

The Civilization Affect:

From natural to neurotic, a different look at the evolution of our species

Part one:

“The emotionally neurotic ape is trying to communicate”

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Since the first moment we came up with the idea of walking upright, our race has continued to evolve into what now stares back at us in the mirror each morning. As frightening as that sight may be for some, do any of us take the time to reflect on our reflection? Do we see a complex biological organism, a result of our specie’s unyielding drive to persevere and procreate, or do we just see someone who should have gone to bed a little earlier judging by the bags under our eyes? Do we see the atoms combining to create the living cells that form our organs? Do we see the organ systems that make up what we call our organism, our body? Do we take the time to acknowledge that, staring back at us is an animal born into captivity, trained from birth so that it can assimilate into a society evolving faster than any period in recorded history? Or have we become so lost in the world we created that we’ve forgotten we created it, and that we are not genetically designed to exist in it mentally, physically, or emotionally? When we walk out the door in the morning, do we really understand what we are walking into?

This habitat, this free roaming human zoo, is a breeding ground for insanity. Why? Because many of us think the existence we currently inhabit is natural, and therefore requires little thought. But, the world of man is as natural to man as a habitrail is to a hamster, only we are forced to clean up after ourselves and take care of our own feces.

Now, what separates us from the run of the mill hamster is our brain. Whether it’s a blessing or a curse, our minds have evolved over thousands of years from a biologic mass of fight or flight responses, keeping our species alive and multiplying, into a mass

of neurologic synaptic connections that give us the ability to define what this world is, how and why we exist in it, and how to load over a thousand songs into an iPod.

So we, as a species, are living in a habitat that is completely unnatural to us and we require an extensive amount of domestication in order to survive in it with a minimal amount of psychosis. What happens when we are not given the education or experiences we need to understand the complexities of our habitat and are instead given misguided beliefs and information that perpetuate anxiety, anger, and fear? Is it possible that the negative emotions many of us contend with are caused by our perception of reality, not reality itself? And, if this is true, is it possible for us to overcome these emotions, not by subduing them or repressing them, but by changing our perception of the situation that is ultimately causing them?

According to Daniel Goleman (1995), having conducted an extensive amount of research using some pretty sadistic experiments involving rats, monkeys, and electrodes, scientists have hypothesized that our mind was originally an emotional organism with a set of preprogrammed regulators that kept our body in a state of homeostasis to insure our survival. The brain we have now allows us to create definitions about our emotions. Credit for this achievement can be given to our neocortex; consequently, it is also responsible for most of our psychosis. Where once our emotions were designed for survival, now, with the evolution of our neocortex and the world it's trying to interpret, our emotions are being used in ways they were never designed to be, in ways that can ultimately destroy our organism, meaning us.

For example, Goleman (1995) points out that when our emotions are not appropriate for certain situations, "when out of control, too extreme and persistent, they

become pathological, as in immobilizing depression, overwhelming anxiety, raging anger, and manic agitation” (p. 56). The problem seems to be that our mind, having to focus on other things besides mating and survival, has assigned several of the emotions supporting those activities to other situations they were not intended. For example, while a flat tire is just a flat tire, eliciting no threat to us unless we are on the freeway when it happens, no emotion is necessary. But, if a man sees the situation as threatening to his bank account, he may get angry. If a woman sees it as making her late to work, she may get worried. If a man sees it as just one more example of how much god hates him, he may feel a bit depressed. So, really, our emotions are more often than not caused by how we define a situation, not by the situation itself. This is what our mind has evolved into, a gelatinous mass of neurons that have a compulsion for defining things. Because we react to our environment based on how we’ve defined it, we find ourselves at the mercy of the emotions we’ve attached to those definitions.

Each one of us defines our environment differently. We may think we all see the same world, but we don’t. Why? Because each one of us has defined the world slightly differently than the other... or, in some cases, extremely differently. Many of us then live with those definitions as if they are reality and not something we, or someone else, thought up. We see this with the concepts of morality, religion, community, sex, in fact, just about everything we see, hear, taste, and smell has either been defined by us or defined for us. Our senses, when combined with these perceptions create emotion.

Since we created our reality, why can’t we just make ourselves feel better? Why can’t we just convince ourselves that being broken up with, losing a loved one, or any of the other tragedies we experience shouldn’t affect us and therefore do not require that we

feel depressed? Why can't we forget about the abuse we experienced as a child and move on? Why can't we let go of our anger and live without worry? Why, if we created our reality, can we not control our emotions? It is because we must first change our perception of reality: by doing so the emotions will take care of themselves.

