

A TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL CHANCE

Last month Michael Chance died, and was laid to rest in Cheltenham crematorium along with his wife Mariella. It was a lovely humanistic service, greatly appreciated by Anthony Stevens, David Stevens and myself as well as many other friends and family. Michael Chance had a great influence on many of us in our generation, and it was both a joy and a privilege to have been associated with him. In this personal and one-sided tribute to him, I shall not refrain from criticism, continuing the struggle to relate simple ideas to complex reality.

A man of insights

Michael was the kind of thinker who has insights. From my point of view his two greatest insights concerned the "two modes". And I think the two modes concept required two separate insights for its development. His first insight came from studying his group of long-tailed macaques and observing the frequency of agonistic behaviour and the effect it often had on the subordinate animals. He extrapolated this to man, and suggested that a lot of mental health problems were the result of agonistic behaviour. This was an idea that immediately appealed to me as a trainee psychiatrist working in the Maudsley Hospital emergency clinic: there was an obvious parallel between the social circumstances of Michael's subordinate monkeys and those of many of my patients.

Although Michael himself had a somewhat fiery temperament, he was definitely anti-agonic mode in his thinking. He also noted that the agonistic behaviour is usually inhibited, both in the dominants and the subordinates - he used the term "braked" to imply that the urge to attack the opponent was suppressed - in the dominant by the effect of receiving a submissive signal, in the subordinate by fear of retaliation. For this inhibited agonistic behaviour he coined the term "agonic". Perhaps unfortunately, he used a new terminology to describe a phenomenon which had already been recognised by other ethologists and termed "ritualisation", meaning that evolved signals were used to replace the out-and-out attack behaviour of unritualised fighting. But I think for Michael the term "braking" had a more physical meaning than ritualisation - for him it was a matter of opposing muscle groups both contracting and no action resulting; whereas ritualisation implies the evolutionary process by which the tense posture of opposed muscle groups becomes a signal of threat or submission to stand in for the unritualised behaviour of attack and running away. I think this was quite a personal experience for him, and he related "braking" to his own personal tension when he was infuriated with, for instance, management obstructing his research.

So, he had the insight that ritualised agonistic behaviour might cause mental health problems. But then he had another insight; namely, that this "ain't necessarily so". He himself experienced an alternative type of social interaction in which he felt relaxed and comfortable. And he noted that ethologists had described this kind of interaction in chimpanzees. So, to distinguish this from agonic behaviour, he called it "hedonic" interaction, and he realised that human groups have the capacity for either type of interaction, and he labelled these two types of interaction "the hedonic mode" and "the agonic mode". He made the important point that to reduce mental health problems, one should attempt to switch the group out of the agonic mode into the hedonic mode.

Why has this insight of Michael's not been universally accepted? My own view is that behaviourists as a whole would have found the two mode concept useful if it could have been more precisely defined and its recognition, measurement and implications more clearly spelt out. But one characteristic of Michael's thinking was to "stay with the insight" and to promulgate it, but not to follow it up with detailed clarification. In particular, there were some unresolved areas which led to confusion and reduced the value of the concepts. I will describe one or two with which I was personally concerned.

Psychopathology in the hedonic mode

Although most psychopathology may be due to the agonic mode, some is clearly secondary to interaction which is indisputably hedonic. In particular, bereavement may lead to serious depression, and may follow the loss of a loved one with whom there has been no agonic interaction at all. Likewise, any diminution in a close relationship, whether due to rejection, or infidelity or any other cause, may lead to anxiety and depression and, in general, what we have called "linking disorders" (the disorders associated with cohesive group functioning). One might say that psychopathology in the hedonic mode is usually due to the absence of someone, whereas in the agonic mode it is usually due to the presence of someone.

Also there is the situation in which the group as a whole punishes one of its members for an anti-social act. The person being punished may well feel shame and guilt and even depression - the high suicide rate in prisons testifies to the pathogenic effect of such social punishment. This has always seemed to me to be within the confines of the hedonic mode, since it lacks interpersonal animosity, but in this view I was in a minority in the Birmingham group. We argued whether the relationship between the hangman and his client could be hedonic, but could never agree.

I think the recognition by Michael that the hedonic mode may have its own problems would have made the two mode concept more useful, and have reduced what some see as the idealisation of the hedonic mode. If the proponents of a theory cannot agree about its application, it is asking a lot of other people to endorse it. Perhaps I should have been expelled from the Birmingham group for my heretical ideas (a hedonic act, in my view), and the theory would have prospered more.

