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The Rhythm of the Whip

Why do people willfully expose themselves to physical pain? How does pain become a positive experience? Investigating these questions in the extremely different areas of religion and sexual practice demonstrates commonalities in the application of a general affective mechanism involved in the rendering of pain. Identity, practice, and institution share a frame that is so powerful that we take this contextual interconnection for granted and generally overlook similarities of affective mechanisms in religion and sexuality.

Flagellation (from the Latin *flagellum*, "whip"), the whipping of the human body, is an ancient religious practice that is still performed in many religious communities. One of the communities I observed was San Fernando, Pampanga, in the Philippines. The cover image is from a series of photographs of flagellations, self-flagellations, and crucifixions taken at the 2008 Good Friday procession that was organized by the Catholic community of San Fernando.¹ While crucifixions are the better-known spectacle, it was the

¹ The continuous tradition of the procession was established in 1962 in San Fernando when Artemio Añoza volunteered to be nailed to a wooden cross. In 2008, I observed the devout Catholic Ruben Enaje be crucified for the 22nd time.

observation of self-flagellations that spurred my reflections on the trancelike state that apparently facilitated the endurance of pain.

In 1983, I observed a different religious practice that I also have seen in a very different nonreligious context: the suspension from fleshhooks in the procession in Kataragma, Sri Lanka, is a religious practice of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and indigenous Vedda communities. Later I learned about suspension techniques practiced in North American S & M communities. In my role as academic advisor for the Bondage Dominance Sado Masochist student organization at Indiana University, I asked practitioners of suspension about the nature of their experience. About half of them interpreted the act of suspension as entirely spiritual, the other half experienced the same physical act as purely sexual.

Social meanings of pain are central in the interpretation and subsequent management of pain (Kotarba 1983). Pain is not an objective physiological entity, but a social construction managed and rendered in individual experience. Institutional context is central in the interpretation of pain, and it provides rituals in which pain is inflicted. In religious practices, and in sadomasochistic aspects of sexual practices the experience of pain is reinterpreted as positive emotions that signify accomplishment. The control of pain is an achievement that creates pride and positive identity.

Procedures that enable people to endure pain involve the control of its duration and intensity. The intensity of pain is restricted through self-infliction by experienced

practitioners or infliction through a trusted partner. An important way to control duration is rhythm, which also facilitates a trancelike state that can provide an additional internal incentive to the practitioner. It is a two-pronged approach in which the procedure (that involves trance) and the product (a positive identity) can be incentives for an individual to endure pain.

In a reciprocal relationship affect is product and/or cause for cognition. Cognition, in turn, establishes denotation and thereby provides context. While affective dynamics describe general mechanics of change, context provides the specific interpretation chosen to facilitate the change. It is, therefore, not surprising that the same physical act (e.g, the suspension on flesh hooks) receives profoundly different interpretive frames that facilitate the redefinition of physical pain. Since trance states are induced by sexuality or spirituality, they rehearse social events creating rituals that stabilize their institutional origin. Rituals not only enable practitioners to detach and enter a trancelike state, they also involve religion or sexuality that organizes or frames (Goffman [1974] 1986) the experience.

Depending on the frame introduced through the attachment to different institutional contexts, pain will be interpreted as spiritual or sexual achievement. Juxtaposing the extremely different frames of sexuality and religion helps to identify the general mechanics involved in the rendering of pain into pleasure.

Control <REM> #1 Head</REM>

Pain induces the production of endorphin, an endogenous morphinelike peptide that, as an inhibitory neurotransmitter, modulates the perception of pain within the central nervous system (Boecker et al. 2008). Physiologically, pain hereby creates an altered state of mind that social-psychologically can be seen as an event that begs for new interpretations and actions to control the situation.

The first concern people have about pain is its intensity. Pain is hard to control when its intensity is unpredictable. Self-inflicted pain and the infliction of pain by a trusted and trained source make the level of pain more predictable. The second concern is the duration of pain. Sudden and extended pain is unpredictable and hard to tame. Self-inflicted pain is easier to predict than other-inflicted pain. An alternative is an established team with high level of trust. The scheduling of pain increases the predictability and creates rhythm. Rhythm that is used to control the duration of pain induces trance, a mental state conducive to the redefinition of pain.

