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From: Dr J.S. Price, Odintune, Plumpton, E. Sussex, England.

Dear Russ,

The two modes: agonic and hedonic

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Michael (Chance) has been staying with me for a few days and we have had the opportunity to have some discussions on his concept of the two modes, so we thought we would send you a note in the form of a sort of communique.

Consensus statement on two modes of social relating, hedonic and agonic. By John Price and Michael Chance. (ASCAP, Oct, 1991, Vol 4, No 10, p 3-10).

History

Let me just recap a little for the sake of those who are not familiar with the two modes concept. Michael first used the terms to describe the difference between macaque and chimpanzee groups. His long-tailed macaques, for instance, seemed to be perpetually testing out the rank order of the group and were oriented towards fighting most of the time, even though actual fighting was not common. The subordinate monkeys were either testing out the dominants, looking for an opportunity to rise in rank, or avoiding the random aggression which was directed down the hierarchy. The dominants, for their part, were watching for signs of imminent rebellion among their subordinates. As a result the animals all seemed tense and edgy, and their attention was preoccupied in monitoring the position and activity of more dominant animals. Because the animals are all oriented towards agonistic behaviour, Michael called this style of group interaction the agonic mode.

In contrast, chimpanzee society, both in captivity and in the wild, is much more relaxed. Although fighting for status occurs, the fights are over relatively quickly and complete reconciliation usually takes place, so that there is no longer any tension in relationships which have recently been in dispute. The animals seem relaxed most of the time, and their attention, instead of being focussed on the dominants, is free to engage other objects and facilitates exploration. This relaxed acceptance of the results of fights, even of rank reversal, may be due to the fact that rank is not very important in chimpanzee society: food is widely dispersed, there is no shortage of sleeping sites, and sexual opportunities are very little influenced by rank. In macaque society, on the other hand, mating opportunities are highly correlated with rank, so that rank matters and is worth fighting about. Michael called the relaxed chimpanzee style of interaction the hedonic mode.

Michael makes two main points about the kind of adjustment which occurs with each mode. First, macaques are used to living with social uncertainty, particularly with contested social rank. According to the principle of the coevolution of ritual weapons and ritual defences, they have evolved thick "skins" for dealing with the chronic tensions and "pecking" of the agonic mode. Chimpanzees, on the other hand, are used to living in the relaxed conditions of the hedonic mode. The price they pay for this is that their behavioural repertoires, and probably their physiology, are not adapted to spending long periods in the agonic mode, and if this is forced on them, as it was by the provisioning carried out by Jane Goodall, their behaviour disintegrates; they are not able to maintain the ritualised aggression characteristic of the macaque agonic mode, and they start seriously injuring each other; probably also the unaccustomed social stress causes ulcers and other psychosomatic disorders. Presented with highly desirable bananas confined to a small space and only available for short periods in the day, they found they had, for the first time in their lives, something that really mattered to fight about.

Michael's second point is that primitive man probably had a chimpanzee kind of organisation and spent most of his time in the hedonic mode. This left his attention free to organise and dominate his physical environment. The disadvantage was that, like the chimpanzee, he did not develop the macaque's tolerance for long periods in the agonic mode, and therefore if he finds himself in the agonic mode for any length of time he lacks the resilience and the behavioural inhibition characteristic of the macaque and is susceptible both to psychosomatic disorder and to uninhibited outbursts of agonistic behaviour such as

temper tantrums, wife battering and child abuse.

The problem we now face with the two modes concept is to adapt it for use with human beings. It was derived from a difference between species, but we want to use it for differences within a species, partly to describe differences between human groups, but mainly to describe changes within human groups from time to time. This seems at the moment the most promising use of the concept, to describe the way that human groups (or dyads) can switch from the hedonic mode into the agonic mode and back again. This kind of switching describes a phenomenon with which we are all familiar (particularly in marital relationships) but which our existing terminology lacks descriptive terms for. In order to prepare the two modes concept for this task, we need to "humanise" it and to clarify its meaning so that it really does shed light rather than confusion on what is undoubtedly a very complex and confused field of study. Much progress towards this end was achieved by Michael's book Fabrics of the Mind, but some loose ends remain.

