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PSYCHOLOGICAL GAMES IN ORGANIZATIONS – THE USE OF TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS IN MANAGEMENT

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to present the basic principles of Transactional Analysis, a psychological concept that also finds application in business, and to demonstrate the possibilities for its practical use within an organisation through the analysis of psychological games. The article also seeks to demonstrate ways to interrupt these games in order to prevent the systemic perpetuation of inefficiency and to support understanding and communication.
Design/methodology/approach: This study utilised various methods, including descriptive methods and mini case studies. Their selection was determined by the available research materials related to Transactional Analysis. The descriptive method was used to present the key issues of this study, in particular to discuss TA. Furthermore, the article utilises a literature review, conducted using both Polish-language and foreign-language sources.
Findings: TA can provide a useful theoretical and practical framework for studying organisational dynamics, and the analysis of psychological games can be an effective tool for intervention in management processes, team development and conflict resolution.
Research limitations/implications: The research results presented here form part of a broader study concerning a specific entity. However, the comprehensive application of TA principles in such studies may contribute to a better understanding of how people function both as individuals and as members of teams.
Practical implications: The findings of this research have both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, they may serve as a contribution to raising awareness of and demonstrating the usefulness of AT in the business world; in practice, they may inspire a different way of looking at human behaviour within organisations, as well as the crises and conflicts associated with it.
Social implications: Examining human behaviour through the prism of ego states may contribute to a better understanding of one's own actions and decisions, both individually and within groups, and consequently may lead to a correction of unfavourable and destructive behaviours.
Originality/value: The article provides cognitive value through an empirical demonstration of the application of TA's theoretical principles in the organizational settings, in the context of individuals and teams, which may contribute to a greater understanding of dysfunctional employee behaviour.
Keywords: psychological games, transactional analysis, organization.
Category of the paper: research paper, case study.

1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations operate in a dynamic and complex environment, the volatility of which significantly affects the effectiveness and stability of these organisations' operations, as well as their competitiveness. In this context, one of the key management issues in enterprises is the role played by interpersonal relationships and communication processes. Despite growing awareness of the importance of effective cooperation, in business practice one very often observes recurring patterns of behaviour that hinder the achievement of goals at both the individual and team levels; they lead to conflicts, a lack of understanding of employees' roles in work processes, or simply have a destructive impact on the functioning of the organisation or parts thereof. One of the tools enabling the identification and analysis of these recurring patterns of behaviour is the concept of psychological games, derived from Transactional Analysis. The aim of this article is to discuss the basic principles of TA as a psychological concept that is also applicable in the organizational context, as well as to demonstrate the possibilities for its practical application in organisations through the analysis of psychological games. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to identify ways of breaking these games, so as to prevent the perpetuation of systemic inefficiency and to support the development of understanding and effective communication.

2. Transactional Analysis – origins, application, basic concepts

One of the most important aspects of an organisation's functioning is that related to people. People constitute one of the organisation's most significant resources (Orzech, 2024; Rogozińska-Pawełczyk, Sitarska-Piwko, 2024), influencing the level of competitiveness and thus the organisation's development potential; hence, both economic theory and practice provide many concepts for describing the state and potential of human resources. One of these is the concept of Transactional Analysis (TA), which is relatively little known in the Polish context. According to the International Society for Transactional Analysis, Transactional Analysis is a theory of personality and a system of psychotherapy focused on development and personal change' (Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 3). Crucially, this concept finds wide application beyond psychotherapy: in education, counselling, but also in organisations – in this field, it is used for all kinds of training, diagnosis and description of the functioning of various entities, particularly where "there is a need to understand individuals, improve interpersonal relationships or communication" (Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 4).

The creator of the TA concept is Eric Berne, who worked particularly intensively between 1949 and 1958, conceptualising the principles and subsequently promoting them to a wide audience. Following his death, research in the field of TA continued (Hay, 2012; Widdowson, 2010; Mountain, Davidson, 2011; Berne, 2021), which has contributed not only to the widespread recognition of this method globally but also to enhancing its practical utility.

