

Child Violence

The Screen Language of the Mind: Learning and Unlearning Emotional and Semantic Disturbances

Abstract

It is my hypothesis that sustained arousal leads to a habituation for arousal while simultaneously desensitizing prior arousal stimuli, conditioning emotional disturbances, giving rise to semantic distortions necessary and appropriate for the rationalization of behavior, altering brain chemistry and thereby producing bi-polar tendencies and other mental health issues among the mass of “average ordinary” people. Further, the intensity in the environment of distortions (emotional and semantic), particularly with respect to the media, can be used to predict the distortions in the “normal” person, and with an increase in magnitude, the violence among young people today.

Introduction

From the outset I wish to note it is my opinion that emotional disturbances are more or less equal to semantic distortions. For simplicity, it could be written this way: ED SD where ED refers to emotional disturbance and SD to semantic distortion. Further, there exists today a direct linear relationship between the development of semantic distortions and the ever-increasing mental disorders in our modern society, particularly among the youth. The sheer numbers of disturbed young people carrying out the most violent of acts is especially frightening.

It was my original intention to deal primarily with distortions in this paper. However, the tragedy at Columbine High School followed by the hundreds of so-called copycat acts urged me to expand the article in order to show the relationship between arousal threshold manipulation, emotional disorders and semantic distortions.

History

Violence among young people is not new. What is relatively new is the degree and type of violence. Two ten-year-old boys kill a five-year-old child in the United Kingdom. The taking of the child is captured on surveillance video. If this type of act occurred a hundred years ago, it was rare and the world generally did not know of it. Today it happens with an alarming frequency and/or the media makes society much more aware--probably some of both. Indeed, criminal “copycat” acts are more prevalent in the modern culture of instantaneous 24-hour news than would have been possible in times past.

Recorded violence among young people is increasing, of that there is no dispute. The type of violence is also becoming more and more sensational, of that too there is no dispute. Where drive-by shootings have faded into the background of society as

something to be expected (a sort of “normal” youth violence, albeit undesirable), mass killings in the school have not yet reached the public saturation point which leads to the acquiescence now prevalent regarding the so-called drive-by violence.

In 1993 Gary Scott Pennington, age 17, killed 2 students in Grayson, Kentucky. In January of 1995, John Sirola, age 13, killed one and left one more wounded in Redlands, California. In October of 1995, Toby Sincino, age 16, killed 3 in Blackville, South Carolina. In November of 1995, Jamie Rouse, age 17, left two dead and one wounded in Lynnville, Tennessee. In February of 1996, Barry Loukaitais of Moses Lake, Washington, age 14, left 3 dead and one wounded. In February of 1997, Evan Ramsey, age 16, killed two and wounded two more in Bethel, Alaska. Luke Woodham, age 16, killed three and wounded seven in Pearl, Missouri, during his October ‘97 rampage. In December of 1997, Michael Carneal, age 14, brought the violence back to Kentucky when he killed three and wounded five more in Paducah. In December of ‘97 Joseph Colt Todd, age 14, wounded two in Stamps, Arkansas. In March of 1998, Mitchell Johnson and Drew Golden of Jonesboro, Arkansas, ages 13 and 11, respectively, killed five and wounded ten. Andrew Wurst of Edinboro, Pennsylvania, age 14, killed one and left three wounded in April of 1998. In May of 1998, Kipland Kinkel, age 15, killed four and wounded twenty-three in Springfield, Oregon. In April of 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, ages 18 and 17, respectively, killed fifteen including themselves, and injured 23 at Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado, in the bloodiest to date school shooting.

DATE	AGE	NO. KILLED	NO. INJURED
1993	17	2	
1995	13	1	1
1995	16	3	
1995	17	2	1
1996	14	3	1
1997	16	2	2
1997	16	3	7
1997	14	3	5
1997	14		2
1998	13/11	5	10
1998	14	1	3
1998	15	4	23
1999	18/17	15	23

There are other school threats and shootings not listed above. Indeed, according to a story by NBC correspondent, Pete Williams, over 6000 students are expelled from school each year for carrying weapons to school. (1999). Additionally, within the first thirty days following Columbine, the “copycat” threat intensified with student boasts, threats and additional violence around America.

Killings in the schools by students, acts of barbaric proportion perpetrated by students upon students and teachers, are now a part of American history. In my opinion, the

violence will only increase even if the schoolhouse becomes an institution known more for its maximum security than for its educational and socialization role.

What's happening? Guns are the current scapegoat. Yet, guns are not new. Behavioral scientists offer profiles; however, they too are not new.

Profiles of a School Shooter

School killers do not stand out as potentially more dangerous than most of their classmates. They are typically Caucasian males from a blue collar to middle class socio-economic range. Their average age is 15. They are physically healthy with average to above average intelligence, normal cognitive functions, including those of memory, attention, concentration, and concept formation, and they show no evidence of blatant mental disorders. (McGee, J.P. and DeBernardo, C.R., 1999).