To begin with, we distinguished between the agonic and hedonic modes in a dyadic relationship and the same two modes in a group of three or more. They are not necessarily the same. In a large group of human beings there is a tendency for polarisation into two opposing factions, so that the group as a whole is in the agonic mode but each faction on its own is in the hedonic mode. Romeo and Juliet is a good example of this. The social action in the streets of Verona is in the agonic mode because of the feud between the heads of the two houses, but within the House of Montagu, as within the House of Capulet, the social action is presumed to be in the hedonic mode. In general, when the relationship between the two highest ranking individuals in a group is in the agonic mode, the group as a whole is in the agonic mode, but within the faction headed by each of these individuals, the social action may be in the hedonic mode. Thus, in a family, there may be a coalition between father and son against mother and daughter; the marital relationship is in the agonic mode, therefore the family as a whole is in the agonic mode, but the father/son and mother/daughter relationships are in the hedonic mode. This is unlike the situation in a group of macaques where, in spite of the formation of alliances, there is a tendency for all the dyadic relationships to be agonic.

Thus, in humans, the modes define dyadic relationships; and not as a trait variable but as a state variable, implying that relationships may switch from one mode to the other, so that the modes could be said to define episodes in relationships.

Although the term mode should be restricted to relationships, the terms agonic and hedonic may be used to qualify other things. Thus, an agonic society is one in which most of the relationships are agonic, an agonic personality is one who tends to have agonic relationships. Also we feel that we should be able to say that a person is in an agonic mentality when his social action is dictated by a relationship in the agonic mode (although we realise that Paul has reservations about this last usage).

Definition of the two modes

Michael's original definition of the agonic mode stated that the animals were oriented towards fighting, although fighting was not actually taking place. This emphasised the fact that in a group of macaques the psychological, physiological and muscular preparations for fighting are in operation when the mode is agonic, and these preparations may be continued for a long time in the absence of fighting. This concept is important for psychosomatic medicine. However, in humans, fighting (in the form of the exchange of catathetic signals) may be so subtle that it is almost impossible to tell whether it is occurring or not; and there is the added problem that omission of an anathetic signal, such as a customary act of deference, may be equivalent to a catathetic signal (frustrative non-reward) so that even if nothing is actually happening, the fight may still be going on. Therefore it seems best in humans to use the term agonic to describe a relationship which is oriented towards fighting, whether or not fighting is actually going on. We think this slight change of definition may make the concepts easier to use in relation to humans, and therefore more useful.

We think we can get a more precise definition than "oriented towards fighting". Gregory Bateson and his successors at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto (1) distinguished between the command (or definition) element of a communication and the informational content. Thus if I say to you "Pass the hammer" I am not only giving you information about what I want, but I am defining myself as someone who tells you to pass the hammer, and defining you as the sort of person who gets told to pass the hammer, and our relationship as one in which I tell you to pass the hammer. In this case the definition does not exclude the possibility that we are reciprocal about the hammer, and that you might just as easily tell me to pass the hammer (but of course many definition statements do in fact define the relationship as asymmetrical (complementary)). Power in a relationship resides with the person who defines it, and in a complementary relationship one person defines it and the other accepts the definition given by the other. In a symmetrical relationship the definition is agreed by mutual negotiation. In both cases there are likely to be times

when there is no dispute about the definition of the relationship, in which case the definition components of the communication are redundant. At other times one of the members will have introduced a new definition which has not yet been accepted by the other, and here, the definition statements are not redundant; there is likely to be fighting about the definition until one (whom we might call the acceptor) accepts the new definition provided by the definer. Thus, we can say that a relationship is in the hedonic mode when the definition component of the communications are redundant, otherwise it is in the agonistic mode. The agonistic mode is characterised by non-redundancy of the definition components of communications.

To give a clinical example, one patient of mine was a submissive wife whose depression enabled her to accept her husband's definition of their relationship, which was that he was having an extramarital affair. Then he redefined the relationship by bringing his mistress to live in the house, ostensibly as a live-in babysitter. The wife could not accept this new definition and offered a counter-definition, which was that the mistress should leave.

The wife suffered many months of humiliation, driven into the kitchen while the husband and the baby-sitter disported themselves in the sitting room, and this made her very depressed. But even her new depth of depression did not make her sufficiently apathetic to accept the new definition by the time she came for treatment, and she was still feeling angry with her husband (a symptom of an agonistic relationship).

When we come to a larger group, going by what we said above, the group is in the hedonic mode when the definition statements of the two most powerful individuals are redundant. This should generally be true, except in cases when numbers three, four and five are strong enough to gang up and challenge one and two. This definition accounts for the persisting hedonic mode in the Glasgow gang (2) in spite of the bitter resentment of the number two that the investigator had joined the gang as an extra supporter of the number one. Given that the investigator ranked number three (or equal two) the struggle for definition between two and three could not tip the gang as a whole into the agonistic mode.

