

## GAMES MARRIED COUPLES PLAY: ADLERIAN VIEW<sup>1</sup>

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Eric Berne (4, 5) in developing his Transactional Analysis approach to psychotherapy used among others the popular conception of "games" which people play (see also 10, 11, 13). Our concept of games is quite similar to that of Berne in that it considers games as repetitive sets of dyadic maneuvers which combine defensive and offensive tactics while serving the individual's goals. These are seen in Adlerian terms as expressions of the "life style," by Berne as expressions of the "life script." These two concepts are functionally also quite similar, although they differ in their genetic assumptions.

The wide appeal and popularity of the "games" approach to understanding interpersonal relationships seems attributable to its conceptual simplicity. We are using Berne's term, with full credit to him, because of its familiarity and obviousness. Even as the public generally has adopted the games paradigm because of the understanding of personality dynamics it gives them, so the patient and the novice therapist alike, in our experience, have found this approach clarifying and helpful.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, to describe as games a number of patterned-stylized, conflictual-interactional maneuvers which we have consistently encountered in the treatment of married couples, and to list the rules of these games; second, to examine these games in relation to Adlerian personality theory as vertical movements related to certain complexes; third, to discuss the significance of games during the therapy session, how to identify them and how to deal with them.

Not all marital conflict or disagreement is encompassed under the concept of games. The core of the games concept is that the spouses are unconsciously engaged in a struggle for personal prestige and/or domination.

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## GAMES—THEIR PROGRESSION AND RULES

While each of the "games" described below has its inherent fundamental "rules" by which it can be identified, there are idiosyncratic variations unique to each couple.

*Game No. 1: "I'm Right; You're Wrong!"*

This is perhaps the most popular game. One reason for this may be that it presents a mandate particular to our present-day culture, as alluded to by Dreikurs (6, 7). A typical round proceeds something like this:

WIFE: You were drunk at the party last night and you made a fool of yourself.

HUSBAND: I was not drunk. I had only five or six highballs and I didn't make a fool of myself. I simply cracked a few jokes.

WIFE: Five or six! *That's* a joke. I stopped counting at five and besides you were laughing so loud that everybody could hear you.

HUSBAND: I was not laughing that loud and furthermore . . .

WIFE: You not only made a fool of yourself, you embarrassed me by telling those off-color jokes which *you* think are so funny.

HUSBAND: They were not off-color and besides everyone was laughing. You wouldn't know a good joke if it hit you over the head.

WIFE: I know how to laugh at jokes that aren't sick!

HUSBAND: (*in an excited voice*) Sick?

The dialogue proceeds thusly until . . .

WIFE: Isn't it ridiculous, Doctor, the way he won't admit he's wrong?

HUSBAND: Well, you can see how she exaggerates everything, can't you, Doctor?

The rules are:

1. The game can be played regardless of the significance, or insignificance, of the event or detail being argued.

2. Both participants must claim exclusive possession of the "real" facts and deny the possibility of each others' access to them. E.g., "You were too drunk to know what kind of fool you were making of yourself."

3. Statements are never presented as impressions or feelings, but always as absolute facts.

4. Any third person "in attendance" will be made judge or referee whether he is a therapist, child, relative, or whatever.

The game is a tenacious battle to avoid being proven wrong. Even when the "loser" is declared by a third person or determined by overwhelming evidence, he is reluctant to seek a compromise or end the game. He is humiliated and dejected and ready to start a new game that he "can't lose."

The goal of being declared right is the achievement of dominance over the spouse and control of the relationship. Equality is thus denied and subjugation established. The goal of the game is identical to the neurotic search for glory and depreciation of the partner which preclude the possibility of cooperation and marital harmony.

*Game No. 2: "I've Got a Debit; You've Got a Credit."*

Adler anticipated this game in his description of the anithetical mode of apperception in which the neurotic orders events "like the debit and credit sides in bookkeeping, and admits no degrees between, . . . an expression of a strong safeguarding tendency" (3, p. 248). "Accounting," in our frame of reference, is an interaction pattern between husband and wife so that neither is short-changed in their partnership. For example:

HUSBAND: You decided where we went on vacation last year. This year it's my turn.

WIFE: Yeah, but we stayed in the hotel you wanted and played golf whenever you wanted to. When are we going to do what I want?

HUSBAND: We ate at those foreign restaurants because you like spicy food, even though I was half-sick the whole time.

