

In the Zone: Managing Impossible Emotions
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Abstract. This note suggests tentative answers to three broad questions about emotions: Why are they often either hidden or out of control? How do these transformations from normal emotions come about? How can they be managed more effectively? The answer suggested to the first two questions is that emotions can loop back on themselves, having feelings about feelings, sometimes without limit. Feedback loops can produce emotions that are experienced as either unbearably painful or out of control. The answer to the third question involves zones that allow one to feel emotions, and to also observe oneself feeling. These zones are possible because of the human capacity for role-taking; seeing one's self from the imagined point of view of another person. The difficulty of accessing the zone may be a product of the nature of the self in modern societies, which seems to be dominated by a non-reflective ego. Some implications of these ideas for persons and nations are suggested.

Modern societies take a dim view of emotions. They are usually judged to be far less important than the material world, behavior, thought and most everything else. We learn both as children and adults: "Don't be so emotional! Or: "Don't get mad, get even!" We are taught two extremes: either hide or act out emotions. These two attitudes may be at the root of many of humanity's most trying problems, but difficult to change until we learn more about the emotional world. Just as emotions sometimes cause havoc in our lives, the study of emotions is also in a state of chaos. Until recently, even in social and behavioral studies, it was a very small field compared to the attention given to behavior, cognition, alienation, self-esteem and many other topics. Grown larger in recent years, it is still preliminary in nature, with many different and often conflicting approaches. It seems to me, however, that there are occasional glimpses of clarity and light. The following, for example, is a precise description of a zone needed for dealing directly with intense emotions, and some of the reasons it is difficult to find that zone. This comment is focused on a single problem, the ways fear is experienced by victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but it might have wider implications.

[In PTSD there are] cycles of flashbacks and numbing. It can be exhausting to fall into flashbacks or to feel like everything, all feelings, are shut down and inaccessible. In working with trauma, it's critical to develop a healing zone, a space between flashback and dissociation where memories can be felt and also known to be in the past. (Danylchuk 2011. Also see Siegel 1999)

This brief paragraph contains several important ideas. It first points to two non-healing states, flashbacks that merely re-live episodes of violent emotion, and the numbing and dissociation that can hide these episodes. But it also points to a healing zone between the two undesirable states: "memories can be felt and also known to be in the past." This sentence implies that when in the zone, one is both feeling an emotion and observing oneself feeling it. Perhaps such a zone provides the feeling of safety and assurance necessary to explore all of one's emotions, even those sensed to be overpowering and/or unbearably painful.

Finding a midpoint between too close and too far from emotions is at the heart of classic theories of drama. The audience must feel the emotions that are being enacted on stage, but at the same time, must realize that they are safe in the theatre. They are neither too close, repeating their own flashbacks, nor too far, not involved in the drama. At this middle distance, these theories suggest,

the audience response, such as laughing or crying, is cathartic, helping its members resolve their own unresolved emotions, whatever their origin (Scheff 1979).

Most emotion researchers assume, incorrectly, that the theory of catharsis has been disapproved repeatedly in experiments. But these experiments all involve the acting out of anger (venting), rather than remembering anger in what Wordsworth called “moments of tranquility.” The idea of a zone of healing, the reliving of unresolved emotion at the right distance, has not been precisely tested. The confounding of venting with tranquil reliving has resulted in a grossly erroneous rejection of catharsis, throwing out the baby with the bathwater (Scheff 2007).

Out of Control Emotions

The passage quoted about a healing zone for fear is quite helpful in itself. Yet it also involves issues that are much broader than only healing fear: the references to raw flashbacks and dissociations, emotions that are inaccessible, and to people becoming shut down. Drama theorists have given little consideration to the origins and shape of audience emotions, only how dramas might be designed to touch them. What is known about the nature of emotions that are either inaccessible or out of control?

As it turns out, there are only a few attempts to answer this question, and they are not clear. For example, Freud’s idea of repression might seem to be relevant, since it not only concerns ideas and memories, but also emotions. When he had become the undisputed leader of a sizeable movement, Freud (1966) stated that the idea of repression was central to psychoanalysis, but “... so far we have only one piece of information, ...that [it] emanates from forces of the ego.” Apart from that, Freud added, “we know nothing more at present.”

This statement conveys little, since we are not sure what forces Freud was referring to, nor for that matter, how the ego itself is to be construed (A definition of the ego will be offered below.) The vast significance of the concept of repression, compared to the meager amount of knowledge about it, makes an enormous gap in psychoanalytic theory.

Emotion Loops

The reference to a healing zone quoted earlier suggests two further questions: how could emotions be so painful that they are either hidden/dissociated, or so powerful as to be out of control?