In the course of these discussions, Antonia pointed out that Bateson only told half (or two thirds) of the story when he divided communication into definitional and informational components. She said that she spends a lot of time comforting people who are in trouble, often over long periods, and it is neither the informational nor definitional aspects of their communication that she is attending to; rather, she is hearing what might be termed the expressive/affective component of their communication. This ties in with Talcott Parsons' distinction between the expressive female role and the male instrumental role (although both sexes perform both functions, particularly in the present age!). We could say that, in the agonistic mode, the ear is tuned to hear the definitional component; in the hedonic mode, when the social action is task-oriented, the ear is tuned to the informational component; in the hedonic mode, when the social action is oriented towards nurturance and care giving/receiving, the ear is tuned to the expressive/affective component of whatever communication is taking place. There is, of course, a reflexive loop between mode and communication, in that the communication helps to determine the mode, and the mode determines what aspect of the communication is attended to (and how it is interpreted) as Cronen et al. pointed out (3).

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Uses of the two modes concept

I have gone on at some length about the two modes because I think the concept is important. It has clarified my own thinking, to such an extent that it is becoming difficult to communicate with people who are not familiar with the concept. So many things vary with mode. For example:

1. Reinforcement - is it positive or negative? Consider the simple act of turning away: in the agonistic mode, if the other person turns away, it is a submissive signal and therefore rewarding and anesthetic; in the hedonic mode, turning away is a signal of inattention and therefore aversive or catathetic.

2. The modes explain the change of individual behaviour with social context (see Pauls recent ASCAP contribution). For instance, a couple is in the agonistic mode, quarrelling or maintaining hostile silence. They then go out to dinner, where the husband is the "life and soul of the party". They then go home and, as so many wives report, "as soon as the door closed behind him his whole personality changed and he became hostile or silent." The husband is simply behaving according to the mode of the social group he is in. His marriage was in the agonistic mode, so alone with his wife, both before and after the party, he behaved agonistically. But the group at the party was in the hedonic mode, and so he behaved hedonically - still competing, but competing by showing off rather than by putting down.

The two modes concept also draws attention to switching from one mode to the other. Switching from the hedonic to the agonistic mode is similar to the "disassuagement" of Heard and Lake (4); when does attachment theory no longer account for behaviour? Here we are in the territory of frustration/aggression hypotheses and the idea of the equivalence of punishment and frustrative non-reward. Switching from the agonistic to the hedonic mode is commonly called reconciliation. Why are we so much worse at it than chimpanzees? (5).

Hedonic competition

The agonistic/hedonic dichotomy should not be confused with the difference between cooperation and competition. There is no cooperation in the agonistic mode, but there is competition in the hedonic mode. However, it is quite different from agonistic competition. Paul (Gilbert) has pointed out that whereas agonistic competition is based on intimidation, hedonic competition is based on attraction (6); two rivals in the hedonic mode, instead of trying to intimidate each other, vie for attractiveness in the eyes of one or more third parties. The most advanced form of hedonic competition is the political election, but similar activity is going on all the time in an informal way. The third parties vote by expressing approbation or disapprobation, and the end result is the differential allocation of prestige to the two rivals. The differential prestige is the basis of a ranking system, so we should not think of the hedonic mode as only applying to egalitarian social groups. The important thing is that the ranking in the hedonic mode is decided by third parties, rather than by the rivals themselves. The two rivals may not meet, or if they do they may have an agonistic relationship, but they know that they cannot influence their relative rank by the methods of the agonistic mode. This was illustrated well in the film All About Eve in which the two rival actresses had a relation of agonistic bitchiness, but they knew that the more bitchy they appeared, the less attractive they appeared to their judges; only when they were on their own was it possible to "put the boot in" in the hope of making the other depressed and therefore less attractive to others. Since there are always at least two rivals and one judge involved, this kind of competition could be called polyadic to distinguish it from the dyadic competition of the agonistic mode.

The competition of the hedonic mode is not homogeneous over time. There are times when people are actively evaluating each other (as in an election, or a formal meeting, or a contest of some sort, or at receptions where name-dropping and jockeying for position occur), and these occasions have been described by Irving Goffmann as being "on-stage" whereas at other times evaluation is not on the agenda and these times may be thought of as "off-stage"; although it is probably true to say that there is no time at which some form of evaluation is not occurring, even if it is an evaluation of how good someone is at getting "off-stage". To extend Goffmann's metaphor, if we call the dyadic interaction of the agonistic mode "the (boxing) ring", then we can say that social competition normally takes place in the "arena" which includes both the agonistic ring and the hedonic stage, while the hedonic off-stage is relatively free of social competition.

