

## Special points of interest:



### See The Encounterer

Vol. 1, No. 15

An original contribution to  
Transactional Analysis about  
Trying-To-Help.

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## "I'm Only Trying To Help You" and the Game of "Wooden Leg"

Continuing on page 159 of Games People Play Dr. Berne describes the game of "I'm Only Trying to Help You" and the Game of "Wooden Leg."

Dr. Ernst's notes and comments are shown in blue.

"I'm Only Trying To Help You" and the Game of "Wooden Leg."

Dr. Berne

*Thesis. The most dramatic form of "Wooden Leg" is "The Plea of Insanity." This may be translated into transactional terms as follows: "What do you expect of someone as emotionally disturbed as I am--that I would refrain from killing people?" To which the jury is asked to reply: "Certainly not, we would hardly impose that restriction on you!" The "Plea of Insanity", played as a legal game, is acceptable to American culture and is different from the almost universally respected principle that an individual may be suffering from a psychosis so profound that no reasonable person would expect him to be responsible for his actions. In Japan drunkenness, and in Russia war-time military service, are accepted as excuses for evading responsibility for all kinds of outrageous behavior (according to this writer's information).*

*The thesis of "Wooden Leg" is, "What do you expect of a person with*

*a wooden leg?" Put that way, of course, no one would expect anything of a man with a wooden leg except that he should steer his own wheel chair. On the other hand, during World War II there was a man with a wooden leg who used to give demonstrations of jitterbug dancing, and very competent jitterbug dancing, at Army Hospital amputation centers. There are blind men who practice law and hold political offices (one such is currently mayor in writer's home town), deaf men who practice psychiatry and handless men who can use a typewriter.*

*As long as someone with a real, exaggerated or even imaginary disability is content with his lot, perhaps no one should interfere. But the moment he presents himself for psychiatric treatment, the question arises if he is using his life to his own best advantage, and if he can rise above his disability. In this country the therapist will be working in opposition to a large mass of educated public opinion. Even the close relatives of the patient who complained most loudly about the inconveniences caused by his infirmity, may eventually turn on the therapist if the patient makes definitive progress. This is readily understandable to a game analyst, but it makes his task no less difficult. All the*

*people who were playing "I'm Only Trying to Help You" are threatened by the impending disruption of the game if the patient shows signs of striking out on his own, and sometimes they use almost incredible measures to terminate the treatment.*

*Both sides are illustrated by the case of the stuttering client of Miss Black's, mentioned in the discussion of the game "Indigence." This man played a classical form of "Wooden Leg." He was unable to find employment, which he correctly attributed to the fact that he was a stutterer, since the only career that interested him, he said, was that of salesman. As a free citizen he had a right to seek employment in whatever field he chose, but as a stutterer, his choice raised some questions as to the purity of his motives. The reaction of the helpful agency when Miss Black attempted to break up this game was very unfavorable to her.*

*"Wooden Leg" is especially pernicious in clinical practice, because the patient may find a therapist who plays the same game with the same plea, so that progress is impossible. This is relatively easy to arrange in the case of the "Ideological Plea". "What do you expect of a man who lives in a society like ours?" One patient combined this with the "Psychosomatic Plea", "What*

do you expect of a man with psychosomatic symptoms?" He found a succession of therapists who would accept one plea but not the other, so that none of them either made him feel comfortable in his current position by accepting both pleas, or budged him from it by rejecting both. Thus he proved psychiatry couldn't help people. (\* #1) Some of the pleas which patients use to excuse symptomatic behavior are colds, head injuries, situational stress, the stress of modern living, American culture and the economic system. A literate player has no difficulty in finding authorities to support him. "I drink because I'm Irish." "This wouldn't happen if I lived in Russia or Tahiti." The fact is that patients in mental hospitals in Russia and Tahiti are very similar to those in American state hospital. Special pleas of "If It Weren't For Them" or "They Let Me Down" should always be evaluated very carefully in clinical practice---and also in social research projects.