Normal, everyday emotions like grief, shame, fear or anger are unlikely to be extremely painful or powerful. They are merely bodily signals that alert us to loss, feeling inadequate, in danger or frustrated. They are also quite brief, usually a matter of seconds. A car barreling toward us on the freeway stimulates an instantaneous shock of fear, but it usually doesn’t outlast the danger. What could give rise to feelings of fear that persist, or reactions so powerful as to lead to stampedes in a theatre fire, or so painful as to lead to silence and depression?

My own interest in this question began long ago in connection with my teaching the social psychology of emotions. When we discussed embarrassment and blushing in the larger classes, there were usually one or two students who complained that their blushing sometimes made them miserable. They explained that when they became aware that they were blushing, they would be further embarrassed about their blushing, no matter the cause of the first blush. Often the same students implied that their blushing about their blush was not only lengthy and painful, but also often seemed out of their control.

This comment by a 20 year old female student provides an example:

I often blush when I receive a compliment. Those who compliment me often pointed out that I was blush. On one occasion a friend praised my smile. I immediately felt a blush. Then my friend said “Oh, you are blushing!” I said “Yes, I can feel it!” We both laughed and my blush

went away. The amount of light effects my blushing. I feel more secure in the dark the less likely to blush. I have never considered myself to be insecure, that is why I speak up in a group when I have a question, even knowing that I will eventually blush. On some occasions my blush feels as if it will be eternal.

With these kinds of observations as background, I was struck by a story told by the noted actor Ian Holm. On one occasion he had muffed his lines, but when he became aware that he was blushing, he blushed more. The more he became embarrassed by his blushing, the more he blushed and the more embarrassed. This process went on, he said, until he ended paralyzed in the fetal position, requiring that he be carried off the stage.

This last story points to an emotion process that is mostly internal, implying that emotion about emotion loops might have no natural limit. This idea is also suggested by the student's comment above, when she states that her blushes sometime feel that they may be eternal. Audience members in a theatre fire could become afraid because they are afraid themselves, and they see other audience members afraid, resulting in loops within and between persons of fear causing more fear, that would end only with a life-endangering stampede. Road rage could arise because one person feels humiliated by another driver's actions, angry that he feels humiliated, and angry that his opponent has become angry, leading to further anger, and in some cases, violence. Emotional reactions to emotional reactions, under conditions to be discussed below, may result in chain reactions.

The idea that persons can be so ashamed that they keep their shame secret suggests the the origin of a shame loop, being ashamed that one is ashamed. Or, to continue with the topic of road rage, a shame/anger loop, being angry that one is ashamed, and ashamed that one is angry, and so on. One driver may experience the behavior of another driver as insulting. This driver is likely to shout "Idiot, you cut me off!" rather than say to himself and/or to the other driver: "I feel disrespected and ashamed." Rather than acknowledging, and therefore feeling shame, he hides it behind anger. Acknowledgment is usually the first step toward resolving intense emotions. The idea of a chain reaction may help to understand Gilligan's (1997) otherwise puzzling theory of shame as the basic cause of violence, based on his experiences with violent men as a prison psychiatrist.

The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence... (pp. 110)

Gilligan is referring to a specific situation, keeping one's shame secret.

Shame is probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men... The degree of 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 and bring about the death of the self, cause him to lose his mind, his soul, or his sacred honor (112).

This reference to the awesome destructive power of secret shame implies a feedback chain, beginning with one loop: being ashamed of being ashamed. However, my experience with the blushing students suggests that such loops can go further, being ashamed, being ashamed of that, and ashamed of that, and so on. Or shame in a loop with anger: angry that one is ashamed, ashamed that one is angry, and round and round. The idea of an unending emotion loop seems to explain how shame, fear, or other emotions might become too powerful to bear and/or control.

There are other studies that suggest that shame/anger, even when the anger component is not obvious, can be so painful and controlling as to lead to murder and suicide. The clearest example is Websdale's (2010) study of 211 cases of familicide (the killing of one's spouse and one or more of the children): it shows a type of killer who seemed driven by secret shame.

A few of the cases occurred long enough ago so that only media coverage was available. But most cases were recent enough that Websdale, with the help of many people, was able to gather interviews from persons who knew the families. The findings suggest two kinds of killers. The majority were working class men who had a history of anger and aggression. The cases of these men strongly suggested that they used anger and aggression to hide shame.