The fundamental task of TA is to examine ego states described as "coherent systems of thoughts and feelings that manifest themselves through corresponding sets of behaviours" (Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 17). Applying the general framework of TA to the organisational context (Hay, 2010), it can be assumed that "the organisational specialisation is intended for practitioners who work within or on behalf of organisations, taking into account the organisational framework, context and development. Their work aims at the development, growth and improvement of people's effectiveness" (Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 383). Even this brief overview, setting out the general principles of TA, demonstrates its universality and, at the same time, its broad applicability.

However, for the purposes of this study, which focuses primarily on specific and repetitive behaviours of people in organisations (described in TA as psychological games), the basic principles of TA will be presented in such a way that this section of theoretical considerations forms the basis for describing the games observed within the company.

Transactional analysis is distinguished from other psychological concepts by the ideas that constitute its components:

- the model of ego states,
- transactions, strokes, time structuring,
- life script,
- misrecognitions, redefinitions, symbiosis,
- substitute feelings, vouchers and games.

These elements interconnect and influence one another. However, to fully understand the nature of games, their components and rules, it is necessary to familiarise oneself with the models of ego states and transactions.

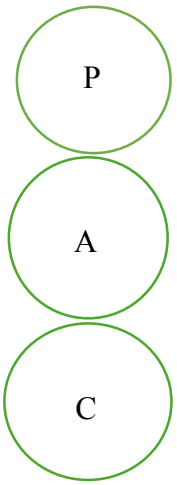
Ego-state models – Essentially, we distinguish between two models: functional and structural, and their specific characteristics are shown in Table 1. E. Berne defined ego states as "a coherent pattern of feelings and experiences directly linked to a corresponding pattern of behaviour" (Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 17).

Table 1.
Ego states

Structural state	Functional state
Defines the content of ego states	Shows how to use ego states
Components	Manifestations

Source: own work.

The first-order structural model presents three ego states, which are described using behaviours, thoughts and feelings (appropriate to the ego state), as shown in Figure 1.



Parent ego state
behaviours, thoughts and feelings copied from parents or people fulfilling this role.

Adult ego state
behaviours, thoughts and feelings that are direct responses to situations in the here and now.

Child ego state
behaviours, thoughts and feelings carried over from childhood.

Figure 1. First-order structural model[1] – model of ego states.

Source: Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 14.

Access to all three ego states is necessary for healthy personality development, learning, exploration, and forming relationships. We need access to all three ego states (Hargaden, Sills, 2002, p.180). The Adult ego state, through analysis, logical thinking, reference to facts and deduction, can solve problems, devise strategies and respond appropriately to situations. Rules and values, on the other hand, are elements of the Parent ego state – it is through this that we adapt to society. We gather our opinions and norms; these are also stereotypes that we may have adopted from people who were important to us in childhood. Too much energy in this state leads to a tendency to create an excessive number of prohibitions and commands. Thanks to the Child ego state, we can explore the world, experience emotions and feel; it is also a place of creativity, exploration, expression, openness, spontaneity and intuition, but also of fears and anxieties.

To understand human behaviour, it is essential to explore the functional model[2] – here we learn how the 'I' states are used (James, Jongewald, 1994). Only by linking actual human behaviours with their source do we gain a holistic picture of the individual.

Understanding ego states is key to analysing human behaviour, which, from the perspective of organisational functioning, can yield benefits in the form of understanding the causes of specific behaviours, including, for example, recurring destructive ones, which we can find in the next AT concept – transactions. Their specific nature will only be briefly touched upon in this article, so as to provide a basis for discussion on games.

[1] This paper presents very general principles; in professional practice using TA, advanced approaches are employed, including a second-order structural model – only such a perspective on the individual allows for a comprehensive description.

[2] Given the nature of this paper, we refer those interested in expanding their knowledge of 'I-states' to the literature.

We encounter transactions in the process of communication; communication begins with a transactional stimulus, whilst the reaction to it is a response. Hence the definition of a transaction: a transactional stimulus plus a transactional response. (Stewart, Joines, 2021, p. 81). We distinguish the following types of transactions:

- complementary,
- crossed,
- hidden.

Complementary transactions – the essence of this transaction is that, graphically speaking, the vectors (arrows indicating the direction of communication) are always parallel (hence another name for it – parallel transaction). Complementary transactions can continue as long as the questioner receives the responses from the 'I' state that they expected, e.g. Adult-Adult, Adult-Child, Child-Child.

