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0521640946 - The Hidden Genius of Emotion: Lifespan Transformations of Personality

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PART I

Introduction

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1 Challenging the Prevailing View

The Affective Connection

Knowledge of emotional processes can give a person a sense of second sight or even magic. Years ago a young man was being introduced to his new professional colleagues in the department of psychology; among them was Silvan Tomkins. As the young man elaborated on his many interests, views, and intellectual dilemmas, he quite exceeded the time that other speakers had taken. Silvan turned to a colleague, lowered his voice, and said, "That young man lost his beloved mother at an early age." In fact, he had. But when Silvan was queried about his acquaintanceship with the young man, he replied, strangely enough, that he had never even met him.

This story is emblematic of the Silvan mystery. Tomkins seemed endowed with a supernatural knowledge of the human mind and its longings. He always seemed to know more about people than was discernable from the observable facts. Indeed, at the memorial service held for Silvan in 1991, not only did renowned psychiatrists single out his uncanny ability to fathom the essential elements of people in a way that few could, but even his garbage man described him as a "yoda" – a wise man.

Sometimes Silvan would explain his inductive process, and one could follow it, but it took a long time to absorb and understand just what was taking place. If one studied with him a while, it became apparent that he more or less had a system for putting together emotions and thoughts, a system he called the ideoaffective system. He could work with the system himself, but he never really made it accessible to others, although a few notable attempts to break the code have been made. He was a marvelous teacher, but only for those willing to endure his idiosyncratic

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style of thinking and discovery and personal eccentricities. One felt that it was important to remain close to Silvan, for it appeared that he possessed or was closing in on the holy grail of personality; emotion was the code or the process that brought together the many varied aspects of personality, and, somehow, Silvan knew how it was encrypted.

Tomkins' intuitions have led the present authors to consider emotion to be the missing link in modern approaches to personality development. Over the years, we have learned to decode some of the enigmas ourselves, but the process is an ongoing effort – exciting, perplexing, and ever surprising. We have come to appreciate the chaotic, unbounded character of the emotion system, as Silvan must have early on, before the mathematicians and physicists had a name for such nonlinear systems. Dynamical systems, as even developmentalists are now understanding (Emde, 1994; Lewis, 1995; Thelen, 1990), are not to be apprehended in the kind of straight-line, logico-deductive method that so infuses scientific thinking of our time and our Cartesian science. There is an emerging awareness that entrenched paradigms and patterns of thinking must be broken. It is our feeling that the time is particularly ripe for this. One has but to examine the typical psychology colloquium offerings around our college campuses to be impressed with the immediacy of the need; a recent sampling from one campus follows:

“Using event related potentials to investigate priming in schizophrenic and normal populations”

“Evolution of the human brain through runaway sexual selection”

“Modality effects on syntactic parsing”

“SHT and disorders of cognition”

Here we see a few bits and pieces of the world of psychology as it is currently practiced. The field has grown enormously technical, relying on years of study for each new addition to gain acceptance or to just become another piece of flotsam in the widening sea of knowledge. The “massive”ness of the field – massive numbers of subjects, massive numbers of observations, massive numbers of researchers, massive amounts of information – seems to cry out for some form of meaningful organization. Yet there has been little attempt to bridge the fragmentation. No attempt is made for one seminar topic to speak to another. The shards of information that are produced en masse are allowed to stand without challenge or comment. There is little collaboration across even closely allied topical areas, one of the results of a mechanistic and linear approach to science. It has led to a search for “elements” of the human

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psyche, which in turn has led to a fragmentary science of human functioning. There is little emphasis on the relative nature of those elements and even less emphasis on the dynamic whole.

But even more notable is the fact that no individuals are ever mentioned. The individual intellect, individual presence, or individual case example seems to have been obliterated in this vast sea of disconnected pieces. This phenomenon – the depersonalization of psychology in the interest of finding elementary building blocks – is remarkable when one considers that among the social sciences, psychology was, at one time, unique for its focus on the individual. Fragmentation has occurred, despite the fact that ultimately everyone appreciates psychology when it fits the bits and pieces together in the context of singular persons such as Little Hans (Freud), Martin Luther (Erikson), the man who mistook his wife for a hat (Sachs), Lorens (Piaget), and Little Albert (Watson).

In the present volume, we take a lesson from the individualizing tradition and at the same time integrate it with other systems. In this instance, our aim is not to target clinical disorders as in other case studies but to bring the individual fragments of the subject matter of psychology back into perspective. It is our hope that in crossing the boundaries of the specialty areas of the analytic, cognitive, and affective, a new view of psychological processes will emerge. Emotions are at its core and are, in our terms, the missing links to an integrated psychology of the human being.

