

Shame & Difficult People

Bill Hansberry for Hervey Bay Conference, September 2012

When we find others difficult to deal with, it's easy to get so caught up in the unpleasant feelings and thoughts that are triggered inside us that we can ignore the fact that those we are finding difficult are too experiencing these very same emotions!

What do we do instead; well we might cook up all kinds of sinister motivations and character assassinations, to convince ourselves that the problem doesn't lie with us, it lies with the person we find ourselves conflicting with!

At the heart of strained and difficult transactions between human beings is what we call negative affect. Whenever we label another as 'difficult', it is because their behaviour has triggered a host of unpleasant emotions in us! This fact is easily overlooked as us 'rational' human beings try to keep it all 'unemotional' and justify to ourselves the 'rightness of our own actions and the 'wrongness' of those we are finding it difficult to manage a relationship with, BUT, none of this is possible without affect – feelings – emotions. So sorry folks, the old paradigm that says that we humans do our best work when we put emotion aside is gone forever, we know too much about affect to kid ourselves that we can switch it off or put it aside while we get the important jobs done. The very fact you are looking and hopefully listening to me right now is because an affect we call **interest-excitement** has been triggered.

So today, I want to take you on a journey where we explore the types of emotions that we experience when we find somebody else difficult. We'll look at how these unpleasant emotions can either kick our problem solving brain into action, where we go to work on the difficulty, or, have us spiral into a set of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that momentarily abate the uncomfortable feelings, but in the longer term, make things situation worse for us and others.

So, you probably get by now that we'll be doing some navel-gazing and looking at our own emotional reactions to difficult people, as these are the key to transforming relationships.

CLICK: Pan to Affect Script Psychology

So, we'll need a theory to hang our hats on. The one we'll use today is Affect-Script Theory. This theory was pioneered by Silvan Tomkins, the American psychologist and philosopher whose work in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s allowed us to develop whole new systems of understanding. Tomkins taught psychology at Princetown and Ruckers and was the author of

CLICK: Zoom to AIC

"Affect Imagery Consciousness", a 4 volume work so dense that its readers were evenly divided between those who understood it and thought it was brilliant, and those who didn't understand it, and thought it was brilliant!

CLICK: Back out to Tomkins 1.30

Tomkins was a brilliant talker, who would attract crowds at cocktail parties, who by the end of an evening would be crowded around him, listening intently as Tomkins discussed anything from comic books to his theories on human emotion. Tomkins believed that faces held valuable clues to inner motivations and motivations. It was said that Tomkins could walk into a post office, look at the wanted posters and say what various crimes the displayed faces had committed.

CLICK: Zoom to Blink 38sec

Malcom Gladwell in his book 'Blink' tells us the story of a young graduate psychologist Paul Eckman,

CLICK: Zoom to Eckman

who met Tomkins in the early 1960s. Eckman was interested in studying faces and wondered if there was a universal set of rules that governed the expressions of humans. Tomkins said there was. At the time, this opinion was at odds with popular theory that dictated that facial expressions were different from culture to culture.

CLICK: Zoom to Faces

CLICK: Zoom Lie to me

CLICK: Back out to Tomkins

Eckman decided to test Tomkin's legendary ability to read faces by presenting Tomkins with footage of two remote tribes from Papua New Guinea. Some of the footage, Gladwell tells, was of a tribe called The South Foray, a peaceful and friendly people. The rest of the footage was of the Koo, Koo, Koo, Koo, a hostile and murderous tribe, characterised by a homosexual ritual involving pre adolescent boys and elders.

Eckman had whittled the footage of the 2 groups down to close ups of faces, so to study the facial expressions of the tribes people. Eckman set up the projector, Tomkins was in the back. He had been told nothing of the tribes involved. All identifying context had been edited out. Tomkins looked in intently. At the end of the film, he approached the screen and pointed at the faces of the South Foray. "These are a sweet, gentle people, very indulgent, very peaceful" he said. Then he pointed to the faces of the Koo, Koo, Koo, Koo. "This other group is violent, and there's lots of evidence to suggest homosexuality" Tomkins said. Even today, a third of a century later, Eckman cannot get over what Tomkins did that day. "My God, I vividly remember saying "Silvan, how are you doing that?" Eckman recalls. As we replayed the footage backwards, Tomkins pointed out particular bulges and wrinkles on faces that he was using to make is judgement. He was a genius, and his work proved to the world that all humans, regardless of geography or culture, experience the same nine biological affects – the basis of human emotions and he did all of this by studying faces. Often described as an American Einstein, he was a genius who devoted his life to the exploration of human emotion.

CLICK – Nathanson

This other handsome chap is, Don Nathanson MD, a student of Tomkins, who furthered Tomkins work. Author of the heavy going 'Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self', Nathanson's contributions to our understanding of human emotion has been huge.