WIFE: Well we flew 'cause you don't like to drive, even though I wanted to see the country. (*And so on.*)

The rules which are based on a profound distrust between spouses are:

1. Always keep tabs on the activities of your spouse. And, as the corollary, never let your spouse know what you are doing.
2. Occasionally give in on little matters to accumulate "IOU's" for something you really want.
3. Assume that your spouse, whenever possible, will try to short-change you.
4. A spouse's enjoyment must never be shared; but rather insist that it be counterbalanced by your own opportunity for fun.

The impetus for this game, the assumption one will be short-changed, often extends to people and life in general. One is convinced

that one must constantly be on guard so as not to be taken advantage of. This game and its goals are manifestations of a pessimistic life style with little social interest.

*Game No. 3: "Pay Attention!"*

This game can be played by one or both spouses. It can consist of a mutual shouting contest, or it can be a one-sided nagging affair. Regardless of the particular form, the goal is always the same: The proponent is seeking involvement with his spouse. Arguments, even physical abuse, will satisfy the goals, for it is a game of desperation. Being ignored by a significant person is equivalent to not existing. This is an extreme expression of the neurotic oversensitivity described by Adler. After positive or constructive maneuvers to gain attention fail, the "pay attention" player will frequently shift to negative behaviors. These are more difficult to ignore because they are more irritating. But even the hostility that such negative behaviors evoke is preferable to the alternative of isolation as Dreikurs (6) has suggested. The following rules prevail:

1. Never be silent in the presence of your spouse, or else, be so conspicuously silent that he is troubled by it.
2. Always announce what you are going to do before you do it. E.g., instead of simply sitting down, announce, "I think I'll sit down for a while."
3. Continually ask permission from your partner. An "Is it all right if I . . . ?" sentence cannot be ignored; it commands an answer.
4. Require your spouse's assistance in everything you do. Even a refusal is a form of attention. If you get your spouse to shout at you, you have won!
5. Rearrange your spouse's clothes, possessions, etc., so that he or she will have to ask your assistance in finding them.
6. Cultivate habits that annoy your spouse.

Once the "pay attention" player shifts to negative behaviors the progression of the game is inevitable: He will win. If negative attempts to gain recognition fail at one level of intensity, the level is raised until an "explosion" is elicited from the spouse. However, the emotional and sometimes physical price one must pay for the attention gained is enormous. Hostility and open conflict are the necessary by-products of "pay attention." It is unfortunate that couples do not recognize the positive side of their partner's negative behavior,

namely, his demonstration of their importance to him. Haley (9) has alluded to this entire interactional pattern when he indicated that therapists can reinterpret one spouse's negative behaviors in a more positive light as a therapeutic technique.

*Game No. 4: "I Don't Want to Discuss It!"*

This game is the reciprocal of "pay attention." One spouse tells the other about his refusal to participate in a game. In so doing, he initiates a new game of his own. Through his silence he becomes impregnable, invincible, in short, the winner! He is playing his own game all by himself, and thus, he can't lose.

This game allows only two responses to one's spouse: (a) silence and (b) "I don't want to talk about it." Other rules are:

1. Never show any irritation at the remarks of your spouse.
2. Whenever possible employ some method of dissociation: Turn your head, close your eyes, leave the room, read a newspaper, etc.
3. Can be played even when you are wrong and can't or won't admit it. You give the impression of being right and that it's stupid to question your position.

The demonstration of disdain in this game immediately places the player in a one-up position (see below) relative to the spouse. He is too mature, adult, rational, and/or moral to engage in his spouse's games. Frequently this game is initiated to avoid losing another game, just as the child snatches victory from the grasp of his adversary by stating, "I quit!"

*Game No. 5: "This is War!"*

There is nothing subtle, implicit, or manipulative in this game. Each participant merely selects a verbal club with which to attack his partner. It is an escalating cycle of attack, counter-attack, and retaliation that generally develops into a no-holds-barred verbal slugfest. What makes it a game is that the differences over which the fighting rages constitute a deception to cover up the underlying motive of revenge: "I have been hurt by something you did or said to me, and now I am hurting back." The rules are:

1. Hurt your spouse's feelings more than you are hurt.
2. Attack your spouse at his or her weakest point.
3. If your repertoire of name-calling and abuse-hurling becomes exhausted, attack your spouses' family, friends, etc.
4. Never intimate something nice about your spouse.

*Game No. 6: "It's All Your Fault!"*

In this game, one spouse takes the initiative in a problem or conflict situation and suggests the most "logical" of all solutions: "This situation could not conceivably be related even remotely to any ineptitude, error or negligence on my part. Therefore, it is my inescapable conclusion that this whole situation is *all your fault*." The rules are:

1. Strike first! The advantage lies with the attacker, who makes himself safe while placing his partner in a defensive position.
2. Accuse your spouse of total liability for the issue at hand. As long as he remains on the defensive, he is unable to "score points."
3. Obtain the consensus of children, other relatives, neighbors, minister, therapist, etc., that the culpability lies with your spouse.
4. Never under any circumstances consider what your part might be in the situation.

