

Abused and neglected children based on the theory of an ambivalent object

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Preface

The theory of an ambivalent object is a subject of my postdoctoral thesis. It covers and explains many phenomena, which we also encounter in abused and neglected children. These include tendencies to manipulate others, hyperactivity, void feelings, auto-stimulation, aptitude to extremism, inability to enter close relationships, emotional instability and low frustration tolerance, hypertrophy of imaginary in combination with poor achievement in reality etc. I draw upon my experience with such children at an emergency line (Security Line - Linkabezpečí), in the Child Crisis center and in a Department of Step Family Care in the Municipal Center, where I worked for several years.

I was very often surprised by the fact that despite these children need more care and affection, they are very often unable to accept it especially in older age (13 years and above). It is as if there are some indirect proportions: the more they need stability in their lives, the less they are able to accept it and to share it with others as well. It is very hard to offer them help because reparation of consequences of abuse and neglect must be a very slow and long-term process.

The life of abused children is full of indirect proportions: The more they long for love of someone (say biological parents or anyone else), the less their love is returned. The other way round: the more they are loved by someone (stepparents or any admirer) the more they disdain and scorn him or her. They cannot understand why they cannot be loved by someone whom they love, and why they are loved by someone, whom they are not interested in it at all. Which laws govern these regularities?

The following text depicts an attempt to understand these laws based on the theory of reaction to an ambivalent object. Ambivalent objects are, to bigger or smaller extent, almost all people we meet. Ambivalent or crosscurrent tendencies keep social balance or homeostasis. It is perhaps the reason why they are so strong, simple and ubiquitous. The theory is not only about the nature of an ambivalent object, but first of all about natural defensive reactions to an ambivalent object and processes which are induced by interactions with it.

Definition of an ambivalent object

An ambivalent object is a person (human, divine, etc.) who activates two opposite or antagonistic emotions or needs in a subject. I postulate existence of two basic needs in my thesis. Firstly a generalized tendency to avoid contact with this object which I used to call, according to context, aversion or fear. Secondly, a generalized tendency to approach an object, which I call appetite. These two tendencies are closely connected with proximity, i.e. physical or psychic distance between an object and a subject, and with an amount of emotional arousal. We can easily imagine that the closer we stay to a chasm or any dangerous object, the higher the emotional arousal we experience. On the contrary, we also experience higher emotional arousal when we have to say goodbye to a loved person.

The dependencies among emotional arousal, distance and quality of emotional experiences can have

different forms. The most typical form of firm relationships is shown at the following chart:

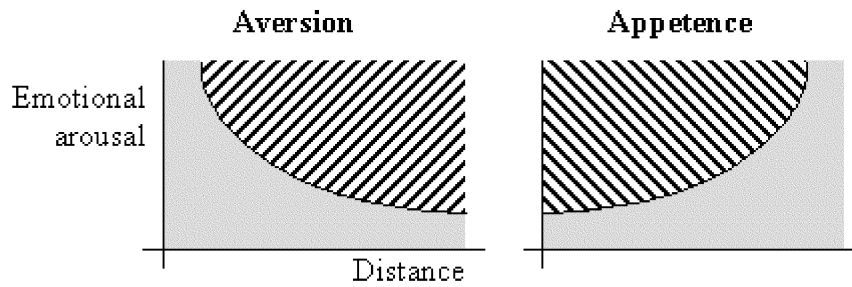


Chart 1 – Areas of pleasant and unpleasant experiences

Caption: Hatched areas show where a person feels good. Gray areas are of unpleasant experiences. When psychic distance grows, the emotional arousal diminishes in case of fear or aversion and grows in case of appetence or any approaching need.

As it was said above, an ambivalent object activates both these needs, so we can place these two charts over one another and we get the following chart.

