

relief of impediment
clg · 8/17/99 at 5:22 pm ET

Here's a question I've been thinking about recently. I think maybe I'm missing something, or not understanding properly that aspect of shame. Perhaps someone could help clarify..(?)

If a source of interest was fully relieved, thus producing enjoyment; and there occurred an impediment to said enjoyment, and then partial relief of that impediment: would that still trigger interest? What would be the new source of interest? Or would that be a purely physiologic, or biological response?

Re: relief of impediment
Don Nathanson · 8/22/99 at 11:03 am ET

Good question, and one that shows clearly the gap between a theory of emotion and the experience of emotion. Let's look at it from a few vantage points.

On the basis of affect theory, any stimulus that enters the neural apparatus as a rising gradient within an optimal range will trigger affect over the range from mild interest to wild excitement. Tomkins named this affect, of course, to denote that range, so it is called interest-excitement. As I never tire of saying, each affect is like a spotlight that illuminates and calls attention to whatever turned it on, to whatever triggered it. When that optimally rising gradient of stimulation (like a new tune on the radio, an approaching car that looks different from our expectations, a good looking guy, a cloud formation) triggers interest-excitement, we focus on whatever the affect thereby makes interesting and "think about" it for a moment.

Let's say, then, that after a moment's careful consideration we "recognize" the good looking guy or notice that he finds us equally interesting; that we "get" the new tune and like it; that we "realize" that the new car is part of a family of cars we know well; that the cloud "resembles" a sheep that turns into a dinosaur. In each situation, the affect interest-excitement is actually turned off or sharply reduced as soon as we begin to focus our attention on whatever has triggered it. We don't really need the spotlight now that we have begun to process this realm of data. In many situations, the "problem" on which we have started to focus contains many subunits, so we go through sequences of rising and falling densities of interest-excitement.

Of equal importance, as our correspondent notes, is the observation that as we achieve solution of the problem illuminated by affect, we are rewarded by the affect that amplifies decreasing stimulation. Enjoyment-joy, the affect I prefer to describe in its milder form as contentment, is the physiological response to this reduction in effort or any other source of data. In each of the sample situations mentioned above, there might well be a blip of contentment or even joy as we reach our conclusions.

Now, says our correspondent, what happens when and if something interferes with our enjoyment of that moment? Is there an obligatory connection between the situation that preceded the one in which we started to experience enjoyment-joy? Just because the affect enjoyment-joy was triggered in a sequence initiated by interest-excitement, would that have anything to do with the predecessor experience? As a first response to this complex set of questions, it is essential to explain that each affective experience is its own little world. It doesn't matter what was going on before the moment of enjoyment-joy for an impediment to that positive affect to trigger shame affect. Contentment may follow

any decrease in anger-rage, distress-anguish, dissmell, disgust, fear-terror, or shame-humiliation. So the moment of enjoyment-joy would be independent, would feel the same, no matter what preceded it. Furthermore, the experience of shame-humiliation as an amplified analogue of any impediment to any experience of enjoyment-joy would be similar. So for the purposes of this specific question, it doesn't matter what preceded the positive affect of enjoyment-joy when we begin to examine what happens when that experience of positive affect is impeded. Shame is shame is shame is shame. It is an affect and as an affect it is a physiological mechanism.

But hey, wait a moment. Shame is no different from any of the other affects in its work as a spotlight. The evolved function of shame affect is to act as an analogic amplifier of whatever was the impediment and to focus our attention on that impediment. It is only when we refuse to focus on the impediment that we move to the Compass of Shame, which is really not about shame as affect but about our scripted responses to moments of shame affect in which we don't obey the call of the spotlight. The moment we pay attention to the spotlight, shame dwindles and then disappears. All is right with the world when we obey the call of the innate affects. Actually, it is to get everybody to learn this simple truth that we run this Forum and that we engage in the business of psychotherapy.

Intuitively we know (I forget whether it was Tomkins or I who first said this) that the intensity of shame (the degree of painfulness) is directly proportional to the degree and intensity of positive affect that has been impeded. Little doses of shame hurt a little, big doses hurt a lot. Tomkins pointed out that in addition to these acute, sharp, momentary experiences of shame, there are lots of situations in which we are unable or unwilling to focus our attention on the trigger for shame and make the repairs it suggests. Shame can get us into the Compass of scripted responses when we don't listen to it, and it is possible for someone to experience chronic and unrelenting shame as a life experience of terrible pain.

It is in such a situation that the physiology of shame comes into play in the manner adduced by our questioning colleague. The complete relief of ANY negative affect triggers enjoyment-joy, and the degree of that resulting positive affect is directly proportional to the preceding degree of negative affect (or pain). But for the affect of shame there is another subtle phenomenon. Yes, the complete resolution of chronic and enduring shame, like all the other negative affects, triggers/releases great joy. But since the physiology of shame affect depends on the fact/assumption/theory that it is an analogic amplification of an impediment to positive affect, then partial or incomplete relief of shame affect must be interpreted in terms of this understanding. Although acute shame can be triggered in response to impediment of either positive affect, we can understand chronic shame only in terms of ongoing impediments to our hope that the good scene will return. This makes for mini-sequences of rising and falling gradients of interest-excitement, and has little to do with enjoyment-joy. You can't postulate constant joy because stimulus density can't go on decreasing indefinitely! And you can't postulate constant shame unless you think of it in terms of impeded constant hope, which means impeded interest-excitement. In such a situation, incomplete resolution of the pain of shame brings this hope to the fore, with all its attendant interest-excitement. Complete resolution of this chronic pain makes it unnecessary to postulate anything as relief of the pain because it no longer exists, and therefore once the pain is completely relieved there is powerful reduction in stimulus density of all sorts.

But let's get away from this complexity for a moment and see that here we have been talking about the difference between affect and script. Complex, of course, but so is human life. If I am lucky, this explanation will spur increasing interest in the study of affect and script, and perhaps encourage some of you to join one of our Tomkins Institute Study Groups. Look at the description of our Study Groups

you'll find in the Members Section of this website and consider joining. I rather suspect you'll enjoy the experience.

And I sure hope that clg, our astute questioner, has booked a ticket for the 22-24 October Colloquium here in Philadelphia where all of these issues and more will be discussed with vigor. Thanks again for the question.