We chose to personalize and individualize this integrative approach through the lives and work of individuals who are already well known to many readers; they are three innovative psychologists of mid-20th century – Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, and Albert Ellis. We bring an ideoaffective analysis of personality to bear on our treatment of the material at hand. The term “ideoaffective organization” was introduced by Silvan Tomkins (1962) and was originally used as a shorthand to describe the way in which emotions are integrally related to the structure and dynamics of personality. According to Tomkins, ideoaffective organizations – or emotional/cognitive schema – which are unique to each individual, emerge from recurrent or particularly salient affective “scenes” over the course of development; these organizations then become dynamically active agents affecting an array of cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal processes. This phenomenon is richly in evidence in the present work. Indeed, an ideoaffective analysis of the lives of Rogers, Perls, and Ellis provides a compelling illustration of the centrality of affect and its interrelation with thought, behavior, ideology, and practice. This is not

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to say that the clinical techniques they introduced in and of themselves do this. Rather, it is the relation between each theory's development and each man's unique personality or ideoaffectology.

The choice of our subjects was both fortuitous and deliberate. Originally, it was not dictated by the fact that Rogers, Perls, and Ellis were therapists, nor was it essential that they be particularly emotionally gifted – though in some ways they were. We could have in fact chosen any three individuals – ordinary or otherwise. However, there were two especially compelling reasons to select these particular individuals.

The fortuitous aspect of the choice is related to the rediscovery of a film that was originally produced in 1963 and that had been widely shown in introductory psychology classes: *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* (Shostrom, 1966). In the film, each therapist – Ellis, Rogers, and Perls – conducts a half-hour interview with a client, Gloria; it was intended to illustrate what psychotherapy is like, and that there are several modalities of psychotherapy practice. It had been a good twenty-five years since either of us had seen the film, certainly way before our professional immersion in emotions theory and our various works on the centrality and idiosyncrasy of affect. This time, we were startled as we watched each man in action. What leapt out at us at once were the gross differences in the three clinical psychologists' affective communication patterns – not their particular techniques, but the specific qualities of emotion embedded within them. In spite of our expectation that there would be commonality to individuals in the same profession, we immediately saw that Perls had a style thoroughly saturated with contempt, whereas Rogers's style was replete with shame, distress, and joy. Ellis seemed angry much of the time. Yet these three men with their contempt, shame, and anger were legitimately renowned for their clinical skills and innovative discoveries. In this volume, we focus on the fact that each individual therapist illustrated a particular combination of wisdom and passion. This observation violates the common belief that "good" people have largely "positive" emotions, and it violates the belief that highly successful men are "unemotional." None of the three men were unemotional; neither were they wholly full of enjoyment. In this volume, we intend to document how Perls, Ellis, and Rogers deployed their own emotion biases toward theoretically creative ends. At the same time, we show that each had limited appreciation and awareness of themselves as having particular emotional biases and that these were at the basis of their particular therapeutic skills.

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Although the fact that the individuals in this project are clinical psychologists was not important to us at first, the study of the emotional aspects of their personalities had ramifications for clinical theory and practices. That these men's theories are about psychological experience and the functioning of personality, but nonetheless lack a place for such influences, adds a particularly ironic twist. Of course, individual personality influences on therapeutic practice have long been an issue in psychoanalytic and psychodynamic circles, but we wanted to know how well they have been studied and why the studies are limited. We are not the first to raise this point. People's ideoaffective systems and dynamics are ordinarily invisible to others, and they necessarily pose problems for psychological theories rooted in Cartesian ontology. The choice of Rogers, Ellis, and Perls and their work is related both to the issue of personality influence on therapeutic practice and of personality influence on the conduct of science. Once again, we believe that emotion is the missing link in comprehending the relationship.

In this volume, we develop the thesis that human lives are profoundly shaped and structured by emotional experiences and that affect or emotion itself is the creative and organizing force behind all mental life. This new view takes emotion out of the realm of the epiphenomenal and gives it a central role in the development of life histories and in the growth of intellectual and behavioral skills. Our position is admittedly radical for a discipline of psychology in which a century's worth of work has either ignored the emotions, treated them as residuals, "sinful . . . , or . . . a nuisance" (Jersild, 1946, p. 834).