Example: Parent-Child

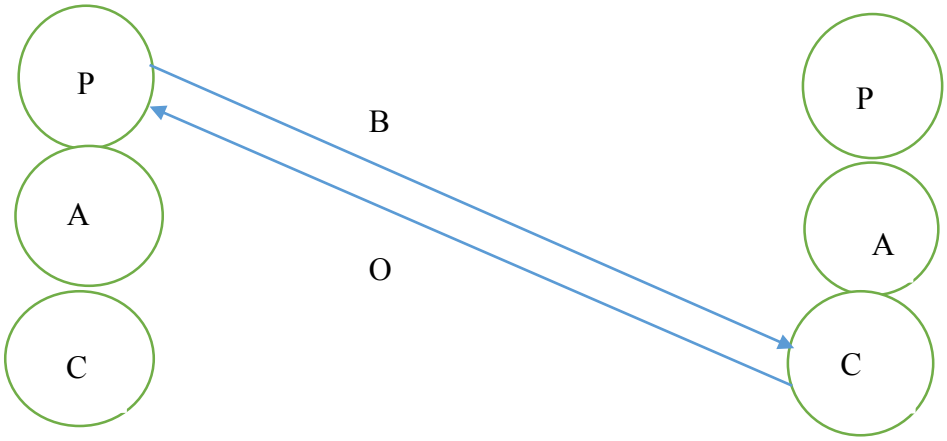


Figure 2. Parent-Child complementary transaction.

Source: own work.

Crossed *transactions* – a transaction in which the transaction vectors are not parallel, i.e. one in which the 'I' state to which the person is addressing is not the same as the one from which the person is responding. (Stewart, Joines, 2021).

