

Dear Russ,

Wellington, 25.1.94

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to comment on the ranking problems of the Houston Oilers. I will do my best to apply our ranking theory to their situation.

The first thing to note is that there is a formal hierarchy, in which ranks are allocated by appointment. This formal hierarchy is not necessarily the same as the "dominance hierarchy" which represents the interpersonally negotiated ranking of each dyad. In many ways formal rank is similar to dependent rank as seen in animals, so that there may be two separate hierarchies depending on whether the authority figures who determine the formal/dependent rank are present. And, for completeness, we should remember the "prestige hierarchy" which Franz De Waal observed in his chimpanzees, which was not the same as their dominance hierarchy.

But in the case of the Oilers, I do not detect any informal deviation from formal rank, and so we can write the hierarchy thus:

Oilman (owner)

Jack Pardee (head coach)

Kevin Gilbride  
(offensive coach)

Buddy Ryan  
(defensive coach)

Legend

- = hedonic relationship  
= agonistic relationship

The next thing we need to know is whether the relationships are in the agonistic or hedonic modes (I use the term agonistic rather than agonic because the current definition of agonic excludes episodes in which catathetic signals are being exchanged, and I do not wish to exclude them). In the agonistic mode the power bases of the relationships are being contested, in the hedonic mode they are not. Thus it seems that all the relationships are hedonic except that between the two assistant coaches. According to the information you give, the agonistic aspect of the Gilbride/Buddy relationship is contributed by Buddy, who wants to be formally superior to and informally dominant to Gilbride. Perhaps he is an "authoritarian personality", which means that he has a deficit in the area of forming hedonic equal relationships. Or he may disapprove of the idea of the offensive and defensive coaches having equal status, and instead of trying to change the formal structure, he is trying to become informally dominant to the other coach. For whatever reason, he is challenging the symmetry between himself and Gilbride. He is emitting catathetic signals to Gilbride, in the form of both words and blows. We are not sure of Gilbride's response, but our theory predicts that if the catathetic signals are not returned in full measure (or dealt with by some other method), Gilbride will suffer a fall in RHP and will be liable both to an episode of involuntary subordinate strategy (ISS) and to being manoevered into the one-down position in his relationship with Buddy.

Also, since the exchanges between Buddy and Gilbride are public, they are competing for prestige in the eyes of both their patrons and their teams. We do not know on what criteria the prestige will be allocated. It may go to Buddy, who may be seen as desirably strong; or it may go to Gilbride if he is seen as chivalrously ignoring the boorish behaviour of Buddy.

Buddy has more manifest "up-hierarchy motivation" than Gilbride. Whereas Gilbride has been offered positions of head coach, we do not know whether he wants them, but we have been told that Buddy covets the senior positions. Nevertheless, we have not been told that he covets Jack Pardee's job, nor that Jack finds Buddy's bumptiousness threatening, so we have no direct evidence that the relationship between Buddy and Jack is contested, and therefore it can be said to be in the hedonic mode. The only suggestion of agonistic development in the relationship is Buddy's criticism of the offensive play which Jack brought from a previous job, and which is therefore presumably publicly identified with Jack. This could be said to be an indirect attack on Jack, so we might anticipate a switch in the Buddy/Jack relationship from hedonic to agonistic.

If Buddy's desire for advancement was backed up by an "involuntary dominant strategy" (IDS) in the form of elevated mood, this would make him more aggressive to Gilbride (whom he hopes to dominate), more aggressive to Jack (whom he hopes to supplant), but more actively submissive to the Oilman, who he hopes will support his attempt to supplant Jack.

This illustrates the important point that, whereas passive submission is characteristic of depressed mood and the ISS, active submission is a component of elevated mood and the IDS. Powles (1), if no-one else, has pointed out that an increase in flattery (active submission) is characteristic of manic but not of depressed patients.

#### The basic plans of symmetrical relationships

The hierarchy of the Oilers as described does not include a hedonic relationship at the same level, but I would like to use the example to discuss the difference between the basic plans for agonistic and hedonic "symmetrical" relationships. Perhaps we could assume that when they started off together, Buddy and Gilbride were good friends and all their apparent aggression was in the form of play; and that at some stage they switched to being enemies (or at least rivals). What are the basic plans for symmetrical relationships, and are there two basic plans, one for hedonic and one for agonistic relationships, or is there one overall basic plan which can vary a bit depending on how well people are getting on? In other words, is the variation between hedonic and agonistic dimensional or categorical?

The original basic plan for symmetrical relationships must have been laid down hundreds of millions of years ago, at a time when all relationships between members of the same sex were agonistic, and before the development of group living with individual recognition (the requirement for hierarchy formation). At that time there must have been just two basic social plans, the agonistic symmetrical plan for dealing with members of the same sex, and a (male and female) reproductive basic plan for dealing with members of the opposite sex.

The instructions of the basic plans were probably very simple. In dealing with the same sex, the plan must have been designed to instruct the animal whether to attack or flee. Two variants of the plan seem to have evolved, depending on whether the criterion of ownership is available on the input side. If so, then the basic plan is "If you are the owner of the territory, attack! If you are not the owner, flee!" If there is no difference in ownership, another plan is needed, and this probably said, "Evaluate relative RHP. If favourable, attack! If unfavourable, flee!"

