Mind Games

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The term mind games refers to three main categories:

a largely conscious struggle for psychological one-upmanship, often employing passive-aggressive behavior to specifically demoralize or empower the thinking subject, making the aggressor look superior - 'mind games or power games'.
'the unconscious games played by innocent people engaged in duplex transactions of which they are not fully aware, and which form the most important aspect of social life all over the world' - the psychological field of transactional analysis, and in particular the Karpman drama triangle
mental exercises designed to improve the functioning of mind and/or personality.

The struggle for prestige

'The struggle for prestige...in the imaginary' formed for Jacques Lacan one of the major fields of human interaction. Such 'competiveness...a lot of rivalry about' is perhaps most prevalent in Type A personalities, so that for example the wary salesman will know that 'selling to the highly driven person means facing some of the most challenging mind games you'll ever encounter..arrogance, impatience, or condescension'.

However, in all office politics 'envy, rivalry, power conflicts...discord and intigues, are a matter of course'; and the 'passive aggressive... took secret revenge, often quite unconsciously' may well be quite as dangerous a game-player as the 'driven... might pull a few overly aggressive mind tricks'.

Intimate relationships

'Women use the term mind games to refer to the ways their partners undermine their confidence in their own perceptions'. Thus 'Jack may act upon Jill in many ways...He may invalidate her experience...invalidate not only the significance, modality, and content, but her very capacity to remember at all, and make her feel guilty for doing so into the bargain'. Such abusive mind games may extend to 'discounting (denial of the victim's reality), diverting...trivializing, undermining, threatening...and - most important - anger'.

It is clear however that 'verbal coercion is truly an equal-opportunity behavior' - open to each or both sexes. 'This may be done unintentionally as a by-product of each person's self-deception...It is impossible for me to maintain a false picture of myself unless I falsify your picture of yourself and of me'. With straight talk at one end of a scale, 'at the other end of a theoretical scale, conversations can be characterized by the presence of numerous disclaimed, unavowed, contradictory, and paradoxical implications, or "insinuendoes"'.

Berne's games

A great deal of such competitive mind games would seem to fall into the category of Berne's game,

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"Now I've Got You, You Son of a Bitch", with its motto, 'I've been watching you, hoping you'd make a slip': in therapy, the protagonist might have 'recalled that ever since early childhood he had looked for similar injustices, received them with delight and exploited them with the same vigour'. NIGYSOB is however only one in a (far from exhaustive) set of around thirty-five games explicated in Berne's bestseller on the subject.

'Games are so predominant and deep-rooted in society that they tend to become institutionalized, that is, played according to rules that everybody knows about and more or less agrees to' - as with the game of "Alcoholic" and its associated 'organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous...there is also a formal organization known as Alanon for wives and families of alcoholics'.

Psychological games vary widely in degrees of pleasantness. Berne himself may have been speaking from personal experience when he recommended that, when faced at parties with 'an attempt to exploit professional knowledge' in a game of Why Don't You - Yes But", 'the best policy under those circumstances is to flee from the opening move and look for a stimulating game of first-degree "Rapo"' - flirtation.

Berne recognised however that 'since by definition games are based on ulterior transactions, they must all have some element of exploitation'. The therapeutic ideal he offered was to stop playing games altogether: 'try not playing long enough so that your favourite players will realize you have stopped and they may stop too....If things go well, you'll get your reward in good pay-offs instead of bad ones'.

Self-empowerment

There is also the category of the self-empowering 'mind game: mental exercises...in the context of therapy: mind games, socio and psycho dramas, fantasy workshops and the like'. These (like the Lennon song Mind Games) might ultimately be seen as a New Age outgrowth of Yoga as' a technique of self-development...consist of physical and mental disciplines'.

Cultural examples

In The Taming of The Shrew, 'Petruchio combined physical abuse with mind games'.
That Hideous Strength anticipates the theory of the double-bind with its account of organisational 'modes of oblique discipline...the elasticity stunt': as the Deputy Director of N.I.C.E. generously informs an underling, 'My dear young friend...There are only two errors which would be fatal....On the one hand, anything like a lack of initiative or enterprise would be disastrous. On the other, the slightest approach to unauthorised action...might have consequences from which even I could not protect you'.

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