

Suppression of Emotion: A Danger to Modern Societies?

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This essay proposes that suppression of emotions is a key institution in modern societies, and that it underlies the denial of death and both interpersonal and inter-group violence. The first step is to compare traditional and modern societies with respect to their treatment of the social-emotional world. Next a relatively minor type of suppression is considered: wholehearted belief in an afterlife in heaven. The next step is to review a much more serious possibility: studies that suggest that war and collective conflict, such as terrorism, may be caused by humiliation and vengeance. If this is true, then trying to understand and reduce violence by focusing only on politics and economics is a grave error. Finally, some preliminary steps toward change are discussed.

Individuals and thought vs. relationships and feeling

In traditional societies, individuals are much less visible than relationships. One's identity is based largely on position in a family rather than one's own characteristics. Modern societies completely reverse this emphasis, seeing individuals more or less isolated from their social networks. Since this idea is widely accepted, it will be treated briefly.

There is a parallel difference in the treatment of emotions. In traditional societies, emotions get at least as much attention as behavior and thought, if not more. For example, individual morality often revolves around the attempt to keep one's family from being shamed. In these societies, shame is highly visible to the point of excess. But in modern societies, behavior and thought are treated as much more important than emotions, which tend to be ignored or hidden. Shame is taboo to the extent that it can hardly be mentioned.

The overemphasis on the social-emotional world in traditional societies has usually given rise to stalemate; these societies tend to be stuck in their traditions and conventions. For this reason, most of them have by now been either overrun or supplanted by modern societies.

On the other hand, modern societies have undergone rapid change because of their focus on the individual and on thought: creativity and invention tend to be located in individuals rather than groups. However, in this process an important part of life, the importance of the social-emotional world, have been all but forgotten.

Modern societies are very advanced in their knowledge of the material world and behavior, thought and perception. But they still are in the flat earth stage about emotions. A New Yorker cartoon is apropos. A male client, lying on the couch, is saying to the analyst: "Call it denial if you like, but I think that what goes on in my personal life is none of my own damn business!" Like much of the best humor, this caption hits a core truth.

What is usually learned about emotions is that they should be neither seen nor heard or even felt: "Don't be so emotional!" In childhood we get accustomed to denying and hiding our emotions to the extent that it becomes a habit. Boys, particularly, are shamed and bullied if they cry or reveal other emotions, other than venting anger (more the problem with venting below). For this reason, most adults find it difficult if not impossible to feel most of their own emotions: they are none of our own damn business! Angry? Not me, I don't have an angry bone in my body.

Emotions are usually contagious because most of us have built up an enormous backlog of uncried cries, unlaughed laughs, and so on. The more backlog lying in wait, the more intimidating the prospect of feeling and expressing emotion. Perhaps that explains how little crying there is these days at funerals, and how so much quarreling, depression and alienation occur in conjunction with a death in the family.

Grief and loss

In order to make these ideas concrete, a specific emotion, grief, will be discussed in connection with attitudes toward death in modern societies. This is a minor issue compared to the roots of violence, but is more familiar and obvious. The facts that are agreed upon: like other mammals, humans are hardwired to become attached to those near to them, particularly their caretakers and siblings. It's like imprinting, especially on our early intimates: we can't help but do it. We miss them when they are away, and feel normal when they are around. You can be attached to someone you don't even like. Attachment is involuntary because it occurs in the limbic system of the brain: it is completely physical, like breathing.

The emotion of loss of an attachment is grief, sometimes called sadness or distress. Wholehearted belief in an afterlife can help avoid the pain of grief. If the loved one is not really gone, we needn't feel and express grief. Funerals can be a celebration rather than mourning by denying death and loss. One simply cannot suffer loss without the pain of grief, but if one thinks that there has been no loss, most of the pain can be deferred. The idea of deferring emotions will be discussed below. Religious denial of emotions associated with death is just a part of a larger system of denial of emotions by all of the institutions in modern societies, including the sciences. Except in unusual situations, emotions tend to be ignored or discounted by virtually everybody.

For example, most university departments of psychology have sections on behavior, cognition, perception, memory and so on. I know of only one (out of several hundred) that also has a section on emotion. If there is anyone in the department who studies emotions, she or he is likely to be on their own, a rare bird. Emotions are not only seldom studied in higher education, but teaching is almost entirely centered on thoughts rather than feelings. Inadvertently, higher education, whatever else it might teach, also teaches the suppression of feelings.