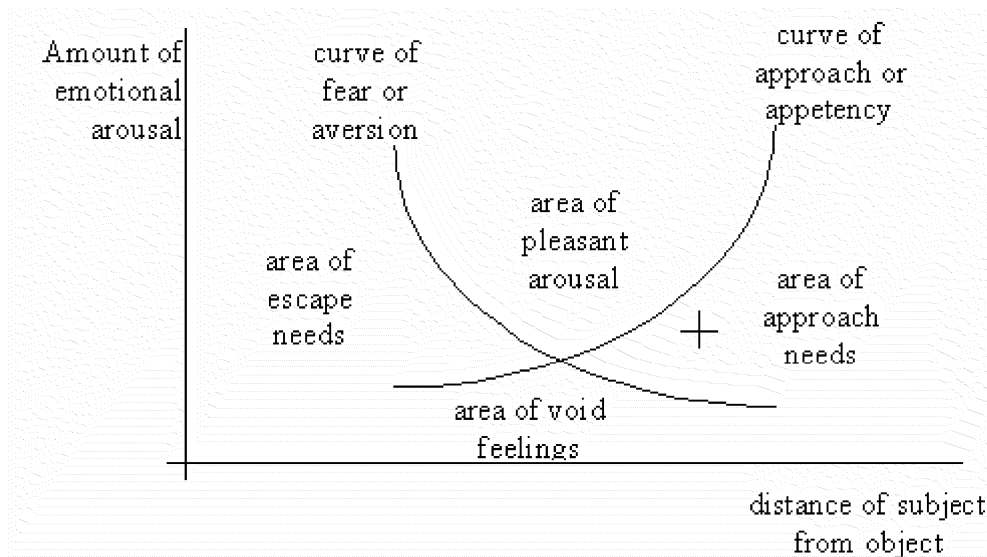


Chart 2 – Areas of pleasant and unpleasant experiences

Caption: The two curves delimit four areas of different psychic states with different prevailing feelings. We can mark actual state of a subject by a cross when we know his or her psychic distance from the object and amount of emotional arousal.

The shape and position of these two curves vary with time. They move and change their shapes. Let us see an example. The child watches a mime actor with a white face on a street. This actor activates a lot of curiosity (appetence) and fear (aversion) in the child at the same time, and therefore he is an ambivalent object to the child. The distance at which the child will observe the mime is the balance point at the crossing of the two curves. Suddenly the mime frightens the child by some gesture. The child runs away and stops in some bigger distance. The balance point is thus moved. It means the curves change too.

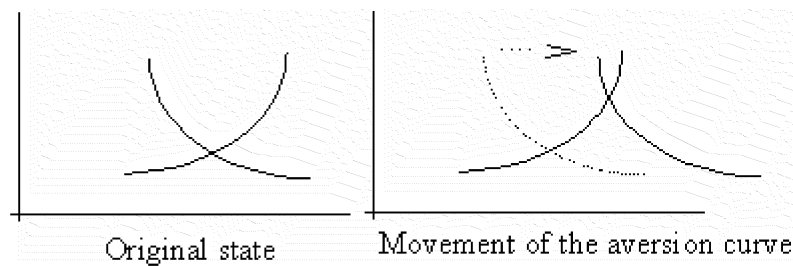


Chart 3 – The aversion curve's movement away from an ambivalent object

Caption: As the aversion curve moves a bit aside, the balance point moves also further from object, and toward higher emotional arousal and this way the area of pleasant feelings is diminished and the area of void feeling expands.

We can see the basic consequences of a reaction to an ambivalent object even at this very simple example.

The child is much more concerned with the mime now. An ambivalent object draws our attention much more than common objects and we feel to be much more attracted to them.

The child pays much less attention to other people and things around him now. Interactions with ambivalent objects lead to a narrowing spectrum of interests, losing friends and social contacts and to some general simplification of a subject's personality.

The child is more emotionally aroused. As such emotional arousal is not long-term maintainable, chronic ambivalent interaction leads to feeling of void or nothingness most of the time.

The child feels good only in a narrow precise distance from the mime, he can go neither closer nor further. Children affected by interactions with ambivalent objects lose their flexibility. They are unable to establish and keep firm partner relationships later, they manipulate or force others to be in a smaller area of pleasant feelings.

