

Transactional Analysis

Core Concepts, Theory and Applications in Social Work

15-Mark Exam Answer | Department of Social Work

Based on Eric Berne's Theory (1950s–1970s)

Master Memory Tip — Remember Everything in TA

Before reading the full answer, learn this one framework. All of TA fits into 4 big boxes:

TA in 4 Words: **PETS**

P — Personality (3 Ego States: Parent, Adult, Child)

E — Emotions (4 Life Positions: OK / Not OK)

T — Transactions (3 Types: Complementary, Crossed, Ulterior)

S — Scripts & Games (Unconscious life plans & patterns)

Trick sentence: "PETS help us understand people!"

Introduction

Transactional Analysis, commonly known as TA, is a theory of human personality, communication, and behaviour developed by the Canadian-born American psychiatrist Dr. Eric Berne in the 1950s and further developed through the 1960s and 1970s. It is one of the most practical and widely used frameworks in psychology, counselling, and social work because it explains human behaviour in a very simple and accessible way.

The word 'transactional' refers to the exchanges or transactions that happen between people when they communicate. TA helps us understand why people think, feel, and behave the way they do — and more importantly, how they can change. The central philosophy of TA is simple and powerful: "People can change, and everyone has the right to be accepted."

About the Founder — Dr. Eric Berne

Dr. Eric Berne (1910–1970)

Dr. Eric Berne was a Canadian-American psychiatrist who trained under the great psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Dissatisfied with the complexity and inaccessibility of Freudian psychoanalysis, Berne set out to create a theory that ordinary people could understand and use to improve their own lives. He drew inspiration from Sigmund Freud's concept of the multi-layered personality and Dr. Wilder Penfield's brain research, which showed that memories and emotions are stored in the brain. Berne synthesised these ideas and presented Transactional Analysis for the first time in the 1950s. His most famous book, 'Games People Play' (1964), became an international bestseller.

| **Key influence: Freud's ego theory + Penfield's memory research → Berne's Transactional Analysis**

Core Concept 1: The Three Ego States (PAC Model)

The most fundamental concept in Transactional Analysis is the idea that every human being has three distinct ego states — three different psychological parts of the personality, each with its own way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. These are called the Parent, Adult, and Child ego states. Berne represented them as three stacked circles, abbreviated as PAC.

An ego state is not a role that a person plays — it is a real psychological state that a person is actually in at a particular moment. When we are in the Parent ego state, we genuinely feel, think, and behave like a parent figure from our past. When we are in the Child ego state, we genuinely feel and behave like we did as a child.

Memory Trick for PAC:

P — Parent = Taught (what we were taught by authority figures)

A — Adult = Thought (what we think rationally right now)

C — Child = Felt (what we felt and experienced as children)

"Parents Teach, Adults Think, Children Feel"

1A. The Parent Ego State (P)

The Parent ego state is made up of all the thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and behaviours that a person has absorbed from their parents, teachers, elders, and authority figures — usually during the first five years of life. It is like a recording of everything that was shown, told, or taught to us by the adults around us when we were children. The Parent ego state contains the 'rules' and 'should/should not's' of life.

The Parent ego state has two sub-states:

Nurturing Parent: This is the caring, warm, supportive, and protective side of the Parent state. It encourages and supports others. Example: A teacher saying to a struggling student, "Don't worry, you are doing well. Keep trying!"

Critical Parent: This is the judgmental, strict, controlling, and often blaming side of the Parent state. It sets rigid standards and criticises when they are not met. Example: A parent shouting at a child, "You are so careless! Why can't you do anything right?"

In Social Work: A social worker recognises when a client is operating from a Critical Parent state — for example, a client who constantly criticises and blames others — and helps them shift to a more balanced and nurturing way of relating to people.

1B. The Adult Ego State (A)

The Adult ego state is the rational, logical, and fact-based part of the personality. It functions like the data-processing centre of the mind — it collects information, analyses it objectively, and makes decisions based on facts rather than emotions or old programming from the past. The Adult state is not influenced by the judgments of the Parent or the feelings of the Child. It is calm, balanced, and present-focused.

Key features: The Adult ego state is logical, rational, objective, unemotional, and problem-solving in nature. It processes information accurately and without bias.

Example: A social worker is conducting a home assessment for a family in crisis. Instead of reacting with pity (Child) or judgment (Parent), she calmly asks questions, gathers facts, and prepares a practical action plan. This is the Adult ego state in action.

In Social Work: The Adult ego state is the most desirable state for a professional social worker to be in during assessments, planning, and counselling sessions — because it ensures objectivity and rational decision-making.