This game is most often encountered when one spouse is the identified patient and has demonstrated symptomatic behavior or been involved with the police, psychiatric treatment, financial or occupational crisis, etc. In some way society or overt behavior has identified one spouse as the source of the problem, and the other spouse is eager to engage in "It's All Your Fault" and deny any covert responsibility.

*Game No. 7: "Where Would You be Without Me?"*

In this game the player achieves a position of superiority by simultaneously declaring his own unselfishness and goodness and his spouse's ingratitude, weakness, and inherent worthlessness. Obviously this game is a defense against perceived inferiority. Any attempt by the spouse to deny the redeeming role of his mate merely underscores his ingratitude in the eyes of the advocate of the game.

The implicit as well as the most explicit forms of this game involve a recitation of a litany of self-sacrifice for one's mate with the implication that the latter's survival and basic worth would be imminently threatened if it were not for these sacrifices. For example, a wife might remind her husband, "I wash your clothes, fix your meals, raise your kids, lie to your boss when you're too hung over to work, etc."

The explicit form of the game is frequently encountered when husband and wife are from different socioeconomic levels. In fact, very often one partner's quest for a mate may have been a quest for someone to "save." He is then able to attain a feeling of superiority by reminding his spouse, "If it weren't for me you'd still be . . ."

The rules are:

1. Marry someone who is lazy, unattractive, uneducated or from a lower social class. This one act of benevolence can be traded for an entire marriage of demands upon your spouse.
2. Assume total responsibility for the welfare of your spouse, if not in the present, at least in the past.
3. If your redeeming efforts are questioned by your spouse, occasionally demonstrate his or her dependence by (a) going home to mother for a few days letting him fend for himself, and (b) visiting your spouse's conflictual parents to remind your spouse what you saved him from.

#### THE CONCEPT OF GAMES IN ADLERIAN THEORY

An important concept in Adlerian psychology is that of movement, which is integrally related to the concepts of goals and purposes (3, pp. 195-196). Human beings are not "driven," nor do they simply respond to stimuli and reinforcement expectancies. They move toward more or less unconscious individually unique goals of superiority, success, or simply, overcoming difficulties.

Lydia Sicher has added to this conception the distinction between movement on the vertical plane, and movement on the horizontal plane. The former corresponds to a view of life as a fixed above-below relationship where one aims to reach an ever higher rung on a precarious ladder, thereby adding to one's own prestige—a "most neuroticizing" conception. The latter corresponds to a view where there is ample room for everybody. "Side by side, each with his own start, his own road, his own goal, individuals can walk together, work together . . . contributing their share to life" (14, p. 101).

#### *Vertical Movement*

Husband-wife games are not relatively static, discrete tactics relevant only to the specific situationally determined ego-state. They are a continuance of a life-long theme directed toward a definite end or purpose within the context of a basic societal structure. Furthermore, all games are classically descriptive of movement on the vertical plane, elevation above one's fellow man. It is exactly what Haley has so well described as the art of "oneupmanship" (9, pp. 192-201).

When either or both spouses engage in games behavior they are interested only in their own vertical movement, self-aggrandizement, status and dominance relative to that of their spouse. The vertical

advance achieved in marital games is extremely damaging and precarious because it is at the expense of the spouse who in many instances will reflexively seek to overcome, to sabotage and to be victorious the next time, bringing about the fall of the original "victor" and perpetuating the neurotic cycle. Games are not only destructive of the spouses and their relationship, but also provide children with a faulty model of marriage and interpersonal behavior in general.

Marital horizontal movement by contrast, is free of games. It reflects an attitude of cooperation toward mutually beneficial goals. Such movement can be effected only when both spouses feel as equal partners in a marriage, motivated to seek constructive, mutually satisfying solutions to problems.

### *Complexes*

The games we presented are based on quite independent observations of married couples in treatment. Yet they are remarkably consistent with some relatively unknown psychological complexes described by Adler (2) in addition to the well known inferiority and superiority complexes. According to Adler complexes reflect one's attitudinal position toward life and are manifested in characteristic approaches to the tasks presented by the environment. Of the eight complexes identified by Adler we shall briefly describe the four which seem related to couples' game behaviors we were able to observe.

