which in contrast to pastimes are based more on individual than on social programming, may be called *games*. Family life and married life, as well as life in organizations of various kinds, may year after year be based on variations of the same game.

To say that the bulk of social activity consists of playing games does not necessarily mean that it is mostly ‘fun’ or that the parties are not seriously engaged in the relationship. On the one hand, ‘playing’ football and other athletic ‘games’ may not be fun at all, and the players may be intensely grim; and such games share with gambling and other forms of

‘play’ the potentiality for being very serious indeed, sometimes fatal. On the other hand, some authors for instance [Huizinga,2](#) include under ‘play’ such serious things as cannibal feasts. Hence calling such tragic behaviour as suicide, alcohol and drug addiction, criminality or schizophrenia ‘playing games’ is not irresponsible, facetious or barbaric. The essential characteristic of human play is not that the emotions are spurious, but that they are regulated. This is revealed when sanctions are imposed on an illegitimate emotional display. Play may be grimly serious, or even fatally serious, but the social sanctions are serious only if the rules are broken. Pastimes and games are substitutes for the real living of real intimacy. Because of this they may be regarded as preliminary engagements rather than as unions, which is why they are characterized as poignant forms of play. Intimacy begins when individual (usually instinctual) programming becomes more intense, and both social patterning and ulterior restrictions and motives begin to give way. It is the only completely satisfying answer to stimulus-hunger, recognition-hunger and structure-hunger. Its prototype is the act of loving impregnation.

Structure-hunger has the same survival value as stimulus-hunger.

Stimulus-hunger and recognition-hunger express the need to avoid sensory and emotional starvation, both of which lead to biological deterioration.

Structure-hunger expresses the need to avoid boredom, and [Kierkegaard](#)<sup>10</sup> has pointed out the evils which result from unstructured time. If it persists for any length of time, boredom becomes synonymous with emotional starvation and can have the same consequences.

The solitary individual can structure time in two ways: activity and fantasy. An individual can remain solitary even in the presence of others, as every schoolteacher knows. When one is a member of a social aggregation of two or more people, there are several options for structuring time. In order of complexity, these are: (1) Rituals; (2) Pastimes; (3) Games; (4) Intimacy; and (5) Activity, which may form a matrix for any of the others. The goal of each member of the aggregation is to obtain as many satisfactions as possible from his transactions with other members. The more accessible he is, the more satisfactions he can obtain. Most of the programming of his social operations is automatic. Since some of the 'satisfactions' obtained under this programming, such as self-destructive ones, are difficult to recognize in the usual sense of the word 'satisfactions', it would be better to substitute some more non-committal term, such as 'gains' or 'advantages'.

The advantages of social contact revolve around somatic and psychic equilibrium. They are related to the following factors: (1) the relief of

tension; (2) the avoidance of noxious situations; (3) the procurement of stroking; and (4) the maintenance of an established equilibrium. All these items have been investigated and discussed in great detail by physiologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts. Translated into terms of social psychiatry, they may be stated as (1) the primary internal advantages; (2) the primary external advantages; (3) the secondary advantages; and (4) the existential advantages. The first three parallel the 'gains from illness' described by Freud: the internal paranoic gain, the external paranoic gain, and the epinoic gain, respectively. [11](#) Experience has shown that it is more useful and enlightening to investigate social transactions from the point of view of the advantages gained than to treat them as defensive operations. In the first place, the best defence is to engage in no transactions at all; in the second place, the concept of 'defences' covers only part of the first two classes of advantages, and the rest of them, together with the third and fourth classes, are lost to this point of view.

The most gratifying forms of social contact, whether or not they are embedded in a matrix of activity, are games and intimacy. Prolonged intimacy is rare, and even then it is primarily a private matter; significant social intercourse most commonly takes the form of games, and that is the subject which principally concerns us here. For further information about