1C. The Child Ego State (C)

The Child ego state contains all the emotions, feelings, memories, impulses, and ways of experiencing the world that were recorded during childhood. When a person is in the Child ego state, they are feeling and behaving in ways that are reminiscent of childhood — whether that is joyful and playful, or frightened and dependent. The Child state is the seat of creativity, intuition, and emotional expressiveness.

The Child ego state has two sub-states:

Free/Natural Child: Spontaneous, joyful, curious, creative, and playful. Example: An adult bursting into laughter at a friend's joke or getting excited about a new project.

Adapted Child: The part of the Child state that has learnt to adapt its behaviour in response to parental demands — either by complying (being overly obedient) or rebelling (being defiant and resistant). Example: A client who says 'I can't do this, I need help' even for tasks they are capable of handling independently.

In Social Work: A social worker helps clients who are stuck in the Adapted Child state — for example, those who feel helpless and dependent — to access their Adult state and make rational, empowered choices about their lives.

A Healthy Personality — Balance of All Three

According to Berne, a psychologically healthy person is not one who stays in only one ego state, but one who can flexibly move between all three states based on what the situation requires. They use the Parent state to provide guidance and values, the Adult state to think rationally and solve problems, and the Child state to experience joy, creativity, and emotional depth. Rigidity — being stuck in one state — leads to problems in relationships and mental health.

Core Concept 2: The Four Life Positions

The Four Life Positions are basic beliefs that a person develops about themselves and others in early childhood — usually within the first five years of life — based on the kind of feedback and emotional experiences they receive from their parents and caregivers. These beliefs become the foundation of how a person views and relates to the world throughout their life. They are also called 'existential positions' because they reflect a deep psychological stance about one's own worth and the worth of others.

Memory Trick for 4 Life Positions:

Remember the 4 types by their emotional tone:

1. **OK–OK = Happy and Healthy** ✓✓
2. **OK–Not OK = Arrogant Blamer** ✓✗
3. **Not OK–OK = Poor Victim** ✗✓
4. **Not OK–Not OK = Hopeless** ✗✗

Sentence: "Happy people feel OK, blamers blame others, victims feel low, hopeless give up"

Position 1: I'm OK — You're OK ✓✓ (The Healthy Position)

This is the ideal and most psychologically healthy life position. A person in this position genuinely believes that they have value and worth, and that other people also have value and worth. They approach relationships with trust, openness, cooperation, and mutual respect. They can give and receive without feeling superior or inferior. This position develops when a child receives consistent love, encouragement, and positive feedback from parents.

Example: A social work student receives critical feedback on her fieldwork report. Instead of feeling crushed ('I am useless') or dismissing the feedback ('My supervisor doesn't know anything'), she thinks: 'This feedback will help me improve. My supervisor is trying to help me and I am capable of doing better.' This is the I'm OK – You're OK position.

Position 2: I'm OK — You're Not OK ✓✗ (The Blaming Position)

In this position, a person sees themselves as capable and worthy but views others as problematic, incompetent, or untrustworthy. They tend to project their failures onto others, blame others for their problems, and adopt an attitude of arrogance and superiority. This position often develops in children who were either over-praised (and therefore feel they can do no wrong) or neglected (and learned to distrust others to cope).

Example: A manager who always says, 'Nothing goes right because my team is incompetent,' never takes personal responsibility for failures, and constantly criticises subordinates, is operating from the I'm OK – You're Not OK position.

In Social Work: A social worker may encounter clients who blame the entire world for their problems. TA helps the worker understand the origin of this belief and gently help the client move towards the healthier OK–OK position.

Position 3: I'm Not OK — You're OK ✗✓ (The Victim Position)

This is also called the depressive or 'one-down' position. A person here feels inferior, powerless, and inadequate in comparison to others. They tend to see everyone else as more capable, more worthy, or more fortunate than themselves. They often serve others at the expense of their own needs, feel victimised, and may become excessively dependent. This position typically develops in children who have received consistent criticism and inconsistent care.

Example: A woman in a difficult marriage repeatedly says, 'I am not good enough for him. He is always right and I always make mistakes.' She sacrifices her own needs entirely and feels helpless to change her situation. This is the Not OK–OK position — and it is common among clients social workers work with.

In Social Work: This is one of the most common life positions among clients seeking help. Social workers use TA to help clients recognise this pattern and build self-worth, autonomy, and agency.

Position 4: I'm Not OK — You're Not OK ✗✗ (The Hopeless Position)

This is the most destructive and dangerous life position. A person here feels that neither they nor anyone else has any value or worth. They have lost hope in themselves and in others. Life feels purposeless and relationships feel meaningless. This position may lead to extreme withdrawal, self-destructive behaviour, depression, or in severe cases, violence. It develops when a child receives no positive strokes at all — consistent rejection and neglect from all caregivers.

