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More about catathetic signals

Russell Gardner has pointed out the intricate interweaving of catathesis with anathesis that occurs in sophisticated human exchange such as that between Mr. Knightley and Emma. Mr. Knightley certainly knew how to "sugar the pill" of his catathetic signals as far as Emma was concerned, or, as Benjamin Disraeli's father said of Pierre Bayle, how to "wreath the rod of criticism with roses".

Did Mr. Knightley intend to put Emma down, or build her up, or both? You will have noticed that I have not used "intention to lower RHP" as the sender's definition of catathetic signals, in the way "intention to harm" has been used to define "aggression" (see Bandura (1983), Moyer (1976) and Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975, p339-340) for a discussion of this point). Anathesis being more recent than catathesis in phylogeny, anathetic intent is probably mediated by a higher level of the nervous system than catathetic intent, so that there may be no mechanism for ensuring that output is consistently one or the other. Mr. Knightley loved Emma and may have wanted to make her a better person, more admired by others and more acceptable as his wife; at the same time he may have thought her too "cocky" and opinionated, and have wanted to humble her a little.

I think the answer to this problem lies in the components of RHP. In Fabrics of the Mind I suggested that RHP consists of a substantive component, consisting of size, strength, skill, weapons and allies (and, in Emma's case, correct deportment); a ritual component which can be reduced by catathetic signals and increased by anathetic signals; and an endogenous or thymic component which varies with mood (there is also a situational component which is affected by such things as being on home ground and being "in the right"). It seems likely that Mr. Knightley was trying to reduce Emma's ritual RHP but to increase her substantive RHP.

Words, threats or blows?

There is a lot of folklore about the relative painfulness of words and blows. There is the schoolboy jingle:

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

This is in direct opposition to the teaching of the Bible:

"The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes bones."
Ecclesiasticus 28, 17.

Giacomo Leopardi (1834) sided with the Bible:

Men are ready to suffer anything from others, or from heaven itself, provided that, when it comes to words, they are untouched.

Pensieri, Vol. 1, trans. W.F.Weaver

The potential interchangability of blows and insults was demonstrated in a chimpanzee who was trained to use sign language by Fouts (1974). Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975) describes the interaction as follows:

"Once while learning the sign monkey she was observed exchanging threats with a mature male rhesus monkey. Fouts interfered and showed her monkeys in other cages. Upon being asked Lucy correctly named siamangs and squirrel monkeys with the monkey sign. The rhesus monkey, however, was described in answer to each of Fouts' several questions as dirty monkey. Since then she has been observed to use the dirty sign as an adjective to describe experimenters who refused to grant her requests. Prior to this time the sign was used to describe soiled items and faeces only. This seems to be the genesis of an insult." p138.

In the above example, Lucy did not actually make the "dirty" sign to the rhesus monkey, so that we cannot say for certain that the sign was interchangable with the non-verbal threats; but she showed that she could have done by going one stage further in using sign language to disparage her opponent to a third party (the experimenter). She must be the first non-human primate in the whole of history to use this typically human method of displacing aggression.

If she had made such a catathetic signal to another sign-language-speaking chimpanzee, would the latter have had the capacity to receive it as a catathetic signal, to realise that he was being called a "shit" and to be hurt by it and to suffer loss of RHP? Or

would he have received it as a nurturing signal, like "Excuse me, but I think you've forgotten to wipe your bottom"?

More about criticism

The work of Peter McLean and his colleagues in Vancouver, B.C., deserves to be better known (McLean et al, 1973; McLean, 1976). They recorded the verbal exchanges of married couples. Over 60% of the exchanges were regarded by the recipient as critical. But less than half of these critical comments were intended as critical by the sender. They were intended to be helpful, like "You'd feel much better if you didn't cry so much". McLean calls these critical comments "microstressors" and suggests they are a cause of depressed mood in the recipient. These findings of McLean are confirmed by my clinical work, in which it is not uncommon to find a couple, each of whom complains that the other is "putting me down all the time", but neither realises that he/she is doing as much putting down as the other. Not many married couples could cope with Moliere's ideal that "The proof of true love is to be unsparing in criticism" (The Misanthrope).

When one, for example, gives a scientific paper (or a contribution to the ASCAP newsletter) to a colleague for "constructive criticism", one is asking for a boost in one's substantive RHP (an improvement in the paper and so eventually in one's reputation) at the risk of some loss of ritual RHP; but it is difficult not to hope for a boost in ritual RHP too. As Somerset Maugham put it (Of Human Bondage): "People ask for criticism but they only want praise".

References

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