

Intimate Notes

Within the world of marital and family therapy, the topic of communication and its enhancement is of primary concern. In the affect theory paradigm of Tomkins, the clear communication of affect from within the inmost self is the essential ingredient for effective communication. It is possible to envision several techniques that could lead a couple or family to more direct communication of affect from within the self. The ultimate success of any such method will depend upon how well informed it is in the area of affect and affect dynamics. This column will focus on several means by which the principles of affect theory and script theory may be incorporated into a working model of therapy that helps couples communicate more effectively.

In previous columns, I have suggested one basic strategy for the assessment of the intimate functioning of couples who enter therapy. In consultation with Tomkins shortly before his death in 1991, I began to apply his blueprint for human motivation (*AIC I* p. 328) to intimate relationships. In this system, a couple's capacity to be intimate is viewed as mediated through their ability to 1) maximize positive affect, 2) minimize negative affect, 3) minimize the inhibition of affect, and 4) develop interpersonal mechanisms (scripts) that maximize 1-3 above. Thus, a couple who never experience mutual interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy cannot be intimate, just as a couple who never stop fighting cannot be intimate.

Of course, most couples who consult a therapist are not at such extreme ends of the spectrum. Instead, their intimacy usually lacks balance among the four elements of the system and/or is significantly deficient in one area. For instance, two people may neither fight nor be capable of dealing with anger constructively, but lack shared interests. Others may share a number of interests but be unable to stop angry interactions before they become damaging. When a relationship develops an unbalanced pattern of this nature and repeats it with regularity, the two people can find themselves stuck (not unlike a computer that has become frozen in a loop). They may begin to view this pattern as their inherent or only style of interaction and anticipate its occurrence even before they speak, thus triggering another repetition of that same pattern in their interpersonal system. Such scripted patterns of interaffectivity are pathological because they lack flexibility, reduce the resilience needed in order to cope with the difficulties that dyadic life inevitably imposes, and prevent the couple from forming new, more flexible patterns as they progress through the changes required by successive phases of the life cycle.

I have also theorized that the mechanism controlling the process of intimacy not only follows the basic motivational blueprint sketched by Tomkins, but is powered by *tangible displays* of affect. In this system, the deepest levels of intimacy are experienced when the inmost selves of both members of the relationship are available for affective communication to and from the other. This is true whether the affects being communicated are positive or negative. I believe that the inmost self of a person is only available to another when the affective component(s) of the self are revealed by displays such as those found in kissing, touching, talking, facial expression, tone of voice, general body language, etc. Such revelations permit the exposure of self necessary for the development of intimacy. They are also the basis of the vulnerability to the other that one experiences in intimate relationships. In earliest interpersonal life, such exposure of self could be considered the most pure and the most vulnerable to affective communications from outside the self,

as Nathanson describes in his work on the empathic wall (Nathanson, D.L., *The Empathic Wall and the Ecology of Affect, Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 41:171-187, 1986). The exposure of self is pure because the innate affect of infants and young children is not yet altered by the socializing effects of their caregivers and others. The facial and verbal productions of the child leave no doubt as to whether they are distressed, angry, afraid, excited, joyful, embarrassed, startled, disgusted or having a dissmell reaction.

As the child ages, language becomes available, socialization takes place, and the child's various interpersonal contacts induce scripts for the management of affect that alter the ease with which the inmost self is exposed by affective expression. Space prevents further discussion of the complexity of these developments in the emotional biography of a person. They are mentioned here in order to make note of how easily and directly a child communicates their inmost self through affect display and to contrast it with the complicated communicative style of disturbed couples.

In the affect theory paradigm, it is understood that as the self develops, the acquisition of verbal modes of interpersonal communication follows the basic blueprint and is directed primarily by the need of the inmost self to maximize positive affect, minimize negative affect, and minimize the inhibition of affect. This means that it is possible to analyze all styles of verbal interaction in terms of their motivation by affect. This logical simplification can be extraordinarily useful to the therapist confronted by a couple in the midst of seemingly impenetrable debates about who is right and who is wrong, and about issues that appear overwhelmingly complicated.

Two such cases in which this style of communication was prominent are reported here in brief. In one couple, the husband was a professor of philosophy and in the other, the husband was an engineer. Both of these men used a defensive mode of intellectualization that generated an endless stream of purposefully rational verbal interactions with their wives. Each considered whatever emotionality was demonstrated by his wife to be a sign that the women were defective in their ability to communicate. The script of intellectualization is one whereby affect is managed by suppression of direct expression (often producing what Tomkins called "backed-up affect") and/or disavowal of its source; this converts the presentation of self into a primarily cognitive mode devoid of affect.

Such people are often very good poker players because they have also reduced their facial display of affect. In these cases, both women invariably experienced the intellectual replies or comments of their husbands as impediments to the relationship. Neither woman felt that her emotions could be communicated to the spouse or that the spouse ever communicated emotion back. Instead, the men would respond by either ignoring what they experienced as the overly emotional communications of their wives or with emotionally flat intellectual responses intended to prevent affective resonance and quell the emotion of the wife. Such a situation always operates as an *impediment to positive affect* sufficient to trigger shame, and as a result, both marriages were seriously compromised by the failure to minimize. It was necessary to begin the therapeutic process with these men by using an intentionally didactic style.

