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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2011

Chapter 10

The role of mood change in defining relationships: a tribute to Gregory Bateson (1904–1980)

John Price

In almost all group-living vertebrate species, relationships are asymmetrical in terms of power. The mechanism for creating and sometimes reversing asymmetry is ritual agonistic behaviour (threat and attack). In human beings the requisite asymmetry may also be produced by verbal means, as, too, may symmetry. Gregory Bateson included all these means of producing symmetry and asymmetry (words, threat, attack) in the term “defining the relationship”, so that each asymmetrical (or complementary) relationship has a Definer and an Acceptor (who accepts the definition proposed by the Definer). In this chapter it is suggested that one evolutionary function of mood change is to facilitate the formation and reversal of complementarity, and another is to maintain complementarity once it has been established. Elevation of mood gives the Definer the courage, energy and forcefulness to impose a definition on a possibly reluctant Acceptor. Depression of mood enables an Acceptor to accept a definition which may deprive him of power and resources, and which in a normal mood state he would find unacceptable.

10.1 Introduction

The idea that mood changes relate to the gain or loss of territory or social rank has a history of at least 40 years (Price *et al.* 2007). Over the years, various formulations of this basic thesis have appeared, mostly written by clinicians who treat depressed patients every day (Price 1967, 1972, 1998, 2000, 2009; Gardner 1982; Price and Gardner 1995, 2009; Wilson and Price, 2006). In this chapter, I will review the many sources of inspiration for this hypothesis, and relate it

to Gregory Bateson’s work on communicating about the definition of human relationships.

The basic inspiration for the so-called “social competition hypothesis” of depression came from Darwin’s theory of sexual selection (Price 1999). Darwin proposed that one sex selects members of the other sex for mating, and in so doing it rejects the rest. Even within each sex, there is selection and rejection. Darwin noted that animals, especially males, “drive away or kill their rivals” (Darwin 1871, p. 916) but he did not further pursue the fate of the unselected. The implication of this idea is that, in each generation since social life began, the population has been divided into those who have been selected, those who have not been selected, and also possibly those who have first been selected but then been de-selected (section 10.3).

A second source of inspiration came from comparative ethology (and, later on, behavioral ecology), which described the social structures that had evolved throughout the vertebrate sub-phylum to deal with the results of sexual selection. In group-living species, we were shown social hierarchies in which the selected occupied the senior positions while the unselected were pushed, often by means of fighting or agonistic behavior, into inferior ranks. For us, as psychiatrists, the marzipan on the cake was the fact that this fighting was largely ritualized, in that it took a symbolic form rather than lethal fighting. A corollary of the ritualization of fighting is that there must also be a ritualization of losing, and of the incapacity that accompanies losing in real fighting, such as being dead or seriously incapacitated. An animal that has been defeated has two main characteristics. First of all, it lies down on the ground. Second, it cannot get up. Both these qualities must be ritualized, but surprisingly the second quality was overlooked by the ethologists. They gave wonderful descriptions of the ritual submissive gestures that losers make to winners, but what about not being able to get up? It takes a psychiatric view to appreciate this ritual incapacity—an incapacity that we see in our depressed patients who are unable, for purely psychological or ritual reasons, to get up and carry on with their lives (section 10.4).

Further inspiration came from Paul MacLean’s concept of the triune brain, providing the anatomical basis for the triune mind, or the old idea that the mind has three parts which operate relatively independently. We could see that fighting strategies could occur at all three levels, and that de-escalation at the higher level (in the form of voluntary surrender) could pre-empt or terminate de-escalation at one of the lower levels (in the form of depressed emotion or depressed mood). Moreover, MacLean’s framework can account for both behavior based on intimidating the rival and also behavior designed to be attractive to the rival and to the social group as a whole (section 10.5).

Even though Bateson did not study animal hierarchies or depressed patients, his analysis of the nature of human relationships is of interest here for