Specifics of Mourning

How long does mourning take to ease the pain of loss? Here the story gets complicated. We know that traditional societies had rituals of mourning that lasted a long time, many years. In the ancient Hebrew tradition of *kadish* and *sitting shiva*, one mourns the death of parents for the rest of one's life.

To continue the discussion it will be now necessary to consider matters where there is little or no agreement. Since we are still in the flat earth stage, we must deal with opinions by the so-called experts. Although I am considered an expert on emotions, most of what follows is just my opinions among those of many other experts with different opinions. Are there some kinds of mourning that shorten the period and intensity of pain? From here on, the discussion will be largely based on my own experiences and those I learned about from my students.

I think that a specific kind of cry resolves grief, including deferred grief, and therefore shortens the period of mourning. The physical characteristics are simple: sobbing with tears. The

psychological characteristics are more complex. One needs to distinguish a good cry, one that brings immediate relief, from a bad cry, one that doesn't. A good cry occurs when we feel safe and able to view ourselves as if in a theatre. At this distance, we are not completely lost in the grief (a bad cry; Scheff 1979).

An instance from my own life follows. During the divorce from my first wife, when I was 40, I was utterly miserable because of separation from my kids in the first year of the divorce. Learning to cry at this time was an extraordinary help: I cried every day, without missing a single day, during that year. I learned to review memories of each of my children, along with events of the day after I was home, because I quickly realized that crying at work was not appreciated. I was serving as chair of my department at UCSB at that time: my colleagues and the staff wanted a leader, not a crybaby.

At first I thought I was crying only about missing my kids. But serving as chair was extremely stressful, as it usually is, but especially at this time, since I was also active in the protest against the Vietnam War. Many people on campus and off strongly disapproved of a chair's open involvement in radical politics. It soon occurred to me that the crying was helping with much of that stress also.

Which brings up a further issue. I was crying so much and so often that frequently I didn't know what I was crying about. Since I hadn't really cried for some 25 years, perhaps I was chipping away at my backlog of uncried cries, the ones that had been deferred earlier. Also I had some emotional experiences that suggested that I had a backlog of other emotions, such as fear, anger and embarrassment, as well.

A worrisome thought: suppose everyone has a backlog of uncried cries. If that's the case, then our society is in bad shape. In the fast pace of modern societies, one learns that there is "No Time to Cry" (song by Iris Dement 1993).

My father died a year ago today, the rooster started crowing when they carried Dad away
There beside my mother, in the living room, I stood
With my brothers and my sisters knowing Dad was gone for good
Well, I stayed at home just long enough to lay him in the ground
And then I caught a plane to do a show up north in Detroit town
Because I'm older now and I've got no time to cry
I've got no time to look back, I've got no time to see
The pieces of my heart that have been ripped away from me
And if the feeling starts to coming, I've learned to stop 'em fast
'Cause I don't know, if I let them go, they might not wanna pass
And there's just so many people trying to get me on the phone
And there's bills to pay, and songs to play, and a house to make a home.
I guess I'm older now and I've got no time to cry.

Emotions and Violence

A theory of the emotional causes of violence was proposed by Gilligan (1997), based on his experiences with violent men as a prison psychiatrist:

The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence... The different forms of violence, whether toward individuals or entire populations, are motivated

(caused) by shame. (pp. 110-111).

Gilligan is careful to point out that he is not referring to ordinary shame but shame that is held in secret:

[Their secret shame is] probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men... The degree of secret shame that a man needs to be experiencing in order to become homicidal is so intense and so painful that it threatens to overwhelm him...

The link between secret shame and violence is not spelt out by Gilligan, but is described in other sources (Retzinger 1991; Scheff and Retzinger 1991). When a person is intensely ashamed of being ashamed, they may hide their shame by covering it over with anger and aggression. There is also another direction shame about shame may take: withdrawal, depression, or silence. For brevity, this other direction will not be discussed here, even though it is probably much more frequent than the anger route.

Anger and aggression generated by secret shame can lead to suicide and/or murder. In a study of 211 cases of familicide (one spouse kills the other and one or more of the children), Websdale found evidence strongly supporting Gilligan's theory. In all of the cases that contained enough detail for an analysis of shame (more than two thirds of the cases) Websdale found evidence of intense shame. A typical case: a middle class man who was proud of being the breadwinner for his family lost his job. He revealed the job loss to no one, pretending to be going to work every weekday as if nothing had happened. After many days of pretense, he killed his wife, children and himself. In the aftermath, it became clear that he was completely humiliated, and was plotting the killings in great detail.

