Key Themes in Interpersonal Communication: Culture, Identities and Performance

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from cues to which negative valences are attached or those that contradict established opinions and behaviour patterns.

(Barnlund 1970)

If intrapersonal communication, including the relationship of individuals to their environment, were not already complicated, how much more so does the process become when another person enters the scene? Little might be said, but the cues are potentially deafening. One thing is certain: ‘there will be a shift in orientation of both individuals.’ For example, ‘the mere appearance of a second person in an elevator or office will change the character and content of self-to-self communication in both parties’.

Readers may spot the absence of valences (+ – o) in the second model, a decision explained by Barnlund ‘because their positive, negative or neutral value would depend on the interpretative decisions’ of the communicants. Barnlund concludes by expressing the hope that his pilot models ‘will have served a useful purpose if they prompt the search for better ways of representing the inner dynamics of the communication process’.

Transactional analysis

Barnlund’s emphasis on the nature of transaction in interpersonal communication has found systematic application as therapy in transactional analysis (TA), developed by Eric Berne in two volumes, Games People Play (1964) and What Do You Say After You’ve Said Hello? (1975) and supplemented by Thomas Harris’s I’m OK – You’re OK (1969) with a follow-up, Staying OK by Harris and Amy Bjork Harris (1995).

TA is a widely used technique for analysing the process of interpersonal communication and enhancing social skills. The intention is to make us more aware of the way in which our communication can be influenced by our childhood experiences; to enable us to examine the intent behind our communicative acts and to reveal and deal with deceit and dishonesty.

Essentially the framework for analysis rests on ‘ego states’ out of which, it is claimed, we communicate. A ‘transaction’ occurs when two people are in conversation during which the ego state of one person addresses the ego state of the other. To distinguish these ego states both in ourselves and others, we need to examine verbal and non-verbal behaviour as it occurs in the context of the encounter.

Berne, in Games People Play, identifies three ego states – the Parent, the Adult and the Child, each produced by a playback of our inner recordings of past encounters with other people, times, places, events and our reactions to and feelings about them. Many of these recordings belong to our childhood
experience. We may be unaware of them though they may continue to affect our communicative acts.

Our Parent state is very much influenced by the behaviour of our own parents and other authority figures encountered in early life. Its area of concern is our responsibilities towards ourselves and others. There are two ‘parental voices’, that of the critical or Controlling Parent and that of the Nurturing Parent. The first sets standards of behaviour and can be critical of our own and others’ behaviour; the second is caring and protective.

The Adult within us is the voice of reason, rationality and commonsense. It analyses reality, gathering information, drawing conclusions, making judgments, solving problems and making decisions. This voice develops through life and is capable of regulating and overriding the influence of Parent and Child voices.

The ego state of the Child is seen to have three aspects, the Free or Natural Child, the Adapted Child and the Little Professor. Creativity, relaxation, the capacity for fun, risk taking and spontaneity characterize the Free Child. The state of the Adapted Child concerns the potential for rebelliousness, compliance or servility when faced with the demands of those in authority. It is argued that our adult responses to authority are conditioned by those we adapted to cope with authority figures when we were children.

The Little Professor signifies the emerging Adult, demonstrating the ability to reason, be creative, solve problems, employ intuition and develop manipulative tactics – that is to use communication and behaviour (like throwing temper tantrums) to obtain what the child wants; tactics that can be carried forward into adulthood.

Transactional states

As we have seen, TA cites three ego states, two of these, the Parent and the Child, further subdivided into Critical or Caring Parent and the Free, Adapted and Little Professor. In turn four transactional states are identified: complementary, angular, duplex and crossed, the latter three, according to Eric Berne in *What Do You Say After You’ve Said Hello?* is where problems of communication occur.