Foucault_[GFB1] ([1975]1995:149) stated that monastic communities were central in the implantation of rigorous *time-tables* that established rhythm in daily life. “The temporal elaboration of the act” ([1975]1995:151) was established in the military through the rhythm of the drum. Rhythm “is a ‘programme’; it assures the elaboration of the act itself; it controls its development and its stages from the inside”(152). Rhythm is the basis for disciplinary control of others and oneself. Repetition and rhythm govern the self-infliction of pain, or the teamwork that serves the infliction of pain.

Pain as an altered state of mind was historically used by the Inquisition to make the accused believe in the reality of illusions like having had intercourse with the devil. As organizations give structure to the action of individuals, rhythm structures the altered state that we might call trance. Just as the structure of organizations can induce action in the individual, rhythm can be used to start the process of altering the state of mind, to fall into trance.

Affective Dynamics of Change<REM> #1 Head</REM>

My description of the process by which pain is mastered and rendered into achievement follows Affect Control Theory (ACT), a symbolic interactionist approach that rests on the insight that language and the symbolic labeling of situations are of primary importance for the explanation of human action. ACT describes processes underlying identity change (Heise 2007; Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988) and the connection of emotion and identity (MacKinnon 1994) as a cybernetic model of affect control (Schneider and Heise 1995).

ACT replicates cultural norms by using empirical measures of our processing of affective meanings and hereby provides a generative model of culture that explains how people react to situations that they have not encountered before (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2006).

Following the *Gestalt* idea implemented in Heider's balance theory that we want to make sense out of this world as well as Mead's American pragmatism that sees humans as developing working understandings of reality, ACT interprets human motivation of action as an effort to maximize the perceived likelihood of an event. If events strike us

unlikely we engage in reinterpretations by labeling the actor or object of the event, the attribution of emotions or traits, or by rendering perceived actions. Alternative to these reinterpretations we engage in corrective actions that account for deviations and hereby produce normative events that appear more likely. Reinterpretations and actions are control principles that make ACT a cybernetic version of symbolic interactionism (Schneider forthcoming).

Individuals create events to confirm sentiments they have about themselves and about the current situation. People are active agents in the management of their identity (Goffman 1959). Invalidation of identity will be resolved by enacting compensating identities. In this process, individuals perform social roles that imply institutional context. The management of emotions as a source of self-esteem is intimately connected with the management of identity. Hereby emotions reflect both the sentiments about an identity and the validation or invalidation of the identity achieved in the event. The assumption of individuals as being centrally motivated by making sense of their social world and hereby creatively choosing interpretations and actions within normative limits is a fundamental assumption shared by ACT and by Goffman's interpretation of the presentation of self in everyday life. ACT allows two essential ways for the "The Management of Spoiled Identity" (Goffman 1963). First, ACT investigates the assessment of deviation and the compensation necessary for the discreditable to pass as normal – a central mechanism for the information control of the deviant. The second principle is implied in Goffman's concept of the tension management available to the one that transforms himself or herself from a discreditable to a discredited person: the possibility to render meaning of identities

and actions to be in line with interpretations of deviant subcultures. ACT has a measurement model that empirically describes the cultural meanings that define the component of events and the change that these components experience through the reinterpretation of the event. Sentiments in an event are represented cognitively as symbolic descriptions and affectively as gut reaction. Affect and cognition are flipsides of the same coin, the sentiment. Affective reactions will trigger cognitive interpretations and cognitions will be represented affectively. In this recursive relation affective responses are more immediate than cognitive reflections. Osgood (1962) identified three dimensions of affective response: evaluation (E), potency (P), and activity (A) as fundamentally central for the definition and measurement of affective meaning – evaluation and potency being the most dominant dimensions. Semantic differential scales measure the evaluation (good or bad and bad or awful), potency (big or little and powerful or powerless), and activity (fast or slow and young or old) on a scale reaching from -4.33 to 4.33 (Francis and Heise 2006). In my following description I simplify empirical measures on the EPA dimensions as --, -, +- (neutral), +, and ++. Following this simplified scaling, *pain* is described with an EPA profile of E -- (very unpleasant), P+ (potent), and A++ (very active). I use these simplified EPA profiles as a descriptive to explain the control of pain as an achievement that results in self-esteem, the construction of positive self-identity, and the consequent reinterpretation of pain.