CLICK – zoom into the 9 innate affects

Tomkin's work proved that we humans are all born with a basic emotional wiring made up of **nine innate affects**. Nothing can come to our attention, unless it has triggered one of these basic affects. In other words, unless a stimulus triggers an affect, we simply cannot be aware of it. Affect is the only gateway to attention.

CLICK – zoom into interest and excitement

There are two positive affects that feel good, (it's one of these positive affects that is keeping you tracking, looking and listening to me right now). Interest and excitement are incredibly important because we are wired to maximise these affects. We humans are at our 'wellest' when we can maximise feeling interest and enjoyment. It's any block or impediment to experiencing these that triggers affect shame that we will have a close look at a bit later.

CLICK – zoom out to affect list

“BANG A RULER TO STARTLE AUDIENCE” There's one neutral affect that neither feels good or bad, it resets the system ... making you pay attention to whatever comes next!

And the stink of it is that there are six negative affects that feel generally awful. *Explain Dis smell.*

As we humans grow experience the world, we attach to these *basic affects* memories, scenes that accompanied the triggering of that affect. If you think of a time you were scared or terrified, you trigger a memory, a scene, and it is attached to the affect fear-terror.

So nine basic affects, when assembled with our memories (scenes), become massive libraries of memories that Tomkins called scripts. Scripts wind up being sets of instructions of how to behave when an affect is triggered. We have scripts for everything from how we respond when our partner calls us that embarrassing name in front of guests at a dinner party to how we put our undies on in the morning (right leg or left leg first – think about it!)

So what are emotions? Emotions are affects, mixed with memories of times that affect was triggered. What's a feeling? A feeling is the physiological indicator that an affect has been triggered. Affect fear – terror is accompanied by hairs standing on end, blood rushing from our extremities and a rising lump in our throat!

CLICK – zoom into shame

The one we are particularly interested in today is this affect. Technically, it's known as shame – humiliation. We'll just call it shame.

CLICK – zoom inside shame

It's a very important affect, because it's the affect that tells us when something has happened that has stops us feeling good, and makes us pay attention to what has caused that interruption.

In other words, shame stops us in our tracks, catches our attention with a burst of unpleasant feeling and makes us pay attention to what has interrupted our state of being interested or joyful.

Because we most commonly experience these 2 positive affects in the company of other people (unless we are hermits), shame is a very social affect. Anything that triggers it will usually be an impediment to feeling interest, excitement or joy in other's company.

CLICK X2 (bring up alarm bell)

So, shame becomes the alarm bell that sounds when something goes wrong in our interactions with other people.

CLICK (pans to "So what kinds of event trigger shame?")

So let's simplify things after that brief journey into affect – script theory and look at what sets affect shame off in human beings, and how it feels when it's triggered. So having a look at what I just tried to explain to you.

Now, at any point I said something that confused your interest was impeded and affect shame was triggered, did you look away, slump in the upper body, think about something else, did you perhaps feel bad about yourself "why don't I get this stuff?", about me, "It's his fault, with his fancy presentation and big words – wanker"?

Were the affects of mild distress or anger triggered next?

It's all cool, all normal, – just your affect system at work, all controlling your attention, deciding what to let in to consciousness, and what to keep out. This system evolved because at any one moment there are literally millions of bytes of information being registered by our senses. The affect system has to decide which of those stimuli to pay attention to, which are in the best interests for our survival. We can't possibly process all that information at once.

For our purposes today, we'll look at two really common triggers of shame, now; remember that shame has evolved to let us know that something has occurred that interrupts the affects of interest or enjoyment. Where do we humans experience the vast majority of interest and excitement? You've got it, in the company of other humans. So, when we around other people, common impediments to feeling enjoyment or interest are:

1. The sudden awareness of something about us that we didn't want to know.

CLICK (pans to cranky people images)

2. The realisation that we have caused upset to others.

CLICK (pans to sociogram)

Conflict is a disconnection with other humans that triggers affect shame in both involved. Some experts refer to this experience as a *break in social joining behaviour*. Being warm-blooded hairy mammals, we

are hardwired to group together in communities, groups, mobs, tribes, villages, towns, cities because our genetic code knows that we survive best when in community with other humans. This is Marg Thorsborne's 'Warm Blooded Hairy Mammal Theory'. Human brains need other human brains to regulate their limbic regions. We regulate one another. Glasser teaches us that all psychological instability is related to faulty relationship. I recommend a book called 'A General Theory of Love' that goes further into this important field.

This neural hardwiring for emotional connection is a main reason affect shame has evolved – shame keeps us close to others by signalling to us when something has happened that's interrupted the interest or enjoyment we share when in emotional sync with other humans. It's painful for a good reason, so we pay attention to what's caused the disconnection.