For much of the 20th century, few areas of psychology had had much use for the emotions. Max Meyer, writing in 1933, set the tone for academics in experimental psychology. He championed a "hardheaded" science of psychology and dismissed the entire concept of emotion as superfluous and artifactual, claiming that the concept of emotion was the modern-day equivalent of phlogiston – the early chemists' hypothetical material at the heart of combustion. Moreover, he predicted that the term "emotion" would no longer be in use by the 1950s. Meyer's prediction was fulfilled, in part. The term had indeed largely dropped out of usage by 1950, but it was very much at work again in scientific research by the 1980s.

In clinical practice, Freud understood the central role that "strangled emotion" played in neurosis but failed to appreciate fully the significance of emotion in either the phenomenon of abreaction or normal psychological functioning. In addition, the emphasis in Freud's mature

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works on “remembering rather than repeating, and on remembering instead of acting” (Lewis, 1981, p. 210) meant that emotions were often subordinated to intellect.

Freud originally coined the term *Uebertragung* (transference) to describe the phenomenon in which feelings experienced by a patient toward his or her parents transferred or were generalized to other significant relationships including the psychotherapeutic encounter. The issue of transference in the patient as well as in the therapist (countertransference) has been and continues to be of central theoretical and practical import in the clinical literature (Orange, Atwood & Stolorow, 1997; Stolorow & Atwood, 1992; Tansey, 1989). However, an explicit examination of the role of affect in the process and course of psychotherapy has not been systematically undertaken. Freud himself, who in his earlier writings understood intuitively that affects played a powerful role in neurosis and that it was important to attend to them in psychotherapy, gradually drifted from these understandings and became ever more absorbed in the role of sexual repression in the formation and maintenance of neurosis. Correspondingly, he moved more and more in the direction of dealing with the symbolic content of patients’ concerns rather than with the affective in psychotherapy. Helen Block Lewis’s (1981) close examination of the cases treated by Freud during his extensive clinical career led her to the conclusion that Freud’s declining success in psychotherapy over the years, which he himself acknowledged, stemmed from his abandonment of affect as a key factor.

In the current clinical literature, there is growing recognition that paying attention to affect should be a primary consideration in psychotherapy (Emde, 1980; Orange et al., 1997; Krause, Steimer-Krause & Ullrich, 1992; Strupp, 1993; Tansey, 1989). This concern is usually couched within concepts such as transference, countertransference, empathy, and projective identification. Despite the very obvious affective content embedded in these analytic constructs, to date there has been minimal systematic research directly targeting the study of the ebb and flow of emotions in the psychoanalytic process. This is largely attributable to the fact that the analytic literature has not yet elaborated a formal theory of how affect works in human personality (Emde, 1980).

Within the field of developmental psychology, up until the end of the twentieth century, there was only sporadic and superficial treatment of the emotions and their role in human development. Early observations of infants’ emotional expressions were unsystematic and inadequately controlled; consequently, researchers came to the erroneous conclusion that emotions were undifferentiated and probably “learned” behaviors

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(Magai & McFadden, 1995). As recently as twenty years ago one well-known researcher seriously argued that emotional signals were essentially arbitrary. He cited the behaviors of snarling and punching and claimed that these ostensibly aggressive expressions could index happiness and greeting. Much evidence has since accumulated to dispel that idea definitively. The behavior of snarling and punching *pulls* for physiological change and readiness to action as well as galvanizes particular patterns of thought. Such behavior readies the body and mind for attack, even though symbolization of these behaviors could be used to designate some idiosyncratic code dissociated from attack, as in a secret society's greeting ritual. However, even such a symbolic greeting would still carry some of the innate attack-readiness intrinsic to the gesture.

Developmental studies such as John Watson's provocation of fear in "Little Albert" led to the idea that emotions were simple conditioned reactions that interfered with more sensible and rational behavior. Watson managed to extend Albert's fear reaction to a variety of innocuous objects, demonstrating generalization of the response. Later, others showed that there are in fact limits to this phenomenon; it is notably easy to extend fear to living, moving things such as bugs and difficult to extend it to nonliving entities such as door posts.

Nevertheless, Watson's behavioristic formulations at least admitted some type of emotional function; this admission was more than many of his successors could allow. For several decades, the exciting research in psychology lay outside of the realm of emotion – in the study of cognitive abilities and their development. This trend continued in spite of the seminal work of the mid-century Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, who attributed a central role to emotions in mental life. Ironically, the aggressively successful cognitive-developmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which had been originally inspired by Piaget, left little room for the emotional component of development.