We can see all these consequences in abused children too:

1. **Fixation to an ambivalent object.** It could be abuser of anyone, who does not return their love.
2. Losing of interest in other people and activities. It leads to a **black and white value system and such approach to people.**
3. **Higher than average need of emotional arousal.** It explains extremism of abused children, tendency to hyperactivity, early masturbation, aptitude to provoke interpersonal conflicts, higher attraction to arousal inducing situations (taking risk, gambling, etc.)
4. **Inability to change, rigidity,** feelings of being trapped, losing sense of being and activities

Changes in needs given by crossing over the curves (downfall of interest)

We can predict from these consequences what emotional changes will take place when the child crosses over the two curves. We can see a sudden downfall of emotions quite often. This downfall has already

been clearly proven in sexual needs by hysterical women and by narcissism. It was shown in experiment that there is big difference in sexual needs before and after establishing a partnership by hysterical women. They show big sexual appetite before entering the relationship and after that, we can see a big fall of sexual needs in the marriage, which is much lower than in the control group. The situation is depicted in the following charts.

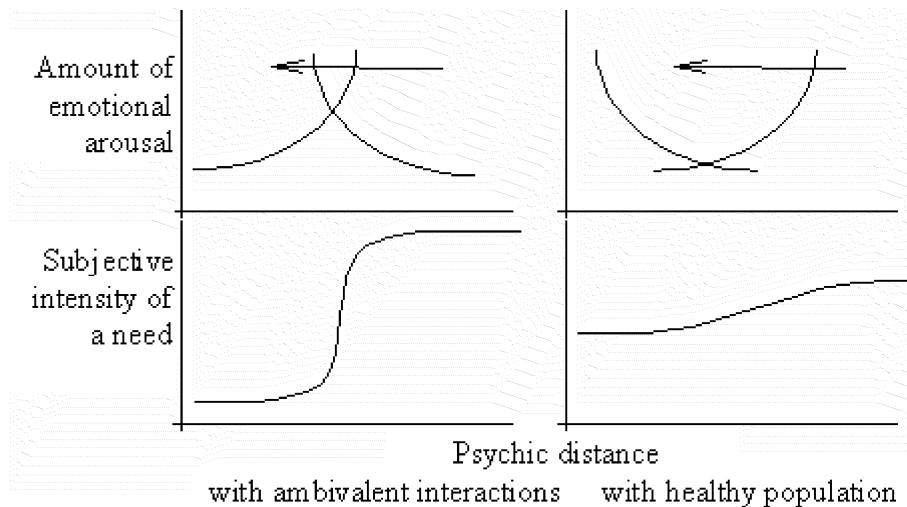


Chart 4 – A downfall of needs given by the approaching of an object

Caption: Two cases are shown in the two columns. The first one is an ambivalent person, while the second one is healthy. The arrow shows what happens by decreasing the psychic distance. The ambivalent (say hysterical) person will feel a sudden downturn of his or her sexual or other needs. On the contrary, the needs of healthy populations remain more or less at the same level.

This downfall is easy to be understood when we realize what happens when say an abused child is taken into new stepfamily. It is what it longs for so much and for so long time (area of approaching needs). The approaching is usually fast too much for the child, and suddenly it finds itself to be too close to the new stepparents. It enters an area of escape needs, where all love and interest suddenly disappear.

The narrowed area of pleasant arousal and hypertrophied areas of void feelings, approach and escape, can explain why abused children are unable to enter close relationships. It is explanation of the indirect proportion. The reason why they love only those who does not love them, and why they disdain and scorn those who love them.

Manipulations and instrumental or utilitarian approach to people

We saw that it is very hard to keep other people in the area of pleasant arousal for abused children, who are deformed by an ambivalent object. There is quite big danger that the object moves into an area of approach needs (biological parents), area of escape needs (someone who love them), or into area of void feelings (very often stepparents). Therefore, by these children we can encounter huge effort to manipulate others into a narrow area of pleasant arousal.

