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More on defining relationships

In the May issue I drew attention to Piero de Giacomo's use of Boolean algebra and Venn diagrams to describe different forms of relating (between people). Then I applied a similar method to the problem of defining relationships (in terms of power and control). Here are some further thoughts on the matter.

The act of defining is at a higher logical level than the definition given.

What is important is the act of defining rather than the definition given. This is a subtle but important distinction. It can be illustrated by a paradox, in which the act of defining and the definition are contradictory. It can occur in two forms. One is a situation between A and B in which A defines B as dominant: this happens, for example, when a masochist pays B to act sadistically towards him. Although B is acting dominantly, B is the Definer and is in ultimate control.

The other form of the paradox occurs when A defines the relationship between A and B as equal. Although the definition is one of equality, the act of defining has been a unilateral act on the part of A and so it makes A the Definer, and so in control. I have seen this happen in courtship, when A is usually the male and B the female. The prospective husband says words to the effect that "I absolutely insist that we have an equal marriage." If B accepts this without argument, she is accepting a subordinate role in the marriage, more so than if she replies, "On the contrary, it is my view that the male should take responsibility in a marriage, and so I absolutely insist that you take the leadership role in our marriage." In the latter case, she has redefined A's offered definition; if they compromise, they may have a really equal marriage; if A accepts the dominant role as defined by B, he forfeits the role of Definer, adopts the role of Acceptor, and is likely to end up as a hen-pecked husband.

Anyone interested in defining marital roles should read P.G.Wodehouse's Spring Fever, in which one heroine happily negotiates a role for herself which is subordinate to her fiance, while the other treads the more difficult but exciting path of mutual negotiation and compromise, and ends up with a symmetrical relationship. Of course, in real life, if a girl hears a man say "I insist that we be equal", she should ditch him without delay.

There may be one exception - when a woman chooses her man and then exits permanently from the role of Definer. George Eliot noted this possibility in the character of Annette Ledru in her novel Felix Holt: "...she was one of your meek little diables, who have a will of their own once in their lives - the will to choose their own master."

The unilateral definition as a hostile act

The offering of a unilateral definition of a relationship comes into the category of a catathetic signal (defined as a signal which lowers the RHP of the recipient unless returned in full measure). Therefore it is like a blow or an insult, and is part of the repertory of ritual agonistic behaviour. It is like a serve at tennis, which if returned leaves the two players equal, but if not returned leaves the receiver one-down.

Like a serve, the offer of a unilateral definition is not only a catathetic signal, but also a request for a reply, to enter into a negotiation (a rally), so that the outcome of the interaction is not something boring like an ace service, but a manifestation of repeated superior skill by the eventual winner. People do not like to win too easily, like the merchant who is disgusted if the buyer accepts the first price - he enjoys haggling. Koenraad Kortmulder has pointed out that even fish have an appetite for a symmetrical encounter, and may handicap themselves to get a more even "rally". It is more fun (and presumably more adaptive) to beat someone who is near one's own level of skill than someone who cannot even return a serve. Of course, a negotiated definition can leave a couple with an equal relationship, which cannot happen with a tennis rally. In this sense, tennis is more similar to animal agonistic behaviour than to human conflict.

It has been noted by ethologists that the general form and rules of ritual agonistic behaviour are similar for all vertebrates, but that each species has a particular method of fighting (such as head-butting, mouth pulling, singing, croaking, locking antlers, etc., etc., etc.). Offering definitions could well be the human species-specific form of agonistic behaviour. It depends on language, which ties in with the fact that ritual agonistic weapons tend to become hypertrophied like the peacock's tail, and language is certainly hypertrophied in man. Moreover, it does away with the problem which in humans, but not in animals, attends the use of "aggressive" acts such as hitting and insulting. This problem lies in the moral code which condemns fighting, and particularly a man hitting a woman. Therefore, if A attacks B and B does not retaliate, it could be that B is weaker

than A, but it could also be that B has been trained not to settle differences by fighting, or, if A is a woman and B a man, B has been trained to believe that a man should not hit a woman. This moral training makes fighting a bad method of determining dominance in many situations, especially between the sexes. By not returning the blow for moral reasons, the courteous man loses RHP. This may be balanced by a gain in SAHP as he smugly contemplates his chivalrous behaviour - but it seems likely that some damage is still done.