Example: A young person who says, 'Nobody cares about me, I don't care about anyone either. Nothing matters,' and shows complete withdrawal from school, friends, and family is displaying the Not OK–Not OK position.

Core Concept 3: Transactions and Types of Transactions

A transaction is the basic unit of social interaction in Transactional Analysis. Every time one person says something or does something to another person — and the other person responds — that is a transaction. A transaction always involves two parts: a stimulus (what one person says or does) and a response (how the other person replies). Each transaction happens between specific ego states of the two people involved. Understanding transactions helps us understand why some conversations flow smoothly while others lead to conflict.

Memory Trick for 3 Types of Transactions:

C C U — "Communication Can Confuse"

C — Complementary (smooth, matching conversation)

C — Crossed (blocked, mismatched conversation)

U — Ulterior (hidden, double-meaning conversation)

Type 1: Complementary Transactions ✓

A complementary transaction occurs when the stimulus and the response happen between the same or matching ego states — that is, the person responds from exactly the ego state that was addressed. The communication flows naturally and smoothly because both parties are 'on the same page'. Complementary transactions can happen between any ego state pairings — Adult to Adult, Parent to Child, Child to Child, and so on.

Example 1 (Adult–Adult): Person A: 'What time does the meeting start?' | Person B: 'It starts at 3 PM.' — Both are in the Adult state, exchanging factual information clearly. This is the ideal workplace transaction.

Example 2 (Parent–Child): Manager (Parent): 'You need to complete this report by tomorrow.' | Employee (Child): 'Yes sir, I will do it right away.' — Both ego states are matched and complementary.

Result: Complementary transactions lead to smooth, satisfying, and productive communication. They keep relationships running without friction.

Type 2: Crossed Transactions ✗

A crossed transaction occurs when a person responds from a different ego state than the one that was addressed. The communication lines are, in TA terms, 'crossed' — and this crossing

causes confusion, misunderstanding, and breakdown. The conversation suddenly feels awkward or hostile because the response was not what was expected. Crossed transactions are the most common cause of arguments, misunderstandings, and communication breakdowns in relationships.

Example: Person A (Adult to Adult): 'Do you know where my keys are?' | Person B (Parent to Child): 'You are always losing things! Why can't you be more careful?' — Person A asked a simple factual question from the Adult state, but Person B responded with criticism from the Critical Parent state. The communication is now blocked and uncomfortable.

Result: Crossed transactions lead to misunderstandings, arguments, hurt feelings, and communication breakdowns. They are the main cause of interpersonal conflict. In social work counselling, helping clients identify and avoid crossed transactions improves their relationships significantly.

Type 3: Ulterior Transactions (Hidden Meaning)

An ulterior transaction is the most complex type. It involves two levels of communication happening at the same time — one that is visible and socially acceptable on the surface (the social level), and another that is hidden beneath it (the psychological level). The person is operating from two ego states simultaneously. Ulterior transactions are the basis of manipulation, passive-aggressive behaviour, and what Berne called 'psychological games'.

Example: A colleague says to another: 'Oh wow, YOU finished the project so fast!' (Surface/social message: Adult to Adult — expressing surprise). Hidden message: Critical Parent to Child — 'I don't believe you could have done it so quickly. You must have done it poorly.' The smile on the face and the sting in the tone are happening simultaneously.

Result: Ulterior transactions are manipulative and ultimately destructive to relationships. They form the basis of psychological games that people play — patterns of interaction that always end in bad feelings.

Core Concept 4: Script Analysis — Unconscious Life Plans

A life script, in Transactional Analysis, is an unconscious life plan that a person develops in early childhood, based on the emotional experiences and messages they received from their parents and environment. This script is like an invisible 'play' or 'story' that a person feels compelled to follow throughout their life — influencing the kinds of relationships they form, the decisions they make, and the outcomes they experience.

Scripts are formed at the pre-conscious level — meaning people are usually not aware they are following a script. Common scripts include 'I will never succeed', 'I must take care of

everyone else', or 'I don't deserve happiness.' These scripts silently shape the person's entire life unless they are identified and challenged.

Technique used in Social Work: A social worker asks a client to describe their favourite childhood story or fairytale — and to identify the character they most related to. The themes in those stories often mirror the client's unconscious life script. For example, a client who always related to Cinderella (waiting to be rescued) may have a script of helplessness and dependency.