The hedonic mode is also compatible with a rank order which has been established by fighting or other agonistic means but which has come to be accepted by the losing parties; then the definition components of the communications are redundant, and the requirement of the hedonic mode is met.

Hedonic anathetic signals

The approbation and disapprobation which are administered in the hedonic mode are by definition anathetic and catathetic signals because they raise and lower self-esteem (RHP). But they are different from the equivalent signals of the agonistic mode. In the hedonic mode anathetic signals are not submission signals as they are in the agonistic mode; usually they are neutral or non-informative about the relative rank of the sender and receiver of the signal. This means that they can be used between equals and in a down-hierarchy direction. We get the paradox that a down-hierarchy anathetic signal runs the risk of being interpreted as a catathetic signal if the definitional component is not accepted by the receiver. Thus patronising or condescending behaviour is received as anathetic by someone who views the sender as higher-ranking (in the way that Mr Collins is flattered by the "condescension" of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in Pride and Prejudice), but as catathetic by someone who views the sender as equal. Between equals there can be no implications of superior relative rank in anathetic signals, otherwise they are no longer anathetic.

Dimension or category?

Should we talk about a relationship being either agonistic or hedonic, or should we use a dimensional terminology and say that it is more agonistic or less agonistic? Paul and I have discussed this and we feel that a categorical terminology is justified because the middle

ground between the two modes tends to be unstable, subject to positive feedback processes whose end-points lie in one mode or the other. This reflects the common feeling of "The more angry he got, the more she retaliated." There must be exceptions, such as cases when one member of a dyad behaves as though the relationship is agonic when the other is behaving as though it is hedonic, but such instances are probably exceptions, examples of pathological social functioning, and worthy of study as such.

Conclusion

Should we define the agonic mode as orientation towards fighting or as non-redundancy (of the definitional component of communication)? Are these two things the same? No, because non-redundancy can theoretically be dealt with by the methods of the hedonic mode, particularly by metacommunication (talking about the non-redundancy). Let me illustrate this by an example from fiction. In her novel September Rosamund Pilcher depicts a hedonic marriage which, after eight years, experiences its first non-redundancy. The couple gradually realise that they have incompatible ideas about the education of their eight year old son (the American wife wants him to go to day school, the Scottish husband wants him to go to the family boarding school). They have never decided who should choose the school for the boy, nor have they decided who should decide who should choose the school. They both realise that they can never give in on this issue, and the marriage switches into the agonic mode. In the novel they do not metacommunicate, but if they had done, they might have remained in the hedonic mode. One of them could have said, "Look, we have an irreconcilable difference, what shall we do about it?" and the other might have replied, "We could toss a coin to decide the winner, or we could go to arbitration, such as Marriage Guidance." In this way they might have avoided the drift into the agonic mode, which must have been the usual method of resolution of non-redundancy in precultural times (and even now). Of course, it would have been easier for the couple to deal with school problem before they got married, or at least before it arose in acute form: non-redundancy is very much a case of prophylaxis being easier than the cure. Best of all to negotiate all possible definitions while at least one of the couple is still in love - surely one of the main functions of the state of being in love must be to facilitate the negotiation of definitions.

It is interesting that the advice to resolve conflict by arbitration is given in the I Ching, said to be the oldest book in the world (7). Under the sixth ideogram, entitled "Conflict", the following advice is given, "You feel yourself to be in the right, and therefore you proceed with complete confidence. The path you have chosen, however, will lead you into a state of Conflict...you cannot engage in conflict with your adversaries, for this would lead to misfortune...it would be in your best interests to place the Conflict before an impartial authority who can make an unprejudiced decision."

On the whole I think it is preferable to define the agonic mode in terms of non-redundancy because this directs our attention to the cause which may be amenable to therapy. The exception, when non-redundancy is detected and communicated about and resolved in the hedonic mode, is of such rare occurrence that it deserves to be the exception that proves the rule.

I hope that this rather imperfect summary of my recent discussions with Michael will help to clarify the two modes concept, and if any ASCAP contributors still have any doubts about the definition, usage or usefulness of the terms, I hope they will speak out. We know that terms can become so imprecise that they do more harm than good, as has happened with "hysteria" and "aggression". I think the two modes terminology catches a subtle but real and important variable in the genesis of psychopathology, and it is worth expending some effort to make the terms as useful as possible.

References

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I am, anathetically, your humble and obedient servant.....