Do all statements define the relationship?

If offering a definition is a catathetic signal, like hitting or insulting, what are we to make of the suggestion by Gregory Bateson that every communication contains a definitional (or command) component as well as an informational component? Can we deal with a situation in which every communication is like an insult or blow? One answer to this is given by Brown and Levinson (1987), who do indeed approach communication with the idea that every statement runs the risk of lowering the "face" of the recipient, and they demonstrate how this omnipresent danger is counteracted in normal intercourse by forms of politeness and other subtle strategies.

Another answer lies in the fact of redundancy. Even if every statement defines the relationship, the vast majority of statements define the relationship in the way it has already been defined and agreed on by the two parties. In other words, the vast majority of definition statements are redundant and therefore do not come into Brown and Levinson's category of "face threatening acts" (FTAs). It is the unilateral definition statement that is an FTA (catathetic signal), in that it gives a definition which has not already been bilaterally agreed.

I have suggested that the consistent redundancy of definition statements is one way of defining the hedonic mode. If no new definitions are being offered, no fighting, verbal or otherwise, is taking place. This is a functional definition of the hedonic mode, and differs from the more usual structural definition in terms of the absence of social hierarchy, differential payoffs, non-random communication patterns, and other agonistic social structures. It may well be that both definitions are necessary, and the question is whether we use the term hedonic for both. An egalitarian society in which no fighting is taking place could be described as both structurally and functionally hedonic.

— Assessment versus engagement

I would like to offer a justification for distinguishing between the assessment stage and the engagement stage of the ritual agonistic encounter. It could be argued that these merge into each other imperceptibly, and that it is artificial to make a categorical distinction between them.

One distinction is that in the assessment phase there is no change of RHP. The smaller animal merely notes that the other animal is a lot bigger than he is (has higher RHP). Then he backs off. That does not make him feel smaller. If the interaction goes beyond the assessment stage, there is a change in RHP in one or both of the contestants. In this way the engagement stage does not have to be repeated endlessly.

The engagement stage starts when both animals have assessed that they are as big as the other (or in general have "favourable relative RHP"). They disagree about which should be one-up, but they agree that it is necessary to sort out their relationship. They agree that other biological goals such as feeding, mating and predator avoidance should be put on "hold" until the "business" of deciding their relative rank is completed. They come to this agreement in the context of what Fogel (1993) calls a "co-regulated consensual frame". In the terms of Cronen et al. (1982 a & b) they agree on the context of the next episode in the relationship, which is to be a pairwise contest or fight or agonistic encounter. In our own jargon they switch from the hedonic to the agonistic mode.

They engage by facing up to each other and offering mutual catathetic signals, which may in the first instance take the form of mutual direct gaze. The catathetic signal has two meanings, one based on the sender and one on the receiver. The sender's meaning is "I have made an assessment of our relative RHP, and decided that mine is at least as high as yours". The meaning for the receiver is that the signal must be returned in full measure, otherwise he will suffer a loss of RHP. The catathetic signal is like an invitation to the other to lower his RHP. The other animal may accept the suggestion and submit, with lowered RHP, or he may reject the suggestion and counter it with a suggestion that the other lower his RHP (he returns the catathetic signal in good measure). Sooner or later, one of them does not return the offer, accepts the other's suggestion that he should lower his RHP, and in so doing he adopts the role of loser in the encounter. He exits from the engagement stage with lower RHP than he entered it.