But there was a sizeable minority still more clearly relevant to the shame/violence thesis. Websdale called these killers civic respectable. They were middleclass men and women who had no history of prior aggression or violence but had obviously been intensely humiliated prior to the murders. For example, several of the cases were men who had lost their jobs, but hid the news from their family and others; they continued to leave the house every weekday as if they were still working. But it turned out that during this period, which in some cases was as long as several weeks, they were plotting murder. Some also killed themselves. All of these cases, particularly, suggest how one can get lost in an unending shame loop to the point that murder is chosen as preferable to further suffering.

The idea of emotion loops not only suggests how overwhelming loss of control that can occur in flashbacks, but also the reason for dissociation and numbing. Anticipation of loss of control and/or unbearable pain might lead people to avoid emotions entirely, which is what occurs in dissociation and numbing. This kind of avoidance also may have still another kind of looping effect: emotional backlogs. The more avoidance, the more the bodily buildup of emotional tension. The more backup, the greater the pain that is anticipated, which can lead to a further kind of avoidance loop.

The idea of avoiding grieving because of the anticipation of pain and/or loss of control is a commonplace. It is implied, for example, in this song by Iris Dement (1993):

My father died a year ago today...

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...

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

In the Zone

This section will expand upon the way the zone (midpoint between avoidance and flashback) might allow for enough safety to experience any backlog of emotion, no matter how seemingly overwhelming. How can one feel safety, and indeed, even pleasure, when experiencing intense emotions that are ordinarily felt as unbearable and/or overwhelming? This problem requires further discussion.

The idea of the basis for the zone, of being both in emotions and out of them, is hinted by what Levine (2010) calls “pendulation,” swinging like a pendulum back and forth between what he refers to as expansion and contraction of one's emotions. The idea of the back and forth motion seems to lie at the very center of being in the zone, but it may be explained in a different way than is suggested by Levine.

Linguists and other scholars have long proposed that the self is made up of a back and forth motion. They begin by pointing to the learning of language: what seems to make all of the various human languages possible, as opposed to the instinctive vocabularies of other mammals, is the ability to see a conversation not only from own point of view, but also to imagine the point

of view of the other speaker. This process of moving back and forth between one's own and the point of view imagined for the other is called "taking the role of the other," or, for short, "role-taking." Human language, since in actual usage it is almost always highly fragmented and incomplete, and since most commonly used words have more than one meaning, would be impossible to understand without role-taking on both sides.

In modern societies, particularly, with their focus on individualism, there are incentives for forgetting that one is role-taking. Each of us learns to think of ourselves as a stand-alone individual, completely independent of what others think. C. H. Cooley, an early U.S. sociologist, said it most succinctly: "We live in the minds of others without knowing it."

The Self and the Ego

Children learn role-taking so early and so well that they forget that they are doing it. The more adept they become, the quicker the movement back and forth, learning through practice to reduce each role-taking time to a span of time so short as to be almost unbelievable. Studies of the length of silences in conversations (for example, Wilson and Zimmerman 1986) help us understand how forgetting is possible. The 1986 study reported that in the adult conversations recorded, the length of the silences varied from from an average of .04 to .09 seconds.

The reason for the great speed acquired in swinging back and forth between self and other derives from its use in conversations. If one is to respond quickly enough to the other's comment to avoid giving offense, one must move into the imagined viewpoint and out again in a split second. It would seem that in a dialogue between two persons, there are 3 different conversations going on, one within each participant, and one between them. Probably by the beginning of grammar school, most children have become unaware of the two very rapid internal parts of their conversations. If one partner waits too long to respond to the other's comment, undesirable interpretations may be put upon the wait. "What are you, stupid or something?" or "Don't you believe me?" etc.

Scholars go on to say that acquiring a human self depends on role-taking: the ability to see one's self as another might, as well as from the inside. The problem with this process is that one has to become so quick in response as to require a part of the self that is virtually automated. How can one imagine the others' point of view, then produce a response, all in less than a tenth of a second? It seems that such facility would require an internal mechanism that is virtually automatic, mostly using stock words, phrases and sentences, rather than the exact responses that particular moments require.

The idea of automatized responses in conversation suggests a more complex loop than the one described above for emotions. The conversation loop is not simply recursive, a folding back on itself, such as shame about shame. Rather it suggests the use of hundreds or even thousands of stock words, phrases, or sentences. But it is a loop because it is largely limited to this fixed package of responses, rather than exploring the limits of human response.

An obvious example of stock response would be "Well!" or "Uhh," to gain time for a more relevant response. But since there is next to no time for the further response either, what usually occurs is also stock, perhaps a saying, or the person's favorite phrases, or phrases that he or she knows are the other's person favorites, some more complex response that is constructed from the available stock.