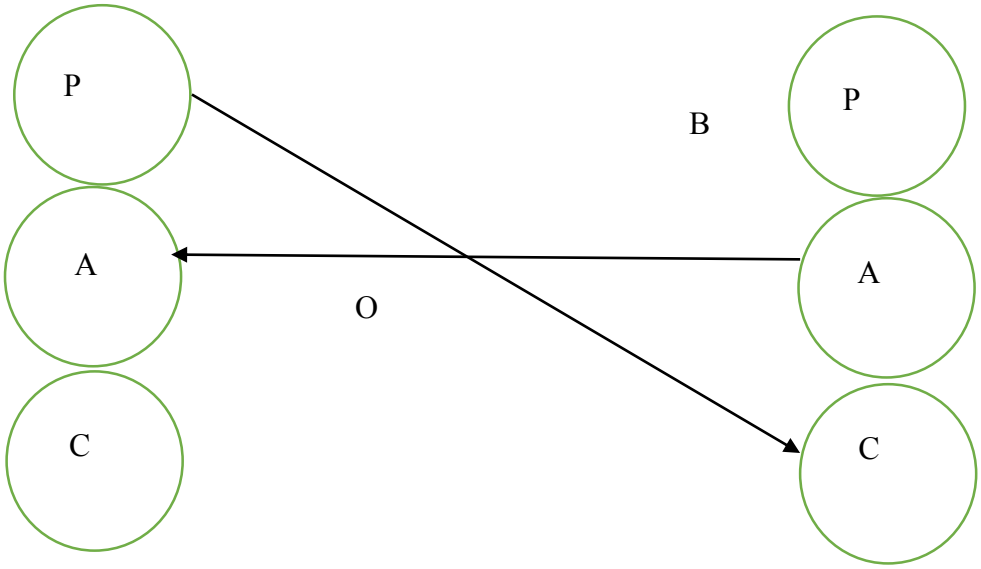


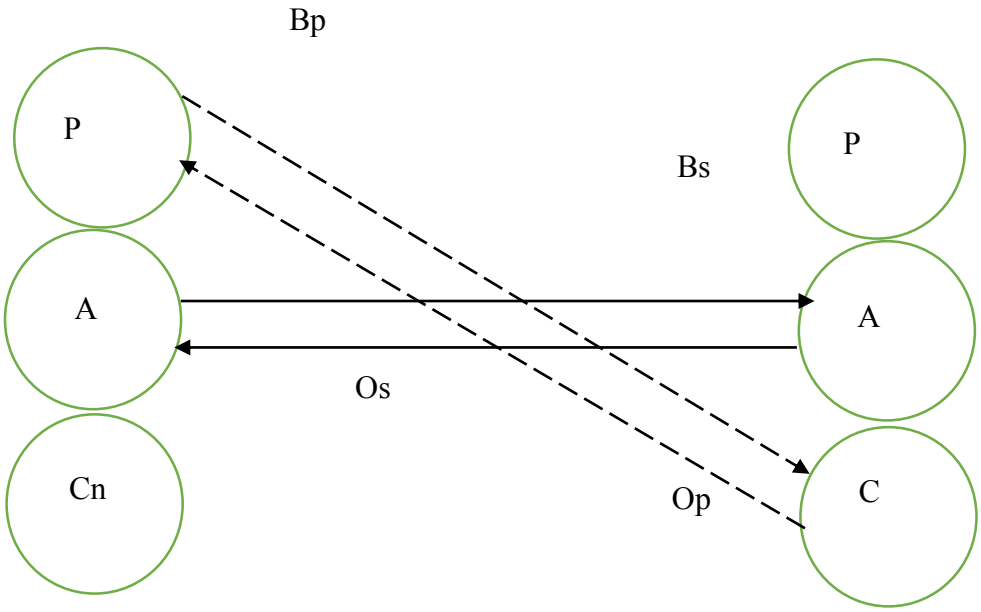
Figure 3. Adult-Adult and Parent-Child Cross-Transaction.

Source: own work.

A consequence of this situation may be that the person initiating the dialogue changes their state to one expected of them by the other party.

Hidden *transactions* – the essence of this transaction is the transmission of two pieces of information at the same time:

- overt information (at the social level) – most often at the Adult-Adult level,
- hidden information (at the psychological level) – usually at the Parent-Child level or Adult-Adult.



Key: Bs, Os – stimulus and response at the social level; Bp, Op – stimulus and response at the psychological level.

Figure 4. Hidden double transaction.

Source: own work.

E. Berne emphasised that the essence of communication is always hidden information; therefore, if we wish to understand someone, we must refer to the psychological level of communication.

3. Psychological games- theoretical background

The same applies to psychological games, which constitute a significant and common element of an individual's functioning within groups and various interpersonal relationships. This concept was developed by E. Berne over many years, a process reflected in the evolution of its definition. Ultimately, it took the following form: 'We call a game a series of complementary hidden transactions leading to a well-defined, predictable outcome. To put it more descriptively, it is a periodic, often recurring set of transactions, seemingly flawless, with a hidden motive, or, more colloquially, a series of moves with a trap or a 'trick'" (Berne, 2022, p. 37; Erskine, 2016, p. 187).

In practical terms, psychological games can be recognised, among other things, by the characteristic consequences of the interaction — the concluded conversation leaves the participants with a sense of discomfort, inconsistency, or reflection on the repetitiveness of a particular pattern ("why did it end this way again"). Despite such experiences, individuals engage in psychological games relatively frequently.

This phenomenon can be explained by referring to the benefits that these games provide to participants (Bowers, 2025; Cornell et al., 2026). Although they may take various forms and occur at many levels of functioning, their common feature is the reinforcement of an individual's specific beliefs. Consequently, mind games serve to maintain cohesion, even if this comes at the expense of communicative effectiveness or the quality of interpersonal relationships.

The classic game follows this formula:

$$F + H = R \rightarrow P \rightarrow K \rightarrow Z$$

where:

F – stratagem,

H – hook,

R – reaction,

P – switch,

K – confusion,

Z – payoff.

Stratagem – conveyed non-verbally, e.g. 'I'm helpless, but if you're willing to help me, I'll sort it out for you' – i.e. a hidden psychological message; an invitation to play along, which will only work if the other person has some weakness (a hook).

Hook – the other person's vulnerability that causes them to react to the bait. A weakness is linked to needs, patterns or beliefs (e.g. the belief that people in need must be helped, or the need for recognition).

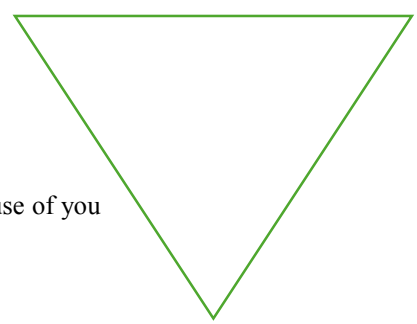
Reaction – a response to the situation and the start of role-playing.