In complementary transactions communication is likely to be even and untroubled, characterized by consonance. People act out of complementary ego states, as in the following example:

\[\text{Doctor:} \quad \text{I'd like you to take three of these tablets a day for six weeks and this time make sure to remember to take them. (Parent)}\]
\[\text{Patient:} \quad \text{Right. I always do what I am told. (Child)}\]

To describe a transaction as complementary is not necessarily to say that the
responses are always appropriate. You might feel that the patient should have been less servile. Crossed transactions occur when the ego states do not complement each other:

Maureen: Can you help me put the finishing touches to our group presentation? (Adult)
Sally: I've done my share and I'm busy. You should not leave everything to the last minute. (Critical Parent)

An angular transaction occurs when a speaker is covertly addressing one ego state while pretending to address another:

Melissa: Knowing that Ian would like a romantic relationship with Sally. I think Sally and Paul are a well-matched couple, don’t you? (Adult/Little Professor)
Ian: Rubbish! It won’t last. (Adapted Child)
In a duplex transaction both communicators are involved in delivering covert as well as overt messages:

Arthur: I feel I should talk to Jeremy and Robin about this issue. They might benefit from my considerable experience in this area. (Adult/Little Professor)

Emily: Yes. I’m sure they would find it helpful to talk to a much older man. (Adult/Little Professor)

The value of TA is that it may help you spot when and why a conversation is taking a wrong turn, or when you are about to be hooked into giving an inappropriate response; allowing you to keep control and re-balance the transaction. It is important in this respect for the Adult to be in control so that even if other voices are activated, they are used appropriately within the communicative situation.

Games and scripts

Another of Eric Berne’s propositions is that we often play games in our interactions with others. He describes a game as ‘an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome’ (Berne 1964: 44). Games are identified by their hidden motives, their repetitive nature and their promise of psychological gains for the players of the game.

Participants in game playing look, for example, for a known weakness (termed a gimmick) of the victim (referred to as the mark). Use of the gimmick serves to hook the victim, or mark. The switch is the point in the conversation when it takes another direction and the player catches the mark out. At this crossup point the mark realizes that something has gone wrong with the exchange. They are likely to feel confused and experience dissonance.

The encounter may well begin to fall apart. Successfully hooking, the mark provides the game player with psychological satisfaction. This is the payoff. Berne argues that every game, whether played consciously or unconsciously, is a dishonest and defensive form of communication. He identifies many games played in everyday life, such as, ‘If it weren’t for you . . .’ or ‘See what you’ve made me do!’ If the intended victim is aware of the games people play in interaction and transaction, they will be better prepared to avoid being hooked, and able to deflect the course of exchange on to a more mutually beneficial course.

Scripts are seen by Berne in What Do You Say After You’ve Said Hello? as a type of psychological narrative which an individual may act out over lengthy periods of time. These are developed in our early years but can affect our interactions with others throughout our lives. The script contains within
it the individual’s sense of self and expectations of, and orientation towards, others. It forms a basis for action. According to Berne, the tendency is for people to seek justification for their scripts. Thus they may act towards others, and interpret the behaviour of others, in line with the expectations set by a script. An example of such a life script might be, ‘You can’t trust anybody!’ suggesting a script characterized by suspicion and a negative view of other people. Again, awareness of the role of scripts emerging from past experience or conditioning can serve to bring about change.

Life positions

Thomas Harris in *I’m OK – You’re OK* writes of four life positions that can be employed in TA for exploring an individual’s sense of self in relation to others. These, like Berne’s Parent/Child/Adult roles are formed in childhood, and they influence the nature and direction of the scripts individuals write for themselves. Life positions are, of course, capable of being modified or changed, though in some cases, Thomas and Amy Harris affirm in *Staying OK*, such changes may require professional help.

**I’m OK – You’re OK** is position one, in which individuals feel confident about their own self-worth as well as that of others. Such a position makes it relatively easier to adopt an open, confident and positive stance when communicating with others. Yet, as Harris argues, considerable effort is required to achieve or maintain this position if, as a result of our childhood experiences, we are left with a feeling of Not OK.

More usual is the position **I’m Not OK – You’re OK**. Harris points out that through our early lives we are recipients of countless messages, many of them critical, aimed at shaping our behaviour into socially acceptable patterns. The position leaves individuals with a sense of inferiority and this demonstrates itself in defensive communication, of which game playing is an example.

Experience of neglect or abuse in childhood is likely to lead to position three, **I’m OK – You’re Not OK**. This reveals itself in communicative modes that are aggressive or hostile, underscored by resentment. Harris’ fourth position, **I’m Not OK – You’re Not OK** is bleakly negative, characterized by a reined in, despairing attitude that permeates communicative behaviour with others. Readers may well wish to scrutinize their own daily encounters to see how the categorizations made in transactional analysis, game playing and the ‘OK’ classifications find authenticity in everyday experience.