

## More on hedonic asymmetrical relationships

Having read your essay "Vertical and horizontal" again, it occurs to me that perhaps what the depressed students needed was a room-mate like Dr Blauberman (BL). He sounds the sort of person it might be difficult to have an equal relationship with, and he would not be likely to adopt the one-down position, but if forced to do so he might well be cringing and subservient. In other words, he sounds like an authoritarian personality.

Incidentally, I wonder if he really did drop (condescendingly?) into the lower left corner when he let up on you in the interview and became chummy about farming. After all, he did use the word "gentleman" farmer which sounds to me like an attempt to remain one-up on someone he had identified as coming from the family of a working farmer. Don't you think he might have moved across the board at the same level and entered the upper left quadrant? Were you not unlike two chimpanzees undergoing conditional reconciliation? You had undergone the hazing and withstood the test (having diplomatically consented to lose the fight) and were now going through a rather asymmetrical hugging situation in talking about farming. But he was giving you both the things the depressed students were asking for: confirmation of their being loved and confirmation of their being one-down.

You rightly rejected the relationship as offered by BL, but many people find the role of one-down in a hedonic asymmetrical relationship to be very satisfactory. There must be countless examples in fiction. I have just finished reading Morris West's latest novel The Lovers (Mandarin, 1993), and a perfect example is given in the relationship between Lou Molloy and Gorgios Hadjidakis. This relationship is ideal for both of them. There is no doubt that Lou is the one-up member; but Gorgios does not covet that role, and Lou knows that; the asymmetry of the relationship is not contested, which, I think, is the criterion for the hedonic mode (6). Another example is the relationship between William Dobbin and George Osborne in Thackeray's Vanity Fair, and it is of particular interest because Thackeray writes a little essay about the psychology of being No. 2 (novelists were the only psychologists they had in those days, other than philosophers). If you have room, it is worth quoting in full:

What is the secret mesmerism which friendship possesses, and under the operation of which a person ordinarily sluggish, or cold, or timid, becomes wise, active, and resolute, in another's behalf? As Alexis, after a few passes from Dr Elliotson (\*), despises pain, reads with the back of his head, sees miles off, looks into next week, and performs other wonders, of which, in his own normal private condition, he is quite incapable; so you see, in the affairs of the world, and under the magnetism of friendship, the modest man become bold, the shy confident, the lazy active, or the impetuous prudent and peaceful. What is it, on the other hand, that makes the lawyer eschew his own cause, and call in his learned brother as an adviser? And what causes the doctor, when ailing, to send for his rival, and not sit down and examine his own tongue in the chimney-glass, or write his own prescription at the study-table? I throw out these queries for intelligent readers to answer, who know, at once, how credulous we are and how sceptical, how soft and how obstinate, how firm for others and how diffident about ourselves: meanwhile it is certain that our friend William Dobbin, who was personally of so complying a disposition, that if his parents had pressed him much, it is probable he would have stepped down into the kitchen and married the cook, and who, to further his own interests, would have found the most insuperable difficulty in walking across the street, found himself as busy and eager in the conduct of George Osborne's affairs, as the most selfish tactician could be in the pursuit of his own. (p 266).

(\*) In 1843 Dr Elliotson published Numerous cases of surgical operation without pain in the mesmeric state.

Lest I should be accused of a sex bias, I will mention the relationship between Francis and her twin in Joanna Trollope's The Spanish Lover, part of the plot of which turns on the rebellion of the one-down twin after many years of hedonic asymmetry. She achieves symmetry with her twin, but at the expense of depression in the latter.

1. Joiner TE, Alfano MS & Metalsky GI (1993) Caught in the crossfire: depression, self-consistency, self-enhancement and the response of others. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 12, 113-134.
2. Price, J.S. (1991) Homeostasis or change? A systems theory approach to depression. British Journal of Medical Psychology, 64, 331-344.
3. Coyne, J. (1976) Towards an interactional description of depression. Psychiatry, 39, 28-40.
4. Coyne JC, Downey G & Boergers J (1992) Depression in families: a systems perspective. In Developmental Perspectives on Depression ed D Cicchetti & SL Toth. New York: University

of Rochester Press. Pp. 211-249.

5. Haley, J. (1976) Development of a theory: a history of a research project. In Double Bind: The Foundation of the Communicational Approach to the Family, (eds C.E.Sluzki and D.C.Ransom). New York: Grune and Stratton. Pp 59-110.

6. Price, J.S. (1992) The agonic and hedonic modes: definition, usage, and the promotion of mental health. World Futures, 35, 87-115.

Table 1. Some characteristics of the hypothesised basic hierarchical plans.

	Agonic mode	Hedonic mode
a) stable hierarchy		
dominant basic plan	punitive indignant "keep them down"	protective caring "improve them"
egalitarian basic plan	rivalrous mutual hatred	sharing friendship
subordinate basic plan	fearful coerced into obedience "placate them"	respectful voluntary obedience "honour them"
b) change in hierarchy (second order basic plans)		
up-hierarchy behavioral package	elevated mood rebellion "bring them down"	elevated mood receipt of honours "surpass them"
down-hierarchy behavioral package denial of former attitude	depressed mood attitude	philosophical high rank devaluation of former rank

Have the students been made depressed by the room-mates?

Cultural differences in negotiation of symmetry may make one think the other is trying to negotiate a one-up position.