Switch – a significant moment in the game; may be linked to a lack of ideas or solutions; a sudden change in roles or the significance of the situation occurs.

Confusion – disorientation on the part of one or both parties, a sense of not understanding the situation.

Payoff – a reward, e.g. confirmation of one's own beliefs (no one is able to help me, no one respects me), justification of behaviour or avoidance of responsibility.

Each of us enters into these games with greater or lesser ease, but from different positions. S. Karpman (2016, West 2020) proposed analysing psychological games through the prism of the roles embedded in the drama triangle.



Persecutor

Gotcha now, you b****...
Schlemiel
If you weren't here
Look what I've done because of you
I know, but I won't tell
My better

Rescuer

If I were you
At your service
Tell me quickly what happened
Have another drink, it'll help
Lucky you know me, what would have done without me

Victim

Wooden leg
Kick me
A madman's carving
But I think I'm boring you
Yes, but...
What will I do if you leave me
I can't do it, but you can

Figure 5. Karpman's dramatic triangle and games.
Source: own work.

The Persecutor is someone who always takes their own side, stands by their own views, fails to see the good in others and does not acknowledge their perspective; they tend to view people as bad and deserving of punishment.

The Rescuer is a person who takes responsibility for others; in their view, people are helpless and need to be helped. The Rescuer perceives other people as inferior, weaker, and incapable of acting.

The Victim is a person who fails to recognise their own strengths; they see themselves as inferior, helpless and wronged, and deny themselves the right to act. As a result, they attract the Rescuer or the Persecutor.

Each of us tends to enter these games from a specific position, but rarely remains in that role. As the game progresses, roles change; however, the best way to exit the game is to return to the Adult Self state[3] . In the diagram above, alongside the positions in the games, the names of games characteristic of a given role are also presented – this is a limited catalogue; furthermore, it is worth noting that E. Bern (2022) described a substantial collection of games, leaving room for the observation of human behaviour and its description through the prism of new games. It should also be emphasised that a game can be a conversation, a series of similar utterances, whilst it may be spread out over time and consist of several interactions.

4. Psychological games- an analysis of psychological games from business practice

The analysis of psychological games below is based on observations made at a medium-sized company in the Lubuskie Province, which provides comprehensive advertising services to businesses. This company has been operating on the market for over 20 years; the business was founded by three partners, initially offering only printing services. The company's growth was achieved by adding new services and entering new markets, which also resulted in an increase in staff numbers, currently standing at 35. In mid-2025, the company's owners faced a significant problem related to interpersonal difficulties within the team. After analysing the situation, specific actions were proposed to the owners, which involved, amongst other things, the need to observe the team. This observation yielded many insights used in the recovery plan; however, for the purposes of this article, those relevant to the subject of the study are presented.

The psychological games observed were initiated by both employees and management. After analysing the frequency of the situations, their intensity, and also their effects, the authors of the study decided to present three games: 'Yes, but…', 'If it weren't for you', and 'I'm just trying to help'.

Yes, but…

This is a game that occurs very frequently in critical situations that threaten the completion of a project. Example:

Patryk: We still haven't completed that advertisement.

Manager: OK, you can use the forklift tomorrow from 1.00 pm.

Patryk: I understand, boss, but we've got a delivery from Y at 2.00 pm tomorrow.

[3] C. Steiner (1971, pp. 146-158) proposed the use of a 'first-aid kit'—that is, a set of questions revealing the true reasons for entering the game—as a method for exiting the game.

Manager: Well, why don't you split the tasks among the team?
Patryk: Yes, but the lads won't be happy, because they've already got other things planned.

This situation causes frustration to build up, at an already difficult time. Although the exchange begins as a D-D conversation, Patryk shifts into the role of the victim. Often, such an exchange continues for a while, after which the employee is left with the conviction that they cannot count on their boss, whilst the manager is left frustrated that the employees are not taking responsibility and are not trying to solve problems themselves, shifting the burden onto the already overworked manager. It is worth noting that Patryk, who initially took on the role of victim, then, having received no help, remains convinced that the manager will not help as usual, and shifts into the role of persecutor. The manager, on the other hand, initially in the role of rescuer (no one asks him for help), shifts into the role of victim, left, as always, with an unresolved problem.