Turning the active (A++) and annoying (E--) sensation of pain into a positive (E+) experience is a potent (P++) measure, a skill for which people are admired (E++). The individual will experience self-esteem and hence take a more positive identity. These

dynamics work from the individual perspective as well as from the social perspectives of the observers. Following the looking-glass-self idea, ACT and symbolic interactionism in general assume that creating self-meaning is a reflective process in which the person sees himself or herself through the eyes of the other. The observer of the individual's achievement to endure pain will attribute this achievement to the individual and assign an identity that accounts for the attribution. In the assignment of an identity, the institutional context will be relevant for both, the practitioner and the observer. People who turn pain into a demonstration of belief, as in religion, are *saints* (E++, P++, A+-). People who turn pain into joy and thrill, as in sexual practice, are *lovers* (E++, P++, A+).²

The cover image is a close-up that depicts a flagellant trotting single-file in a group of four. The rhythmic noise is accentuated by more than twenty wooden tips of the whip. He is passing dense curtains of audience right before the end of the procession that is marked by three crosses on a small hill. The image puts forward the awe and respect that the flagellant earns from its audience. Enduring the *pain* (E--, P+, A+-) that he rhythmically inflicts upon himself, the flagellant sees himself in an act of highest *devotion* (E++, P++, A+) to his Catholic beliefs. The image provides an example of a powerful *authority* figure (E++, P++, A+-), a member of the elite paramilitary police, standing in *awe* (E+, P++, A+-) and *respect* (E++, P++, A-) in response to the flagellant's performance. The audience supports the positive interpretation of pain as achievement, and it provides the

² With the exception of *pain* estimates of descriptive EPA profiles provided for italicized concepts are based on empirical ratings of male and female US undergraduates provided in the database of Francis and Heise (2006). The EPA profile for *pain*, which was not rated, is a descriptive estimate.

institutional frame in which the performer can take the identity of a *saint*-like person (E++, P++, A+-).

Meanings of descriptive EPA profiles are culture-specific. Members of the mainstream culture who become outside observers of self-flagellation will misunderstand the flagellant identity, whose meaning emerges from a subcultural context framed by an alien institutional context. As nonparticipants we might be shocked, puzzled, or at best curious. The policeman in the picture, however, obviously understands the identity of the flagellant constructed in the subcultural perspective that is shaped by the local interpretation of Catholicism. As an audience that shares the frame of the performer, he is not only an observer, but a supporter of the flagellant identity. It is the understanding audience that provides the reflection for the looking-glass self of the performer.

Institutional Context<REM> #1 Head</REM>

In the crucifixions, flagellations, and canings that I observed in the Philippines the attachment to Catholicism provided the frame that was reproduced in the religious procession. While self-flagellation could be performed in solitude, it was socially induced and supported. The popular crucifixions and the rare and less spectacular whippings and canings clearly raise the need for consensus and teamwork, properties that are also central in sado-masochistic practices. Very much like in Oberammergau (Bavaria, Germany), where the Passion Play was introduced in 1633, the community is involved in the organization of the event and provides the actors for the spectacle. In both locations religious practices provide social cohesion for the community and the community

supports the frame for the process in which pain is rendered through control into a positive experience of achievement.

While institutional context provides the frame that people use in the redefinition of pain, the rendering of pain is an affective process. In this process the individual's control of intensity and duration of pain becomes an achievement that transforms a negative and potent affective experience into an equally potent but positive affective state. Reflected in identities like *saints* or *lovers*, these potent positive affective states become stabilized as identities that in turn support the institutions that initially provided the context. Identity, practice, and institution share a frame that supports the recursive relationship between these three basic elements of an event. Since we take the contextual connection for granted, we tend to overlook the communalities that I have identified in the frames of religion and sexuality.

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