Each was intrigued by a detailed, intellectual description of affect theory that allowed them to consider their affects as inevitable and useful biological events rather than emotional weaknesses. Since each couple also had one or more children, the men were readily reminded of the open display of affect visible in their children when young. As a result (and because they were motivated to improve their marriages), both began an intellectual pursuit of their

affective states and learned to locate and display affect. In time, they even began to view the expression of feelings by their wives as normal, rather than as some "irrational" event that they could ignore because of its "irrationality." The perception of affect as biological helped each of these men become less ashamed and less afraid of expressing affect. This helped allow them to imbue their verbal communications with more emotion—an action that made it possible for them to communicate more of their inmost selves.

Nevertheless, after a lifetime of affect suppression, such exposure did not come easily to them. In fact, at first it was unclear to each as to how to expose the inmost self. Both truly believed that many of the things they said were deep revelations about the self. Close examination of these revelations made apparent that they were solely cognitive in nature and devoid of affect. Therefore, although a statement might reveal what they were thinking, it seldom exposed the emotional component of their inmost selves. This prevented both members of each couple from feeling intimately connected, which is, of course, one outcome—intended or otherwise—of the script of intellectualization.

The following technique was of help to these men as they sought to discover how to communicate more of their inmost selves: It was suggested to them that all verbal communications could be grouped into two general categories. Category One is characterized by speech that is primarily descriptive of the world outside of the self while the speech in Category Two exposes what is happening inside of the self. For instance, the following is a Category One communication: "I'm furious with her that dinner is never ready when I get home because she's off shopping or something when she knows I get home at the same time every day." Superficially, one might think that this sentence successfully conveys legitimate inner anger. However, unless expressed with a great deal of anger—not the usual style of intellectualizers—the sentence focuses the listener on the *behavior* of the wife. It blames her and suggests that he is angry only because of something she has done. As a result, it is more descriptive of outside-of-self phenomena than of inner feelings. If expressed with a great deal of anger, then the same sentence also has a high probability of directing one away from the inmost self because the toxic, punishing nature of anger makes one want to get away from it as rapidly as possible. The reader trained in affect theory knows that this sentence is an example of an *attack-other* transaction. In Chapter 26 of *Shame and Pride*, Nathanson points out that such transactions represent a defensive response to shame for an individual, but one that may now be seen as preventing exposure of the inmost self within a relationship.

In contrast, if this same sentiment were expressed in what is called here a Category Two manner, it might read as follows: "When I arrive home and I'm looking forward to dinner but it's not ready, my hunger, my distress from the day, and the sense of rejection I feel that it's not ready make me very angry." In this example, the focus begins with a brief description of the facts, and although it recognizes that the feelings generated are the result of an interpersonal process, those feelings are owned by the person describing them. Hence, the inmost self of that particular man is made more available, and the clarity of what happened inside him is more sharply defined.

He is more vulnerable expressing himself this way. By being so, he opens the door into his inmost self in a way that allows the ensuing interactions with his wife to be more intimate, should she be available. To an affect theory-based therapist, the interaction can then be viewed as follows: this man

was experiencing the normal distress-anguish triggered by an above-optimal steady-state neural density caused by hunger and the requirements of a day at work. He had interest-excitement in arriving home in hope of deriving both physical and emotional comfort from the relationship and a consequent diminution of his distress. When dinner was not ready and his wife unavailable, several things happened. Shame was triggered by the impediment to positive affect posed by her absence and the unmade dinner. In the first example above, the man used anger in an *attack-other* mode to handle his shame. In the second, he expressed a sense of rejection one of the many faces of the shame family of emotions. By owning the feeling, he leaves himself open to a mutual exchange with his spouse. This invites her to be his ally in the resolution of his feelings, rather than an adversary.

When so cast, most people respond with adversarial behavior, for there is little else to do in such a situation. The self of the other is closed off, and negative affect (usually shame) is being hurled one's way; one will then defend the self, and an adversarial spiral will ensue. But to court the other as an ally—and by so doing show interest-excitement in that person—is to trigger interest-excitement in them and to allow a spiral of positive affect to develop. This is the reason that a couples therapist often hears one member of a dyad complain that the other does not seem to be working hard enough on their self. When one person radiates interest-excitement by working on the self in order to improve the relationship, the other experiences that interest-excitement and feels it by the pleasant contagion of interaffectivity. When the opposite occurs—the other showing no interest in working on the self—shame is triggered by the impediment to interest-excitement posed by the other's apparent lack of interest in improving the relationship.

There is, of course, much more that one would need to know about the interaction described above in order to understand more fully the complex scripts of both partners and how the relationship came to reach a point where the wife did not have dinner ready. Such information is omitted in order to focus on the *method* of helping people communicate the inmost self more clearly. Both the philosopher and the engineer readily grasped the dichotomy between communication that describes the outside of the self and that which shares the inside of the self. This apparently cognitive approach allowed both men to work on the task of knowing their affects and to seek to be more direct in their expression of affect without threatening their intellectualizing scripts. It gave them a concrete task, and lessened their shame when they did begin to attempt to share their feelings. It is the inside-of-self communicative style that is being taught when therapists direct people to begin sentences with "I feel." If we do not demonstrate to a couple such methods of exposing the inmost self, then they will not be able to communicate affect successfully, and the depth of their intimacy will be limited. In some respects, the closer each person can become to being more "childlike" in their openness of affective expression, the more their inmost self will be visible. Perhaps this is what those therapists who encourage people to find their "inner child" are attempting to accomplish.

One final note is worth mentioning. The engineer soon became proficient at saying "I feel that she..." Because he understood the difference between outside-of-self and inside-of-self communications, it was not difficult to show him that as soon as he added the "she," he was back outside of the self. When directed to change the sentence to "I feel that I....," he drew a blank as to what to say next. When he then remarked "I guess I don't really know what I feel," our work had begun in earnest.