One way to interrupt the game is to ask Patryk what solutions he sees himself, or to encourage him to evaluate the options – that is, to take on the responsibility and agency characteristic of an Adult. Perpetuating this dynamic reinforces the belief that nothing can be done, which in turn entrenches a sense of helplessness and lack of agency.

The second game, the scale of which was astonishing, is *'If it weren't for you…'*

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that most employees, including members of the management team, engage in this game. It is a game that highlights the pervasive tendency to shirk responsibility, as if it were practically the norm within this organisation. The way it plays out and the areas it affects vary, but its scale and impact become apparent after just a few or a dozen rounds, for example:

- If you hadn't been on holiday then, we would have managed.
- If he hadn't been late, this pile would be smaller.
- If you hadn't been so controlling, I would have done it ages ago.
- If you'd got the hang of this project sooner, I could already be leading another team.
- If you'd worked as a team, you'd have got a bonus.

And although these statements convey information in themselves, when analysed in this specific context, they reveal that people attribute responsibility for their own limitations, inaction or lack of agency to others. It is worth noting that, on a psychological level, they derive a number of benefits from this, such as the ability to maintain the status quo or justify a reluctance to change. The person to whom such words are directed can, through their reactions, end the game; desirable reactions might include questions such as:

- What specifically would you like to do despite these limitations?
- What do you have real influence over?
- What decision are you making in this situation?

It is also important to encourage the separation of facts from interpretations and feelings, as well as to introduce the principle of accountability for actions within one's own sphere of influence.

In the game *'At Your Service*', one of the co-owners took a specialised role. Acting as a rescuer, he helped whenever and however he could:

- I swapped the kettle and the coffee machine around so it would be better for you (did anyone ask him to, and who is it supposed to be better for?).
- I rang X for you.

There are countless such situations, but one of them triggered a real crisis – until then, during our rather informal Christmas Eve gatherings, there had been a clear rule: 'We don't give each other presents'. The boss broke the rule, explaining that 'It's no big deal, I just wanted to make you happy'. In all the situations described, the manager satisfies his need to feel needed, emphasises a sense of superiority ("I know better that presents are needed to celebrate"), controls others and tries to bolster his position.

5. Summary

The analyses presented in this paper demonstrate that Transactional Analysis offers a valuable conceptual and practical framework for interpreting organizational dynamics, particularly in the areas of communication and interpersonal relations. The relevance of this tool has been demonstrated in the examples observed in the company under study. Furthermore, the theoretical foundations of TA discussed and characterised, together with the examples, demonstrate its potential for application in a business environment, particularly in the area of recognising repetitive and unconscious, yet often destructive, patterns of behaviour identified in psychological games. These games, as shown, can significantly reduce the effectiveness of organisational activities and the quality of cooperation between employees. Therefore, identifying these games and the roles adopted by employees within them can be a significant step towards limiting the mechanisms that lead to the perpetuation of inefficiency at the individual and team levels.

Furthermore, with regard to the aim of this article, it should be emphasised that the examples and interpretations presented confirm the possibility of the practical application of Transactional Analysis in organisations – merely noticing the games and identifying their potential effects is not enough; it is necessary to interrupt the games. Only this conscious intervention in communication can contribute to building more transparent and responsible relationships and increasing the effectiveness of cooperation. Thus, the intended objective has been achieved, demonstrating both the theoretical foundations of the concept and its practical utility.

Furthermore, to highlight the practical application of the TA concept, several TA-based training courses (to choose from) were proposed to the company's owners. These were designed to facilitate employees' self-awareness, the observation of their own and others' behaviour, and to demonstrate the impact of communication styles on team building and organisational culture. However, the number of problems and their multidimensional nature within the organisation in question indicate that the process of restoring balance will be a long one. The use of AT-based workshops, where a clear conceptual framework seems ideal for describing team dynamics and the mechanisms that sustain conflict, may help to cease or limit ineffective patterns of behaviour, and this in turn may contribute to further exploration of the usefulness of AT in organisations.

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