*Redeemer complex.* The "redeemer" attains superiority by becoming a problem solver, healer, leader, or savior of others. His goal of self-enhancement is sought through self-sacrifice or what Shulman and Mosak (12) referred to as the hero-martyr-saint strategem. The degree of pathology in this complex, as always, is determined by its lack of social usefulness. A redeemer may, on the useful side, resolve the problem of occupational choice by becoming a physician, a religious, or a psychotherapist. Or, on the useless side, the complex may well provide the basis for a paranoid delusion system in which one is given the mission to save others.

*Proof complex.* This complex characterizes those extremely defensive and overly sensitive people who constantly seek to justify every action. They are never in the wrong and usually can cite evidence to prove it. They live in constant fear of making a mistake, with most of their activities directed toward finding recognition for their imagined perfection.



*Predestination complex.* The individual with this complex approaches problems and life tasks with a rather *laissez faire* attitude that nothing can happen to blemish his perceived invincibility. "I lead a charmed life" seems to be the unconscious aphorism which guides him.

*Exclusion complex.* It is encountered in people who seek to minimize the probability of having their inadequacy exposed. It is an avoidance orientation in which life tasks are perceived as chances for failure rather than opportunities for success. When opportunity knocks, they bolt the door. By reducing their own activity and curtailing their attention to the activities of others, they insulate themselves as an ostrich does by burying his head in the sand.

#### *Complexes and Games*

Just as proficient athletes are described as "naturals" for the sport in which they are engaged, individuals with the complexes described by Adler are "naturals" for certain marital games. The *prover* may become adept at playing "I'm right; you're wrong," and "I've got a debit; you've got a credit." He keeps the books and has evidence to prove his position in any argument.

The individual with an *exclusion complex* frequently engages in "I don't want to discuss it" and "This is war!" In either case he reduces his potential sources of problems by excluding the expressed concerns of his spouse from consideration. In "This is war" he avoids attending to his spouse's communications and feelings by hiding behind his own verbal barrage. The games of the "excluder" generally increase the frequency and intensity with which his spouse engages in "Pay attention."

The *predestined* individual, by having assumed as a basic premise, the attitudinal posture, "In no way could I be at fault," accepts the conclusion inherent in "It's all your fault." His own blamelessness is axiomatic and predetermined, and therefore the responsibility for marital problems "must" lie solely with his spouse.

The *redeemer* is obviously master of "Where would you be without me?" His self-esteem and feelings of superiority are contingent upon an opportunity to "save" his spouse. Thus, the maintenance of his esteem necessitates keeping his spouse identified as inferior and in need of salvation.

Since the complexes reflect the individual's law of movement they are manifested in mate selection itself. Redeemers tend to marry someone lower in status, intelligence, etc.—"in the hope of 'saving'

him." But thereby such a person "betrays the hidden desire for superiority" (1, p. 23). Seldom do redeemers marry or at least stay married to "predestined" individuals. "Provers" most often marry each other and engage in unending battles of "I'm right" and "I've got a debit; you've got a credit."

Neurotic conflicts in marriage are manifestations of life-long themes developed by the spouses from their erroneous convictions about life, about others, and about themselves. They are based on attitudinal postures toward life tasks and a related apperceptive schema which exert a pervasive influence beyond the marital relationship, upon all close relationships, as well as vocational, social and recreational endeavors.

#### THERAPEUTIC CONSIDERATIONS

An examination of the therapeutic process from the standpoint of our theoretical marriage of games theory and Adlerian psychology is beyond the scope of the present paper. However, there are important therapeutic considerations that may be useful for the marital therapist regardless of his theoretical orientation.

In a sense, games played during the therapy sessions are more important than those which the couple plays at home. The therapy matches are the "main events." They are played before a "judge" upon whom the couple has bestowed the power of declaring the winner or loser. In addition, by the time the couple reaches the therapist's office the games are usually "for keeps." If treatment fails, divorce or separation is imminent. Couples often attempt to intimidate the therapist in the beginning of treatment by announcing that their seeing him is their "last hope." Thus marital games in therapy are intense and often extremely difficult to interrupt with the potential for manipulation of the therapist by the couple being quite high.

A specific therapeutic technique for any specific game cannot be suggested. Appropriate therapeutic intervention in any given situation is a complex function of training, sensitivity, type of client, experience, personality of the therapist, and his degree of comfort with what he is doing. However, certain general guidelines for recognizing and dealing with game behavior of couples in therapy can be suggested.

#### *Recognizing Games in Therapy*

The obvious initial, quite difficult problem is the recognition of game behavior. The novice therapist realizes that he was involved

with a game-playing couple only in a post-session conference with his supervisor. Our preceding description of games most frequently encountered in therapy should be of some assistance in their initial recognition. In addition the following signs have been found helpful in identifying game behavior in general.