Slightly more sophisticated are such pleas as: What do you expect of a man who (a) comes from a broken home (b) is neurotic (c) is in analysis or (d) is suffering from a disease

known as alcoholism? These are topped by, "If I stop doing this I won't be able to analyze it, and then I'll never get better."

The obverse of "Wooden Leg" is "Rickshaw", with the thesis, "If they only had (rickshaws) (duckbill platypuses) (girls who spoke ancient Egyptian) around this town, I never would have gotten into this mess."

Antithesis. Anti-"Wooden Leg" is not difficult if the therapist can distinguish clearly between his own Parent and Adult, and if the therapeutic aim is explicitly understood by both parties.

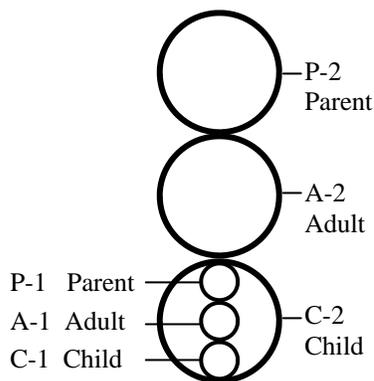
On the Parental side, he can be either a "good" Parent or a "harsh" one. As a "good" Parent he can accept the patient's plea, especially if it fits in with his own viewpoints, perhaps with the rationalization that people are not responsible for their actions until they have completed their therapy. As a "harsh" Parent he can reject the plea and engage in a contest of wills with the patient. Both of these attitudes are already familiar to the "Wooden Leg" player, and he knows how to extract the maximum satisfactions from each of them.

As an Adult, the therapist declines both of these opportunities. When the patient asks, "What do you expect of a neurotic?" (or whatever plea he is using at the moment) the reply is, "I don't expect anything. The question is, what do you expect of yourself?" The only demand he makes is that the patient give a serious answer to this question, and the only concession he makes is to allow the patient a reasonable length of time to answer it: anywhere from six weeks to six months, (\* #2) depending on the relationship between them and the patient's previous preparation.

REFERENCE:  
Berne, E. "The Cultural Problem: Psychopathology in Tahiti." American Journal of Psychiatry, 116: 1076-1081, 1960.

\* #1: This was probably in part his patient, Ben Ennat.

\* #2: This is referring to the rather precisely known internal calendars and clocks in people, ie the 1 day, 6 day, 42 day, 28 week, 18 month and seven year clocks.



## Games Students Play - "I'm Only Trying To Help You"

In **Games Students Play** the author describes the game of "I'm Only Trying to Help You" in Chapter 9, titled "Teacher Games: Helpful Variety." The author, my uncle, Ken Ernst used diagrams extensively in his book and (probably) often during his classroom teaching. Dad told me that Uncle Ken borrowed many ideas from him and The Encounterer, as the credits indicate at the end of the book.

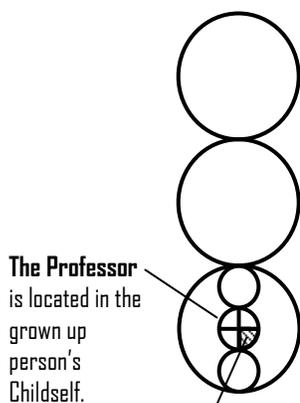
*Teacher Games: Helpful Variety*  
30. Student Folder

Miss Hulpfle [this is how he spelled the name in his book] noticed a boy who was quite aggressive in her classroom. He was often picking on other students.

"Aha, this boy needs my help!" smiled Miss Hulpfle. "If I can just figure out the reason why he's like this, I'll solve this problem. Perhaps

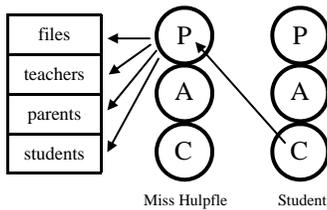
it's his home life or an early trauma." She asked him several questions. "Do your parents argue much?" "Do you remember anything tragic in your childhood?"