Another way of looking at the change that occurs in the engagement stage is in terms of

a change in discrimination of RHP differences. One can imagine that RHP is a continuous variable of infinite length, so that no two animals have the same RHP. However, the animals have only a very limited ability to discriminate RHP differences, so that fairly similar values of RHP seem the same. Then, in a fight, we could say that one animal says to the other, "Have a closer look at our relative RHP; I think if you look more closely you will find that mine is greater." The other animal retaliates with a similar suggestion, and they go on exchanging these catathetic signals until one looks closely enough at the relative RHP values to agree that his relative RHP is unfavourable. He then emits an anathetic signal (submissive signal) and adopts the role of the loser of the fight. Following this fight, there has been no change in RHP in either contestant, but both have become better discriminators of their mutual RHP difference.

These two ways of looking at the problem give different predictions when it comes to the loser fighting a third party. If there has been no change of RHP, there should be no effect on the chances of winning against another opponent. But the experimental evidence from animals seems to indicate that success in fighting one opponent increases the chances of winning against another, and vice versa, so it would seem sensible to assume that following a decisive fight, the RHP of the winner rises, and the RHP of the loser falls.

Is it true to say that, the longer and more intense the fight, the greater the change in RHP? One could argue either side here. I would just like to point out that if this statement is true, an agonistic encounter has the properties of a dollar auction (Editorial, 1989); once involved in the exchange, each contestant gets in a situation of "too much invested to quit" and so cannot withdraw until he runs out of money (comes to the predetermined point at which he "gives up" in a war of attrition). This should be true if the costs of the engagement increase with each "bid", or with each "bout" of the ritual agonistic encounter. (In a dollar auction, the winner gets the dollar, or whatever sum is being auctioned, less his bid, but the second highest bidder also loses his bid without getting any prize; once two people start bidding against each other, it is very difficult to stop - the dollar often fetches many times its value).

Prisoner's Dilemma

Unlike animals, a pair of humans has the choice of forming a symmetrical or a complementary relationship. This decision has to be made before they decide who is going to be one-up in the event of their forming a complementary relationship. Let us say that A and B have passed the assessment stage and have agreed that there is no disparity in RHP (social power) between them. Will they become friends on an equal basis? Or will they enter a trial of strength to compete for the one-up position? Let us make the assumption that friendship is based on mutual trust, and that the offer of friendship gives the other the option of abusing the trust and using the friendship to gain a one-up position. Then the two prospective friends are in a Prisoner's Dilemma situation (Pusey and Packer, 1997). The possible outcomes, in order of desirability, are: 1) to be one-up by the abuse of trust 2) to be equal friends 3) to have to enter a fair fight for the one-up position and 4) to be one-down because of abuse of trust by the other.

Certain social arrangements help to maximise the chances of arriving at the second option (to be equal friends). The payoff from the first option (one-up by abuse of trust) could be reduced, either by lowering the advantage to be gained from the one-up position, or by some form of social scrutiny so that reputation is damaged if the abuse of trust is made public (this is the situation which pertains in egalitarian hunter/gatherer societies). Or there is the possibility of playing a tit-for-tat strategy, so that incipient attempts to abuse trust can be detected and punished by the other before the one-up position is secured.

If option three is chosen, the two faithless friends enter into a negotiation for the one-up position, which in animals takes the form of a ritual agonistic behaviour, and in man can take many different forms, including ritual agonistic behaviour. The moves in this game can be described in terms of offered definitions of the relationship, and the one up winner (the Definer) is the one whose definition is accepted by the one-down Acceptor. The various moves or bouts of this negotiation can be described by the Dollar Auction model, forcing the contestants to go on bidding until one of them runs out of "money". The selection of which runs out of money first can be described by the Hawk/Dove game (Maynard Smith, 1974) in the form of the war of attrition, if we make Hawks richer than Doves. In the real life negotiation, neither contestant knows how much money either he or the other has - they have to go on bidding until one runs out. The fact of being Hawk or Dove is a hidden component of RHP: the discovery of which contestant, if either, is a Hawk, is what the engagement phase of the ritual agonistic encounter is all about.

According to this model, people entering an asymmetrical relationship may play three consecutive games: Prisoner's Dilemma in which they both "defect", the Dollar Auction in which they both have "too much invested to quit" and the Hawk/Dove game which decides which of them will win the dollar and be one-up on the other.

Perhaps it is not surprising that some people prefer to be hermits!

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