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Rustlers' Rhapsody

I would like to follow up my comments on your case IA (ASCAP Dec 1993) with a case of depression from fiction, which illustrates, I think, the usefulness of the 3-level model of escalating and de-escalating alternative agonistic strategies. The depressive episode afflicts the hero of the spoof Western Rustlers' Rhapsody. Written and directed by Hugh Wilson, the film is a fantasy on the pre-1947 B movie Westerns starring Rex O'Herlihan (the "singing cowboy") and his horse, Wildfire. The film illustrates the occurrence of a depressive episode following defeat in a ritual agonistic encounter; also the formation of an asymmetrical affiliative bond and an exercise in the theory of logical types that would have delighted Bateson and the Palo Alto group.

The hero comes to town and defends the good guys (sheep-herders) against the bad guys (cattlemen), adopting, along the way, the town drunk as his "side-kick". The cattlemen hire their own "gun" and eventually there is an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between the two gunmen. But the "frame" of the confrontation is expanded to a higher logical level. They metacommunicate about the rules of the encounter. They agree that, since they are taking part in a Western, and since in Westerns the good guy always wins against the bad guy, the winner will be the one who convinces the other that he is the good guy. Therefore, instead of exchanging shots, they exchange bits of proof that they are the good guy and the opponent is the bad guy. Since the cattlemen, knowing the metarule, have hired their gunman for his virtue rather than for his shooting, the hero is beaten, and his immediate defeat behaviour recalls Leon Sloman's description of losing at tennis. As his opponent counts down to the draw, he looks uncomfortable and says, "I can't fight you today...I'll fight you tomorrow...maybe Thursday...yeah, Thursday'd be good" whereupon he slinks off to his campsite outside town where he throws away his guns and expresses ideas of low profile and unworthiness: "I'll get some new clothes, understated stuff, lots of browns [he is presented as a very flashy dresser], and I'll have to sell Wildfire, he's too good a horse for me now".

The victor of the contest, for his part, shows ritual restraint, "If he's backed down, I couldn't go after him, it wouldn't be nice."

The depressive phase is brought to an end by the elicitation of strong anger, when the bad guys shoot his side-kick, and he then rallies the sheep farmers for a final showdown.

What lessons can we draw from this tale? One is that we need all three modular levels to describe the interaction, so that the three level diagram of escalation/de-escalation in July's ASCAP (1993) is better than the two level diagram in the June issue, thus vindicating Leon's insistence on the importance of anger (both in prolonging depression and, as in this case, relieving it). Also it emphasises that the thymic de-escalation of depression can be over-ridden by escalation in either of the other two modules. As therapists, we are more likely to encourage escalation in the deliberative module, if we see that with help the patient can win his battle, and that yielding is not needed in any of the modules.

Alternative strategies

	ESCALATING	DE-ESCALATING
CORTEX (deliberative)	Fight to win	Submit
Brain Level	Get angry	Feel chastened
LIMBIC (emotional)	Mood elevation	Depression
STRIATUM (thymic)		

I am not sure to what extent the elicitation of anger has been discussed in the treatment of depression. Clearly it could be a two edged weapon, as the provoking stimulus might well make the depression worse; in modular terms, the stimulus could have intensified thymic (reptilian) de-escalation because of the loss of RHP caused by the death of an ally and the insult inflicted by his shooting. It might have induced de-escalation in the affective module too, leaving only grief and humiliation. But in fact it produced such intense escalation in the affective module (in the form of anger) that this module over-rode the de-escalation of the thymic module and led to overall escalatory (assertive) behaviour, thus eliminating the one-down position vis-a-vis the cattlemen's hired gun which had led to the depressive episode in the first place. It was a true

escalation of the fight - he did not recontest the one-to-one encounter with pistols, but rather escalated to a group-to-group encounter with rifles; he also shot his opponent in the head and killed him, in contrast to his usual policy of shooting people in the hand.

Can ASCAP readers suggest any other fictional (or biographical) examples of depression following a ritual agonistic encounter?

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