A structural or functional definition

Michael would never agree to separate the "structural" from the "functional" aspects of the two modes. By structural, I mean things like social hierarchy, unequal payoffs and asymmetrical lines of communication which he associated with the agonic mode, as compared with egalitarianism, equal payoffs and free, symmetrical communication which he associated with the hedonic mode. By functional, I refer to the style of interaction which is occurring, and which in the agonic mode is one of inhibited agonism, which means that two or more individuals are fighting over something they both want, be it rank or territory or some possession, which means that there is conflict, associated with disagreement over outcomes, or, in other words, there is disagreement about the definition of the relationship or the situation. Let me take social hierarchy versus egalitarianism as an example to illustrate the problem. We can agree that hierarchy is often the result of agonic interaction - it is a way of preventing further agonic interaction by deciding precedence in advance. But it is not the only outcome of agonic interaction, as we know well from territorial species who manifest agonistic behaviour between adjacent territory holders. Also, in humans, the correlation between the agonic mode and hierarchy is not perfect. There are agonic egalitarian

societies, such as the Nuer of East Africa, the Yanomamo of Amazonia, and the societies in which the Icelandic sagas were set. These quarrelsome people were quick to take offence and to defend their honour, and no one would defer to anyone else. It is difficult to avoid the inference that they are agonic societies, but they are as egalitarian as most. In contrast, there are authoritarian, hierarchical societies which appear to have all the other characteristics of hedonic interaction. Consider a happy family, in which the parents are clearly dominant over the children, and in which the interaction is characterised by play, teaching and affectionate displays. And the same may apply to societies of adults, as has been described for the Fijians, where rank is literally set in stone, as each member of the council has a designated seat with associated rank, but interaction is companionable and quarrels are rare - rare because the social differences are accepted by everyone and differences of opinion are settled amicably by differences in rank because that is what everyone expects and no-one tries to offer an alternative definition of the situation. In other words, I am making the point that it is function rather than structure which determines the mode. Where there is unresolved conflict, interaction tends to be agonic; and when conflict is resolved, it is often associated with hierarchy formation, but not always. And if the hierarchy is gladly accepted by all parties, the group may then revert to the hedonic mode.

Michael had a deep hatred of social hierarchy, and a deep hatred of agonistic behaviour, and I think this made it difficult for him to distinguish between the two.

Groups and relationships

Michael saw the two modes mainly as properties of groups. He was particularly interested in work groups, and he saw the hedonic mode as promoting not only happiness but also efficiency among the work force. In this he was in sympathy with some modern trends in industrial relations. He carried his theory into practice and all those who had the pleasure of belonging to his "Birmingham group" experienced the hedonic atmosphere which he created.

In clinical work, the two mode concept is more useful when applied to groups of two, or relationships, especially marital relationships. We all know how a marital relationship can oscillate between happy times when all goes well, and bad times when quarrels or hostile silence occur. In some languages there are even words for it. In Iranian, for example, an agonic relationship is said to be in "qar" while a hedonic relationship is in "ashti", and there are rules for dealing with a relationship in "qar", such as the allocation of mediator roles. Also, it is easier in a relationship to conceptualise the switching from agonic to hedonic and vice versa. Switching from hedonic to agonic has been called "disassuagement" by Dorothy Heard. Switching from agonic to hedonic is called reconciliation. If Michael had attended more to the switching of modes in relationships, the two mode concept might have illuminated some of the current work on reconciliation in primatology, such as that of Franz DeWaal.

Hedonic competition

In his first presentation of the two mode concept, Michael described how chimpanzees engage in flamboyant displays which attract other members of the group, in contrast to the intimidating dominance displays of macaques. In making these attractive displays, the chimps are clearly competing with each other for attention and for status in the group, and this represents an alternative form of competition to the ritualised fighting of the agonic mode. But Michael was never happy about the idea of competing in the hedonic mode, which he saw in an idealised form of interaction in which love and co-operation predominated. In taking this view, I think he missed one of the most important developments in evolutionary social science of our generation, which was the recognition of the replacement of agonic competition by hedonic competition as the principle form of human sexual selection - an observation which was made independently by both Jerome Barkow and Paul Gilbert (in the latter case, influenced no doubt by Michael's thinking). Apart from anything else, if there is no competition in the hedonic mode, sexual selection ceases to operate and the hedonic mode becomes an evolutionary dead end.

The coexistence in man of both agonic and hedonic competition, which are in some ways incompatible, is one of the most fascinating things about human social life, and for me, anyway, the two mode concept illuminates this area in a way no other theoretical structure does.

Conclusion

Michael's fertile and enquiring mind made him a role model for the aspiring scientist. I have not even begun to mention his other insights here, such as his well-known distinction between the attention structure of agonic and hedonic groups. Of particular interest to the clinician is his description of "reverted escape" in which the individual who causes the hurt is the same as the individual who gives the comfort, as we often see in parent child relations, and even in the setting of adult education as presented in a recent issue of ASCAP, in which a student joined with a faculty member in laughing about an incident in which the latter had insulted her. The particular dynamics of reverted escape may well be important in the process of internalisation of adult ideas into the child's mind, being, in a sense, the price the child pays for turning the adult from agonic to hedonic (not unlike the process of indoctrination into a cult).

Regretfully, the two mode concept is out of fashion now, both in human and animal work. But I predict that it will have its day, possibly under another name, and I hope that when it does there is an acknowledgement of the contribution of Michael Chance, an inspired thinker - a man ahead of his time.