Piaget regarded affect and cognition as two sides of the same mental coin – processes that were intrinsically joined and indissociable from one another. Although he attributed more influence to affect than would his followers in the United States where positivism was deeply entrenched, his concepts were still limited. He proposed that affect represents only the energetic force in mental life, whereas cognitive activity supplied the "content." This formulation seriously underestimated the influence of emotion on mental life.

Most contemporary theories of human development treat the emotional events of infancy as pivotal in personality development, if not "critical periods," with lifelong ramifications (Ainsworth, 1989;

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Bowlby, 1969). Although the strong form of the critical period thesis has been decisively challenged by animal and human research (Thompson & Grusec, 1970), it is still safe to say that early socioemotional experiences leave important residues. One example inheres in attachment patterns. Early relationships may affect the degree to which individuals are comfortable with intimacy later in development (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). This is not to say that early patterns are immutable (the strong form of the critical period thesis) or that later developmental experiences will not modify or elaborate early patterns.

Our model is more dynamic than espoused by most developmentalists and is decidedly more dynamic than current social and personality models. It is a theory of emotion across the lifespan. In this work, we look for paths of development and entertain the thesis that small effects may grow, even after a long time; that large effects may divide and become distributed across time; and even that events can lose their original purpose or meaning (Lewis, 1995). Certain events, including perhaps the intellectual insights of therapy, encountered in the exploration of remembered trauma may produce new paths that were largely unpredicted by the trauma. Intersubjective memories, present events, general knowledge, and emotional resonance or bias interact to produce new configurations as well as periodic repetitions. Emotional events work within ideoaffective or motivational systems and have a special role both in changing the larger system and in maintaining it, depending upon the emotion and the elements it has attracted. Emotion is especially critical because emotions are contagious among people; thus, a great many opportunities for interpersonal challenge to preexisting structures and for change exist. Every type and level of emotion is critical for this approach. No one emotion is, strictly speaking, "positive" or "negative," desirable or undesirable. As we shall illustrate in the lives of Rogers, Ellis, and Perls, even the typically avoided feelings of our culture play important roles in the creative process. The shame, anger, and contempt of Rogers, Ellis, and Perls are pivotal aspects of their unique contributions.

In these men's lives, affect shaped and framed the content of thought and the processes of thinking and problem solving. Their emotional biases were patently evident in their actions, as revealed, for example, in the filmed record of *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*, and in their thoughts, as can be sampled from their theoretical writings. Mostly, affect is the missing link in making their developmental histories more apprehensible and real. It provides the more holistic grounding to each

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personality as it develops across a lifespan. Thus, affect does considerably more than simply supply energy to the cognitive apparatus. It organizes experience (thoughts, memories, perception) and is played out in multivariate splendor in the many repetitive, mundane, and not-so-mundane activities of daily life.

Tomkins wrote that affect becomes “structuralized” in personality over the course of development. The idiosyncracies of each unique personality depend on the particular affective circumstances of an individual’s life just as much as on the people and the events of that life. According to Tomkins, emotional dispositions – what Malatesta-Magai (Magai & McFadden, 1995; Malatesta, 1990) has termed “affect biases” – serve as the filters and regulators of information and experience. They predispose individuals to perceive the world in certain emotionally framed ways and to assimilate information to preexisting affect-laden schemas. They also may prepare a particular course of action. Each person evolves particular patterns of emotional bias in the course of development. We, as authors, are not as enamored of “structure” as Tomkins was because we focus more on change and development; nevertheless, the concept of stability needs to be continuously evaluated.

An ideoaffective bias simply may involve the dominance of one particular emotion, as in the masked hostility of the Type A personality pattern. Many people who manage to fall into this category have a constellation of emotions and ideas that make many of their daily life events meaningful because they are linked to stressful achievement. Such persons, while denying that they are “emotional” are very willing to admit to being “stressed” because that word captures their drive and need for achievement and success. In this particular construction, however, success is gained only through “stress.” Unstressed people are not valuable or successful. However, the stress comes because part of the ideoaffective scheme expects achievement to be difficult and blocked. The block leads to frustration and anger, which is also blocked since its actual expression has been construed to lead to further frustration and lack of success. The “stress” felt by the blocked hostile person is the result of the self-defeating ideoaffective structure. But taking away the stressful ideoaffective structure can leave an intolerable hole in the identity of this person. A “cure” is difficult if this structure is central.

In another example, depressed people are known to give meaning and connections in their lives through a sadness–guilt link. Early losses of very meaningful people or experiences are linked to depression. Then