Miss Hulpfle also went to the student's cumulative file folder in the front office. Here she went through the accumulated information on the boy and looked for the reason that he loved to argue and fight.



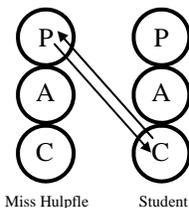
The young child's decisive event and decision for a favored method of concluding personal social events is GRD, GNW, GAF, or GDW.

In most cases Miss Hulpfle finds nothing. This time she found a traumatic experience. She had "The Answer." She knew what "caused" the aggression. This was the end of her efforts. When the boy came up as a topic of conversation in the faculty room, Miss Hulpfle brought out the information as if it were an ancient treasure and said, "See, this is the reason."



Student: Hits someone, causing Miss Hulpfle to be concerned.  
Miss Hulpfle: Goes through students cumulative folder to find "the" reason.

Antithesis: Don't depend on finding "the" cause. Finding the game the student is playing is the key to finding an antithesis to his game.



Student: Hits someone.  
Miss Hulpfle: I understand."

**31. I'm Only Trying To Help You (ITHY)**

Miss Marter, a school counselor, found out that Harry, a nice-looking, likable boy, was flunking several of his courses. She called him into her office, talked to him, and offered help.

"Would you like me to help you?"

"Sure," he answered quietly.

"I've talked to your teachers and have some extra assignments you can do to bring up your grades. Are you interested?"

"Yes."

"You'll need to go to the library and check out these five books."

"Okay."

"Check back in two weeks and let me know how you're coming along."

"Yeah."

Exit Harry. Three weeks passed. Miss Marter called in Harry again and asked, "How's the reading going?"

"They only had one of them at the library."

"Have you finished it yet?"

"I've read the first chapter."

"Well, go ahead and finish it and let me know in a week how you are doing."

"Okay."

A week later Miss Marter called Harry back in, told him the rest of the story that he hadn't read for himself, and helped him do the report. In essence, she did the report for him. He copied it over and handed it in. When Harry got the paper back it had a note saying, "Did you really do the work on this?" Harry showed it to Miss Marter. "I didn't realize that this would happen," she said. "I'll talk to your teacher. After this talk he handed the report back in and got a B+ on it. "Now he's on the right track," Miss Marter thought to herself. Two weeks later she asked his teachers how he was doing.

"Same as always. Nothing."

She stopped Harry in the hall the next day to ask what happened.

"Well, when my mom saw my paper she started after me. 'Why can't you do this all the time? I always told you if you'd buckle down and work you could get good grades. Well, young man, you don't have any excuse now, because I know you can do the work.'"

"What does all this make you feel like doing? Asked Miss Marter.

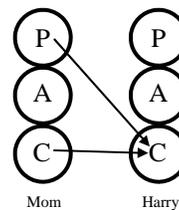
"Like flunking and getting back at her."

"What will you do?"

"I'm going to flunk my science test today anyway, so I'll take the paper home and hit her with that."

The following day was Monday and Miss Marter asked what happened.

"She yelled at me for a couple of minutes for flunking the science test but never mentioned staying home to study. So I guess I'm off the hook."

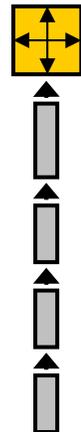
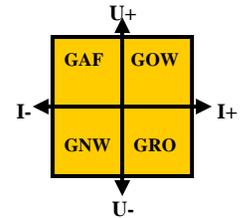


Mom: Parent (social level) "Study and get good grades."  
Mom: Child (psychological level) "Fail."

Harry went on, "Why knock myself out if I get hollered at more when I do the work than when I don't?"

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry you've been yelled at so much. I was Only Trying To Help You."

"You're a counselor and you're supposed to know these sort of things."