Of course we do not know how these plans are organised in the brain and so we must treat the brain like a black box. But the choice between two strategies has been traced right through the brains of electric fish (2). When their output frequency is jammed by another fish with a similar frequency, they have two alternative and mutually incompatible responses (or strategies): they can increase their own frequency or they can reduce it. Formally, this strategy choice is similar to the decision whether to attack or flee in a social situation with a same-sexed conspecific.

These basic strategies do not seem to have changed much over the past 300 million years or so. We can see Buddy appraising Jack and if he thinks he can get the better of him, he swings with his right. The main changes are the extension of the strategy set from "attack or flee" to "attack or flee or submit"; and the introduction of allies and especially patrons (higher-ranking allies) into the evaluation of relative RHP.

Long after the agonistic symmetrical basic plan came the hedonic symmetrical basic plan. In the meantime, other basic plans had evolved, particularly those relating to the parent/child relationship and those relating to pair-bonding. Also there was the hedonic asymmetrical pair of basic plans, according to which there could be hedonic relationships between same-sexed animals of different ranks. I think that these must have evolved out of the parent/child basic plans. Certainly in monkeys, in which these hedonic asymmetrical relationships are very common, they are based on the mother-daughter relationship, and their extension to sister/sister and aunt/niece relationships are probably secondary developments and family life became more complicated.

It is only very recently in evolution that hedonic symmetrical relationships appeared. They do not occur in monkeys (except possibly in opposite-sexed animals who are pair-bonded). It is only in chimpanzees that same-sexed individuals are able to tolerate close social relations without the establishment of dominance. And it is only in the human lineage that these equal relationships have become common and the basic plans for them have presumably evolved in the context of enormous advantages in cooperation with family and other group members. What are the instructions for the hedonic symmetrical basic plan, and how do these differ from the modern human equivalent of the primitive agonistic symmetrical basic plan mentioned earlier? Here are some suggestions:

1. If I get my own way on this occasion, you are more likely to get your own way on the next occasion (reciprocity). This contrasts with the agonistic rule that "success breeds success".
2. If I detect any weakness in you (low RHP) I respond by boosting you up. This contrasts with the agonistic response which is to take advantage of any weakness by putting the other down even more than usual.

3. I do not desire to dominate you, and I do not suspect that you desire to dominate me. This contrasts with the mutual desire to dominate which characterises an agonistic relationship.
4. If I attack you, at the same time I metacommunicate that this is "play". Thus in play, friends develop their agonistic skills which are used "for real" in other relationships.
5. I am interested in knowing about you so that I can help you, compared with desiring to know about the other in order to exploit weakness.
6. If I boast, the boasting includes you, e.g., "We are great". This contrasts with expressions of "I am great".
7. The more powerful you appear, the more powerful I feel. In an agonistic relationship, your power makes me feel less powerful.
8. Our conversation centres on shared attributes, and serves to justify our beliefs, affiliations and actions (3). Agonistic verbal exchanges emphasise differences.
9. If we have a serious difference of opinion, we negotiate rather than trying to impose our own will.
10. (left blank for editorial insertion)

I think the hedonic symmetrical basic plan probably evolved out of the hedonic asymmetrical pair of basic plans, which evolved out of the parent/child plans; whereas the agonistic symmetrical basic plan is a direct evolutionary descendant of the original plan for dealing with members of the same sex. So we should consider the possibility that the two symmetrical basic plans are of different phylogenetic origin; so that when Buddy and Gilbride switched from their former hedonic relationship to their present agonistic relationship, they switched from one basic plan to another of an entirely different phylogenetic origin. This suggests a categorical change of strategy rather than a movement along a dimension of variation of a unitary basic plan.

Before trying this exercise, I had not realised how complex the hedonic symmetrical basic plan is. No wonder it took so long to evolve. Clearly a lot of people have difficulty in relating hedonically to equals, and this has been the main problem in those who have been labelled as having authoritarian personalities (4,5). At the moment I am reading A.N.Wilson's biography of Tolstoy, and he seems to fall into that category, especially in his relationship with Turgenev, to whom he was frequently and unnecessarily aggressive; he liked to affiliate with admirers, such as his serfs or the coterie which surrounded him when he was famous.

The cases presented in Anthony Ryle's excellent book on cognitive analytic therapy are largely people who cannot relate to peers. Some feel they have to buy friendship with subservience (and then feel resentful about it), some are so controlling that they are rejected by others; therapy is aimed to encourage symmetrical and hedonic relating.

I am afraid I have strayed from the Oilers, but in a way the interesting thing about their hierarchy was what wasn't there - like the dog that didn't bark in the night - in the form of a hedonic symmetrical relationship - what about that for an account of a football team from the land of equality! (I have come across a patient here in New Zealand who responds to the injunction, "Have a nice day!" as if it were a catathetic signal...and she was committed to hospital after responding to such an apparently friendly greeting with a blow to the face (she has a paranoid psychosis)).

An afterthought - why is there no existing social psychology of hierarchical relationships? I think there are two answers to this. One is that social psychologists have denied the existence of hierarchy, or at least of the occurrence in humans of the sort of hierarchical relationships that occur in animals (6). The other is that social psychologists have worked largely with students, who do not form dominance/subordinacy relationships in the sort of settings that social psychologists put them.

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