This is a lot more difficult than it sounds. Many of us have become attached to our reality and don't really like the thought of having to question it. Most of us would rather take a pill, preferably one that makes us not worry about why we're taking the pill in the first place. Not to mention that, though our society is extremely self-absorbed, it is not necessarily introspective. We have very little time for it because many of us are spending a surmountable amount of our time looking for, or participating in, something that distract us. In fact, our entire economy, the survival of this country, depends on our desire to be distracted. Because of this, even reaching a point in our lives where we realize we may need to take a moment to question our reality seems almost as difficult as going through with it. So difficult in fact that one could see why we would rather be distracted.

While these distractions may be good for some short term relief from whatever we were worried, angry, or upset about, the underlying belief that creates our emotion does not go away and, as many wise men have said, that which we resist, persists. So, seeing that we've created our own emotional instability, should we continue to distract ourselves with television, novels, Ritalin, or crossword puzzles? Or should we cut the problem off at the source and alter our perception of reality?

To do this we must first look at how we began to define our experiences, how we attach emotions to those definitions, and how those definitions are affecting the way we

interact with others. Looking over an exorbitant amount of human growth theories, it seems that our brain is actually designed to learn emotional responses from our caregivers and our community. This means we learn how and when to create emotions mostly by observing others. For example, if our parents or others in our community do not give us healthy emotional examples, like love or empathy, then there is a possibility that we will not learn how to create the chemical for that emotion. Goleman (1995) states that empathy is hard coded in our biology. Yet, I have known several people who do not know what empathy is. So, though there is a possibility that empathy is in our genetic makeup, there is a chance that we will never learn how to express it if it is not triggered early on by an example. While love, or the definition of love, appears to be more of an idea than an actual emotion, there is a feeling that many of us attach to that word and use it when responding to others. Many of us have attached the word love to different emotions, maybe because we either defined it incorrectly using examples from our childhood or got it mixed up with other emotions during the sexual confusion of our adolescence. We may have redefined love after having negative experiences with others. However we defined love, if we have assigned love to a different emotion than the emotion that someone we are dating, or are married to has assigned it, then it could ultimately impede our ability to communicate or commune with others.

Seeing how one definition, “love”, can be different for so many people, and how the emotions attached to that word are equally different, we begin to understand why we, as a species, have such a difficult time understanding each other. But, more importantly, it shows us that we created the definition and we attached emotions to those definitions. We are the creators of our reality; therefore, we can uncreate it.

Before I leave this thought I would like to point out how we, as adults, spent a great deal of time worrying about our children. Besides the fact that this teaches our children how to worry, we are forgetting that we were once children ourselves and experienced the same amount of insanity they are experiencing. We are examples of what they will become, therefore, we should be focusing on ourselves, not our children. If our children see that we are trying to make sense of the habitat we're born into, they will begin questioning their reality much earlier than we did. Over a few generations this could change the world.

For example, since three out of ten newlyweds are staying married (Goleman, 1995), one may ask why we haven't created a curriculum to teach our adolescents, and possibly our adults, how to communicate with each other and how we created definitions to describe our emotions. As of now, the only class I know of that teaches such a thing is speech class, which only teaches the art of arguing or presenting a point. Communication is far more complex than I think we give it credit for, and seeing how our emotions are the result of our thoughts and our thoughts influence our speech, then it seems logical that we, as a species, need education at a young age on the art of communication, and what emotions are and how they are created. So why don't we have it? Because this kind of class would not be successful since emotions are created by thought, thought is created from belief, and beliefs are created by our family, society, government, and so on. Because of this no one would ever be able to agree on how the class should be taught because they are trying to reinforce their own perception of reality. Therefore, it seems to be almost futile to focus all of our energy, and place all of our hope, on our children

when it is the insanity of those who are raising them that needs to be addressed in order to create change.

So, it would seem that it is up to us as individuals to begin the journey. Born into a world that is completely foreign to our genetic make up, we often find ourselves overrun with emotions that, while once necessary for our survival, are now misused, and can ultimately lead to sickness and psychosis. But, the evolution of our neocortex has also given us the capability of discovering the root cause of our emotions. If emotions are caused by our thoughts, and not the situation we find ourselves in, then it is within our power to discover what is creating those thoughts, allowing us to reprogram our mind so that our emotions enhance our experiences instead of distort them into something negative.

Reference

Goleman, Daniel (1995). *Emotional intelligence, why it can matter more than IQ*.

New York, NY: Bantam Dell.