See "Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy" by Eric Berne MD for more about Ben Ennat.



Addresso'Set Publications

"Game Codes—Newsletter of Games People Play"

Franklin "Harry" Ernst III, Editor

P.O. Box 3009

Vallejo, California 94590

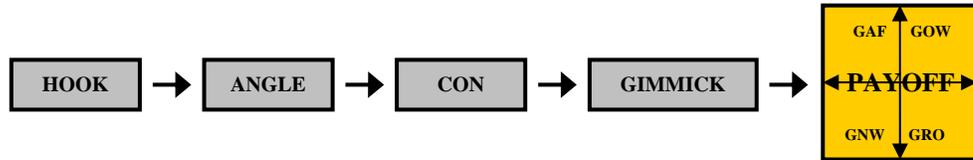
Phone: 707/643-5100

Fax: 707/644-6358

E-mail: [harryernst@aao3news.cnc.net](mailto:harryernst@aao3news.cnc.net)

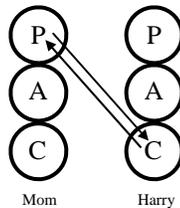
We're on the Web.  
[www.ListeningActivity.com](http://www.ListeningActivity.com)  
[www.ErnstOKCorral.com](http://www.ErnstOKCorral.com)

A game is defined as a recurring set of transactions with ulterior transactions, concealed motivation, a gimmick, and a payoff. Eric Berne, M.D. used a particular variation of the duplex transactional diagram to represent the ulterior aspects of a game. Berne added the concept of switch in 1966 and introduced "The Game Formula."  $Con + Gimmick = Response > Switch > Payoff$ . The "Ernst Game Diagram" as described by Franklin H. Ernst Jr., M.D. in his paper "The Game Diagram" shows the phenomena of the variableness of a game and number of variations without contradicting "Berne's Game Formula." The Game Diagram" has five moves: Move #1-Hook, Move #2-Angle, Move #3-Con, Move #4-Gimmick, Move #5-Payoff. Diagrammatically it looks like this:



*"Mastery of the universe is proportional to the symbols man has by which to represent his universe."*

*As he walked out Miss Marter feels a sense of frustration.*



Miss Marter: "Here, let me help."

Harry: "OK"

Miss Marter: Helps

Harry: "Your help didn't work."

Miss Marter: "I'm Only Trying To Help You." She is confused and frustrated.

*frustrated.*

*This game is a complement of "Indigence."*

*When Harry failed, his mother gave him strokes. A visit to Harry's home showed within a few minutes where the message was coming from. Harry's script included getting into trouble and failing in school.*

*Miss Marter and Harry's mother exchanged a few social amenities. Miss Marter said, "I would like to talk to you about Harry's schoolwork." Harry's mother laughed and said,*

*"Well, tell me the worst. What has the rotten mess-up done now?" ...*

... ..

Game Codes -  
 Newsletter of Games People Play

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## "I'm Only Trying To Help You" in the Book "Group Treatment"

Eric Berne, M.D. writes in Group Treatment on page 327:

Organizational games, from the present point of view, fall into four classes: management games, case-load games, "Wooden Leg," and "I'm Only Trying To Help You." There is no implication that every organization plays all of these. A game-free organization will play none of them; others play some of them; and a game-ridden one may play all of them.

"Good Management" The principal management game is called "Good Management." A currently fashionable form is to have a psychiatrist on the staff of an industrial or government organization, since everybody knows that nowadays that is part of good management. The psychiatrist is then exploited in various ways, but is steered away from situations where he may actually be able to change something. The chief administrator

may use him as a pawn in games of "Let's You and Him Fight"; he let's the psychiatrist tell the unpleasant things to his executives, so that he, the chief administrator, does not run the risk of unpopularity or of being accused of bad relations or bad management. In any case the psychiatrist's lectures and other activities are summarized numerically in the Annual Report.

To be continued