CLICK (pans text)

So to travelling along this line of logic brings us to the realisation that shame can be triggered by any information that indicates we haven't met an internal or external standard, that something about us are perhaps not 'primo'. In us humans, it fires off mainly in social situations (it's hard to feel shamefully exposed in the company of a teapot, or a spanner, or a volleyball unless you've named it Wilson and you're becoming unhinged on a deserted island!

Play Nathanson Clip – stop after he says 'sub par'

CLICK (pans to "the first moments are devastating")

The affect shame hits us "agrhh", we may recoil, we lose muscle tone in the neck and others may see a noticeable slump in our posture or a reddening of face or neck or both. We might blush, wince or become shame-faced and turn away.

CLICK (pans to "we can't think straight")

Try to think straight in the first moments of shame, it's impossible. Our neurones scramble as affect shame demands we pay attention to what has caused the impediment to the feelings of enjoyment or interest we were pleasantly engaged in moments earlier. If you liken your brain to a computer, it's akin to the CPU freezing as it grinds through an overwhelming amount of data.

This moment has been become very accurately known as 'cognitive shock'

CLICK (pans to "when we come out of cognitive shock")

As if this moment isn't hard enough, as soon as our brain comes back on-line, our affective system begins accessing and playing scenes from our memory of other times when shame was triggered. We might think something like "*Oh my god, I've done it again*".

CLICK (pans to "an inner search")

In this moment, we may forget that there's anything about us that is worthy of pride. We can feel wholly defective. This is where affect shame becomes mixed with two other negative affects. Can you guess them?

CLICK (pans to entire affect list)

Self-disgust and self-Dissmell are often triggered. Yes, you've got it, affect can work in teams, like a bank of spotlights, flicking on and off in all sorts of combinations. So, not only do we have the unpleasant feelings of pure shame affect, we now also have self disgust and self Dissmell to deal with.

All of this happens in a blink, we just feel 'arghh', as shame hits us. It's a dreadful feeling and it feels dreadful for a very good reason. It's got to get our attention so we can take notice of what has blocked interest or enjoyment, and do something about the impediment.

CLICK (pans to "fork in the road")

So, shame has a job. It asks us to pay attention to whatever that event is that has cropped up that has stopped us feeling interest or enjoyment.

Without this mechanism, what would life be like for us and those around us?

- We wouldn't be able to stay connected to other people, we'd be on the outer before we knew it and our very survival could be at risk
- We'd not receive important feedback about our affect on others
- We'd have no motivation to restore connections when we severed them

I know where many of your minds have gone – you're wondering if Autistic people have affect shame. The answer is a definite yes, they experience shame in the same way neurotypical people do. It's my reasoning that the critical impairment is in their difficulties reading the emotions of others. The very sensory input that would trigger affect shame is not perceived or processed by their brain efficiently. Their difficulties with mind-reading; the ability to make good guesses about how others might feel causes extreme difficulty and ensures that by the time shame is triggered, it's too late and a relationship is already in serious jeopardy.

So, shame, feels terrible, throw self disgust and self Dissmell into the mix and its toxic! So what are we motivated to do in this moment of shame-pain? You got it; we want the pain to stop. We're compelled to act. How will we act? There are two distinct roads we can travel.

CLICK (pans man looking in mirror)

We can ask ourselves "what is it about me or my actions that requires some consideration?" But think for a moment. This is a brave response that risks us uncovering even more shameful information. What kind of space do we have to be in to be able to respond this way?

Nathanson tells us that this gutsy inner search is only possible in moments we feel secure, when we can love ourselves and feel that we are loved by others.

CLICK (The compass of shame)

When we don't want to focus, when we want to get away from what the spotlight of shame is trying to show us, we move over to what Nathanson calls the Compass of Shame. It's an escape route, it's a safety route. It's a place where we can feel better than we're going to feel if we look at what shame has evolved to show us. For the moment, working, living in the Compass of Shame feels better. It's not terribly good for our future and it's not terribly good for the development of an authentic sense of self, but it sure feels better.

CLICK (Nathanson Video)

Watch Video: 3m

CLICK: Shame Management

So let's take a couple of minutes to reflect on what we've learned about the compass of shame. Enjoy reflecting on what the segment brought to mind and feel free to jot down any questions or comments you have. We'll discuss them shortly.

CLICK x4 (Withdrawal, Attack Self, Avoidance, Attack Other)

Read through: group take 1 minute to discuss with a partner or small group the questions

CLICK (Bradley's Shame)

10m

Read the scenario ONLY – leave out 'Bradley's social history'. Participants jot the chronology of Bradley's responses from the time he kicks Dana.

Explain that at the end the task will be to plot his behaviours against the 4 points of the compass of shame.

Ask participants to take A3 paper.

Continue through Bradley Scenario

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