*Pronouns used in speech.* When a spouse uses pronouns such as you, he, or she, the spouse is probably engaging in a game, directing attention away from his or her own behavior. Only a few games employ the first person. By contrast, the individual who assesses his own behavior and potential for change is most often the one who is making genuine progress in therapy.

*Alliance maneuvers.* Any attempt by one spouse to align himself with the therapist against the other spouse indicates an ongoing game and is designed to insure the outcome of that game in his favor. Alliance maneuvers may be as obvious as, "I want you to know, Doctor, that I'll help you all I can in curing Fred's drinking problem," or "I'll bet your wife never nags you like that, does she?" On the other hand, they may be as subtle as the selection of chairs, glances at the therapist, nodding in agreement with the therapist's comments, etc.

*Impressions presented as facts.* The couple is usually involved in a game when they present feelings and impression as absolute facts. "He treats me like dirt," is a powerful attacking weapon; whereas, "Sometimes I feel like dirt because of the things he does," is a weaker indictment that includes an admission of one's vulnerability. The translation of feelings and impressions into absolute facts is perceived by the spouse as lies, distortions, and exaggerations and elicits the same in return. The therapist is then confronted with two sets of contradictory "facts." The novice therapist failing to recognize this as game behavior may attempt to resolve the contradiction by uncovering more "facts" rather than reinterpreting the "facts" already presented as impressions and feelings. Instead of defusing the weapons he may thus prolong and escalate the game.

*Feelings of the therapist.* The most accurate indicator of game behavior is perhaps the therapist's feelings. Feeling frustrated and ineffective, and wanting to intervene are indications that the therapist is faced with a game-playing couple. By monitoring his own reactions the therapist can become aware of the onset of game behavior and take steps to interrupt it.

*Dealing with Games*

Perhaps the basic objective of the therapist with a game-playing couple is to break their concentration on the game. Game maneuvers must be interrupted to free the energy the couple utilizes in these for the constructive solution of problems. Some effective ways of interrupting games are:

*"Time out."* This is the most succinct way of interrupting a couple's game. The therapist simply exercises his option as the "referee" by calling "time out." After describing the game and its implications to the couple he is able to assess their ability to proceed more maturely.

*"Address all comments to me."* If the couple is intransigent and continues their game behavior, the therapist may request that they address all comments to him. He is now in the crucial position to reinterpret these communications in a less devastating and more positive light. It is difficult to maintain an angry, defensive, antagonistic attitude toward one's spouse when it is discovered that within his or her behavior there is hidden a positive message that was not heard or understood.

*Distinguishing facts and impressions.* As mentioned previously, communications in games are usually presented as assertions of fact that carry an inherent challenge for the opponent to refute. The therapist can minimize the necessity of a game response by having each spouse express himself in terms of feelings or impressions, rather than in terms of fact. Prefatory phrases such as "I feel . . ." or "It seems to me . . ." transform statements of fact into more acceptable and legitimate impressions. The quality of accusation is diminished, movement is changed from the vertical plane to the horizontal plane, and an atmosphere conducive to constructive dialogue and problem solving is generated.

*Prescribing the symptom.* Game behaviors as maneuvers on the vertical plane are antithetical to the therapeutic goal of increased horizontal movement. Any suggestion by the therapist directed at interrupting a game is likely to encounter resistance, since it is seen as a threat to the goals of the neurotic life style. In this case the therapist's most effective technique of interrupting the game is to prescribe it. "Prescribing the symptom" as a therapeutic technique has been stressed by Haley (9, p. 144) and has been described as "paradoxical intention" by Frankl (8). The game is described in detail

to the couple, the implicit rules are made explicit, and the couple is requested to follow them to the extreme. This technique employs a couple's immediate inclination to resist any therapeutic suggestion.

In addition, labeling their behavior a game devalues the prize of superiority that is being contested. The "winner" has not achieved a superior position, but merely demonstrated to himself as well as his spouse and therapist that he is willing to engage in activity that now seems childish. Thus game behavior when prescribed by the therapist, is difficult for the couple to sustain.

#### SUMMARY

The most frequently encountered "games" played by couples in therapy are described and discussed from an Adlerian viewpoint. They are seen as consistent with a neurotic life style, representing movement on a vertical plane, towards superiority over one's spouse, rather than horizontal movement of cooperation toward mutually beneficial goals. These games, empirically derived from observation of couples in treatment, are found remarkably congruent with certain attitudinal positions or complexes described earlier by Adler. Techniques for recognizing and interrupting games in therapy are discussed.

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