Example: A middle-aged woman comes for counselling feeling that she 'always ends up alone'. Through script analysis, the social worker discovers that as a child, her parents told her repeatedly: 'You are too demanding, nobody will ever love you.' This message became her unconscious script — and she has been unconsciously sabotaging her relationships to fulfil that script ever since.

Goal of Script Analysis: To help the client recognise the unconscious script they are following, understand where it came from, and make a conscious, Adult-level decision to rewrite their own story.

Core Concept 5: Game Analysis — Patterns of Destructive Interaction

In Transactional Analysis, a 'game' is not a fun activity — it is a repetitive pattern of transactions that involves hidden motives, ulterior messages, and always ends in negative feelings for everyone involved. Games are played unconsciously — people are usually not aware they are playing them. They often serve to confirm a person's existing life position or life script. Eric Berne identified and described many such games in his famous book, 'Games People Play' (1964).

Key features of games: They are repetitive, they involve an ulterior transaction, and they always end in bad feelings (called 'rackets' in TA) for at least one person.

Common Examples of Games:

'Yes, But...': A person asks for advice but rejects every suggestion. They are not really seeking advice — they want to confirm that their problem is unsolvable (confirming the Not OK–OK position). Example: 'I want to find a job.' | Social Worker: 'You could try online job portals.' | Client: 'Yes, but I don't have internet.' | SW: 'The library has computers.' | Client: 'Yes, but I don't have time.' This goes on endlessly.

'If It Weren't For You': A person blames someone else for everything that goes wrong in their life. Example: 'If it weren't for my husband, I could have had a great career.' This confirms the I'm OK – You're Not OK position.

'Kick Me': A person repeatedly puts themselves in situations where they are criticised or punished, unconsciously inviting negative reactions. This confirms the Not OK–OK position.

In Social Work: Identifying the games a client plays helps the social worker break the negative cycle and help the client relate to others in healthier, more authentic ways.

Applications of Transactional Analysis in Social Work Practice

Transactional Analysis is a highly practical theory that has direct and powerful applications in social work practice across a range of settings — from individual counselling to group work to family therapy.

1. Structural Analysis (Understanding the Client): The social worker uses the PAC model to understand a client's personality — identifying which ego state is dominant and whether there are problems of contamination (when the Parent or Child ego state 'leaks' into and distorts the Adult state) or exclusion (when one ego state is completely blocked). This helps in planning the intervention.

2. Transactional Analysis (Improving Communication): In family counselling or group work, the social worker helps members identify the ego states they are communicating from and understand why crossed or ulterior transactions are causing conflict. By encouraging Adult-to-Adult communication, relationships improve dramatically.

3. Game Analysis (Breaking Destructive Patterns): By helping clients identify the games they are playing in their relationships — with family, employers, or in the counselling relationship itself — the social worker helps them break the cycle and engage in genuine, authentic interactions.

4. Script Analysis (Changing Life Narratives): This is the deepest level of TA work. The social worker helps a client uncover the unconscious life script that is guiding their choices and outcomes, and empowers them to rewrite this script using their Adult ego state — making conscious, autonomous life decisions.

5. Group Work: TA is especially powerful in group settings — where members can observe their own and each other's ego states in action, identify the games being played within the group, and practice healthier ways of communicating and relating.

Conclusion

Transactional Analysis, developed by Dr. Eric Berne, is one of the most comprehensive and accessible theories of human personality and communication available to social workers today. By understanding the three ego states (Parent, Adult, Child), the four life positions, the three types of transactions, and the concept of scripts and games, a social worker gains a powerful lens through which to understand why clients think, feel, and behave the way they do — and how to help them change.

TA's greatest strength lies in its simplicity and its optimism. It is built on the belief that every person is capable of change, that every person deserves to be treated with dignity, and that with awareness and support, anyone can move from a limiting life position or script to a more fulfilling and authentic way of living. For social workers, TA is not just a theory — it is a practical tool for empowering people to become the authors of their own lives.

Final Exam Revision — Quick Reference

PETS = 4 Core Concepts of TA

P = Personality → 3 Ego States → PAC (Parent, Adult, Child)

Memory: 'Parents Teach, Adults Think, Children Feel'

E = Emotions → 4 Life Positions

Memory: OK-OK (Happy), OK-NotOK (Blamer), NotOK-OK (Victim), NotOK-NotOK (Hopeless)

T = Transactions → 3 Types → CCU

Memory: 'Communication Can Confuse' → Complementary, Crossed, Ulterior

S = Scripts & Games → Unconscious patterns

Memory: 'Yes But, Kick Me, Blame You' = 3 common games

Scholar: Eric Berne (1950s–70s) | Book: "Games People Play" (1964)