As I remember from childhood, most of my father's talk and much of my mother's was constructed out of these kinds of responses. "Out of sight, out of mind," my mother would mumble, when she saw me behaving as if I were alone. My father, a small businessman, had a single response to all his various troubles with creditors during the Great Depression:

“Mumserim!” (Yiddish for “Bastards!”) To me when I thought I had said something clever, he would often say: “Hochum steck die aroyce.” (Yiddish for “Wisdom is sticking out of you.” (Sarcastic).

Most stock responses are probably much more complex than mere truisms, however. They probably involve some on-the-spot construction, but still are somewhat tangential to the actual situation. Most of us seem to have “lines” we take with particular people that persist, regardless of actual changes in the other person or in the relationship. My father, for example, took an authoritarian line with my mother, brother and I, and we took a submissive line with him. Knowing what to expect from the other person, and from ourselves is a big help in keeping the silences well under a second long.

Perhaps we can think of the ego as that part of the self that is mostly automated. The internal dialogue of the self is between the automated part and the part that can actually respond to situations de novo. But it appears that the ego is in charge almost all of the time, even during dreams. In many people, it seems that the ego has virtually conquered the self. To the extent that this is the case, these people would need considerable coaching to be able to enter the zone, which requires observing ones experience as much as having the experience. Perhaps Robert Burn’s point was well taken: “Oh, that some power would give us the gift, to see ourselves as others see us.” An automated ego mostly precludes such a gift.

The difficulty that many people have with learning to meditate seems to be caused by the domination of the ego. Meditation required a slowing down of the ego to the point that the observing self has equal time. But many people seem to have gotten to the point that the automated ego is so habitual that it’s difficult to influence. They find it easy to spend most of the time experiencing themselves from within, much too little watching this process as from without. Perhaps meditation might provide a useful tool near the beginning of all kinds of psychotherapy. The key to entering the zone is being able to observe your own ego, as well as experiencing it, more or less equally.

Safety Through Role-taking

An example that illustrates a moment of confidence in the face of strong emotions comes from my own life. It occurred long ago, the night after my first group therapy session. As I was telling my then girlfriend how envious I was when others were crying during the session, I began to cry myself. This episode lasted some fifteen minutes, and was a huge surprise to me. I was 40 at the time: it was probably my first real cry in 30 or so years. The crying part of my then self was completely unknown to me.

A few minutes after I had stopped crying, an episode of anger began. Unlike the crying, this episode happened to include an explicit sign suggesting that I was in the zone, as indicated below. I began to feel colossally angry, but without the faintest notion of what I was angry about (just as I hadn’t known what I was crying about). Without any volition on my part, I began to growl, writhe and bite the air. As in the crying, my body seemed to take over. The writhing became so pronounced that I fell out of bed.

Finding myself on a shag rug provided a target for my anger; without hesitation I began to bite the rug. But then a thought: what will Rachel think of me acting in this ridiculous way (an example of an attempt at role-taking). Since I couldn’t guess, I stopped what I was doing and looked up at her, saying: “Are you OK?” She smiled, “Go ahead. Do your thing.” I resumed writhing, growling and biting as if without interruption. It would seem that in the zone, one not only has the sense of control, but in fact, one does have control. As in theatre, if it gets too heavy, you can always get up and walk out.

Since there were no more interruptions that night, I won't describe my further experiences of fear and shame. However, all four episodes suggest another aspect of the zone: experiences with normally fierce emotions can be pleasurable rather than painful. My encounters with grief, anger, fear and shame each seemed a bit like a diversion, a ride on an elegant rollercoaster. Needless to say, I felt utterly reborn the next day.

Conclusion

This note has proposed tentative answers to three questions about emotions and emotion management in modern societies. Intense motions are usually avoided or hidden because of the anticipation of the great pain and/or loss of control that results from unending emotion feedback loops. If normal emotions are hidden, as in dissociation and numbing, they may build up a backlog so large as to seem too painful to explore. If acted out, unending feedback loops may build to the point that control is lost, ending in withdrawal or violence. Finally, an emotion zone midway between hiding and acting out might allow the resolution of unresolved emotions, no matter how large the backlog. The zone depends of the distinctly human ability to take the role of the other with ones' self.

To the extent that these propositions are true, modern societies may have to change their attitudes and behaviors toward emotions. At present our models tell us either to disparage emotions or act them out. "Action" films, for example, provide models of acting out anger and vengeance as the manly thing to do, rather than negotiations that would minimize violence. The Top40, the most popular of the pop songs, reiterate the message that being unable to bear the loss of one's lover shows the depth of love, rather than the inability to enter the mourning zone (Scheff 2011). Changing these patterns will take considerable time and stamina, so we had better get started.

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