Collective Violence

In an earlier book (1994), I proposed that revenge was the direct cause of WWI and, indirectly, of WWII, since revenge was a prominent feature of the rise of Hitler. The first war, I argued, was instigated by France as revenge against Germany for defeating them in 1871. It is quite relevant that there were no negotiations between the two sides prior to the war.

The French media 1871-1914 were overflowing with references to redeeming French honor through revenge: It was the dominant theme in newspapers, and quite prominent in novels, popular songs and poetry. What was called military poetry, which was extraordinarily popular, was given over completely to this theme.

My book goes on to suggest that Hitler's rise to power in Germany was based on his promise to overthrow the Treaty of Versailles (1918), which Germans found humiliating. Hitler's personal life and his speeches are aflame with references to honor, shame, humiliation, and revenge. These three wars (Franco-Prussian, WWI and WWII) seem to suggest that revenge begets counter-revenge.

With only a few exceptions, most historians are baffled about the causes of WWI and the rise of Hitler, because they insist on looking only at the external world of politics and economics. From this point of view, most wars and collective conflicts seem utterly senseless. The idea that humiliation and vengeance cannot have causal force since they are only emotions is part of the social institution of the suppression of feeling.

The thesis that shame leads to violence can also be illustrated by recent studies of the motivation of terrorists. Several studies strongly suggest that massive experiences of humiliation are the main motivation of terrorists, such as Palestinian suicide-bombers (Strozier, et al 2010, pp. 143-147. See also Jones 2008, p. 36, and Stern 2003).

A remark by the then prime minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, frames our dilemma. When asked by a reporter why Palestinians crossing the border are kept waiting so long, he replied: “We want to humiliate them” (Reported in a talk by Jones 2010). Both Helmick 2003 and Michalczyk 2003 suggest that humiliation was an intentional Israeli policy. If this was true, it would be fair to say that Israeli policy was manufacturing terrorism against Israel. Governments can get away with such policies because emotional causes are not recognized.

Resolving Unresolved Feelings

This section, again based on my own opinions, is for the sake of specificity, to try to bring the idea of emotion to life in a society that ignores and discounts them. The following suggestions apply to five feelings (Scheff 1979). Laughing may be helpful in itself, and also help with all emotional expressions. Doesn't seem to matter if its comedy, jokes, or just laughter from nowhere. Genuine laughter may begin to resolve our backlogs of unlaughed laughs, that is to say, our unresolved shame (1). Another exercise is yawning yoga. If you fake a few yawns, you may have a fit of enjoyable yawns (and spread the contagion to others). Yawning seems to relieve physical tension (2).

All emotional expressions would be contagious if everyone carries a backlog of unexpressed emotions. Contagion occurs because even the slightest encouragement from others may overcome our long established sense that we will be punished if we express our true emotions and/or that we may be overwhelmed if we allow ourselves to feel.

For persons who don't cry (sobbing with tears), or those who have bad cries (one doesn't feel any better after a bad cry), a helpful exercise is Best Moments. Make a list of the best moments in your whole life, the longer the list and the greater the detail, the better.

This idea came from seeing photos of Olympic winners after receiving their medals. The winners of a men's track event, for example, are standing on their pedestals with their new medals, all three crying. Why? It is the best moment in their life so far. Best moments yield good (relieving) rather than bad cries. A good cry signals the resolution some of our backlog of grief (3). Too bad we can't all be Olympic winners.

We can practice being angry without shouting by explaining our frustration in a courteous way. Experimental psychologists have demonstrated that one doesn't feel better after venting anger. The offending person, once they comprehend that we are angry even though courteous, is more likely to apologize. In addition, we may be less hyper (adrenaline charged bodily mobilization) through body heat. The idea is that even a slight increase in body heat is enough to metabolize the adrenalin. Most people, even those that are loud and aggressive, probably carry a backlog of unresolved anger (4) and resentment.

Finally backlogs of fear (5) may be accessible through telling stories of physical danger, seeing horror films, riding roller coasters, or just driving on almost any busy freeway. The telltale sign of resolution of fear is shaking and sweating. Oddly, these kinds of catharsis usually occur with our minds blank, and are quite pleasurable. Reviving our emotions both in private and in public (as in rituals such as funerals) can become a way of bettering our life.

Until we make headway toward resolving hidden emotions, our society is in deep trouble because emotional motives are invisible to politicians and the public as well. Our job as social scientists and as citizens is to try to make the social-emotional world visible and as important as

the political-economic one.

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