The word "manipulation" is derived form Latin word "manus" - a hand - and suggests that a manipulator handle others like instruments or inanimate objects. Such an approach is a regressive form, from the developmental point of view. There are two main sources of such approach to people. First of all these people have very low self-esteem and therefore they cannot imagine that anyone would love them such as they are. Secondly, the area of pleasant feelings for those people is very narrow and small and it is very difficult to keep others in this special configuration.

Let us imagine a hysterical woman who needs very high amount of attention. Such an amount of attention is not natural and not sustainable all the time and therefore her need forces her to use manipulation to increase man's natural amount of attention. She arranges arguments, gives him reasons to be jealous, etc., and suddenly the man's attention is much more concerned with her according to her wish. No man would provide her such attention voluntarily in a common situation. He is forced to by her manipulation. He is just a thing or instrument for her to satisfy her needs. The same we see by abused children who also have increased needs of emotional arousal.

Therefore, we can define manipulation as an attempt to bypass the other person's consciousness and free will. I.e. to consider him to be just a thing without consciousness and free will, a thing that is intended to satisfy the manipulator's needs. It is clear that a tendency to manipulations is a safe way to extreme loneliness, the way into the world where there are no people but only things. When the person is unavailable, it is disaster for a manipulator, when the person is available, the manipulator got just a thing - not live person and therefore he or she is still alone.

There are two main types of manipulation

- 1. Direct or despotic manipulations.** A manipulator openly insists on satisfying his or her needs. This type is mostly by extropunitive people. For example: reproaches, needless arguments, overbearing, moralization, threats, etc.
- 2. Indirect or tactic.** A manipulator does not believe in direct methods and anticipate rejection of his or her needs. Mostly to be met by intropunitive people, e.g. intrigue and machinations

All these serve to increase emotional arousal or to adapt psychic distance from a chosen object.

There are some rules of manipulation, which are quite opposite to recommendations of mental hygiene or any suggestion of healthy relations toward others. First of these rules says that these rules are not written and everybody must discover them by method attempt – error. The everlasting fight is about weakness and strength. The loser is weak, and the winner is strong. Everybody must play the game all time long, nobody is asked whether he wants to play or not.

- Weaker is the one who shows (especially positive) emotions, who apologizes, who expresses need, asks, sympathizes, weakness etc.
- Universal answer to any request or wish of another is "No!" The best way is to do the opposite of the other's need. The loser is the one, who fulfilled the other's wish immediately or for free. E.g. a patient lost any respect to her therapist when he offered her an extra session because she was in a big depression.
- The duller and weaker is the one who was deceived. The dupe is the person, who rests upon a promise of another person. For instance, the weaker person is the one who waited at an appointment but not the one who purposely did not show up. The cuckold is a deceived partner and not the deceiver. The faithful person, who trusted another person and his or her love, feels very poor and to be a loser.

- Weakness, vulnerability, sickness are culpable, punishable and reprehensible. In Milgram's experiments the experimental persons said about the victim: "He was so stupid that he deserved the electric shocks."
- One must be careful not to give more than the other person gives. Nothing is 'gratis' or for-free. In extreme cases, lovers count sighs by sexual intercourse.
- The stronger is the one who first expresses rejecting attitude. E.g. the children at the emergency line express their need for talk by flooding psychologists with swearwords and vulgarisms. They feel to be stronger me, because they told me first "Fuck off!"
- Triumphant feeling of victory is no way lessened by the casual fact that the loser does not know he lost right now. It is just a consequence of the fact that manipulation rules are unwritten. The loser should have known them.
- Only the weaker lose temper and control, and is puzzled by a situation.
- Only the weaker voluntarily withdraws and offers a compromise.

Conclusions

I want to show here with the example of abused children are just a few basic principles and conclusions, which can be derived from the theory of an ambivalent object. I will be happy to answer any further questions you might have. You will find my emails above. I have thought a lot about any experimental or empirical proof of the theory. In other words, I am looking forward to any possibility of presenting it in English or German speaking university, where scholars are interested in similar issues and think that I can be of some help for them.

Literature

The literature can be sent on demand.

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