Forensic specialists suggest that the school killer is an avenger, with a rigid cognitive style characterized by all or nothing thinking, bored by normal adolescent pastimes, likely to come from homes where the prevailing emotion is anger and hostility and the mode of discipline is harsh and inconsistent, with a personal history of temper tantrums and deep sibling rivalries, a "my life sucks attitude" that is also suspicious of others' motives, lacking a stable self image, and likely to engage in more deviant sexual practices. (McGee, J.P. and DeBernardo, C.R., 1999).

Historically the school shooter is a loner who comes from a smaller community. He has been ridiculed by classmates, peers and family. He senses a lack of love and an intolerability of existence. He may suffer an affective disorder and find himself unable to bond with others. His moods may vacillate between bi-polar absolute worthlessness and a super superior form of self-aggrandizement. In the words of James Gabarino, "Nothing seems to threaten the human spirit more than rejection, brutalization, and the lack of love. Nothing--not physical deformity, not debilitating illness, not financial ruin, not academic failure--can equal insults to the soul. Nothing compares to this profound assault on the psyche." (1999).

Probability Variables

With the increasing juvenile violence, particularly that in our public schools, the question everywhere is, "Will it continue? Will there be more?" As indicated earlier, in my opinion, the answer is an overwhelming YES--unless.... However, in order to properly answer the question, a predictive capacity must exist; an instrument, a method of measurement, a means of analysis, and so forth. In order to predict, one must first have some theoretical framework that, at least arguably, provides an explanation for the behavior and gives some insight into the past. If this framework fits well with historical fact and possesses explanatory power, then a theory may evolve that gives rise to predictive ability.

Theoretical Framework

Education for the extended maturation of the young is about self-empowerment and this implies self-discovery. All self-discovery methods, self-empowerment means and goals, are inherently tied up in the meaning of words. This should be obvious, but it is not always so. Our language is built on words. Words have meanings, and where we should all agree on the meanings, we often don't.

All forms of self-improvement, including the rather tight area we refer to as education, seek to alter our self image (verbal descriptions of ourselves and often our environment). These methods are diverse and may involve everything from eye movement to body posture. Nevertheless, the aim is to somehow replace a shabby or partially broken opinion about oneself with a mended healthy life view. This healthy self-image is provided in part by the acquisition of skills gained in the classroom. The aim of all teachers should include providing both the factual and theoretical material in a context that has meaning and adds value to the individual. These aims are a product of communication, the bulk of which falls on words, both literally and interpretive. Words that must provide both information content and meaning. Words that must prime confidence and build esteem.

What's In A Word?

Years ago I wrote a piece titled *Sticks and Stones Will Break My Bones but Words Will Slice and Dice Me*. (Taylor, E., 1988). The thrust of the article bared a penetrating conclusion: words do more damage than things to most people in our culture. It's not the sanitary word itself, Webster's definition, that's damaging or fearful, it's the emotive value attached to words.

It's easy to note the fear of many when it comes to words of rejection, words that make fun of people or are excessively and inappropriately critical, words that condemn, words that are negative labels such as ugly, stupid, loser, failure, and so forth. Words, however, have still other emotional domains that they either anchor, or that are like search words in a web browser, when inputted they trigger a host of related sites stored deep in one's memory. Indeed, due largely to our educational system and culture, most words can be said to have values. Think about it, even so-called innocuous descriptors such as color, have value attached. Some colors are preferred over others, some colors are simply obnoxious, and for some, an emotional disturbance or trauma can be connected to a color.

Our thinking system is such that we all have been taught relative values and judgements that are reflected in our description of everything we know about ourselves and the world around us. For most, at least in our culture, words are generally thought to be at least capable of accurately describing the world of shoes and ships and sealing wax, including ourselves, our feelings, our thoughts, and of course, our reasons.

Our world is so dependent upon words, semantics, that it is hard to imagine thinking without them. Indeed, thinking seems to presuppose semantic possibilities; after all, how else would we ever be able to communicate or understand our thinking? Even the images

in our dreams are thought to be better understood when we can explain them. So dominant is this thinking priority, this semantic communication necessity, that a failure to be able to linguistically communicate an idea, a feeling, an urge, an intuition, an image, a sense, etc., is thought to be the result of either inadequate education or basic genetic equipment. After all, where would we be if we couldn't ask such meaningful questions as, "What did that mean to you?" How did that make you feel? What do you mean by that? Describe the sense or feeling or image or how do you know it's a valid intuition and not just fanciful thinking?

Not only is our world known through semantics, linguistic communication with self and others, it is modeled by each of us in just this same way. Now to say that knowing the world through words is quite different than knowing the world through actual sensing participation is just obvious and trite. To say knowing oneself, or better still, modeling oneself and one's behavior through this same word lens should be even more conspicuously ridiculous. Still, for most, it is precisely through the lens of words that both self and the world are known.

We know much more than we know, at least about ourselves. We all came into this world knowing how to naturally sense our environment, how to explore and provide honest feedback about our feelings, how to allow our imaginations to just deliver intuitions and images without challenge, and then to feel them for that value alone. Ah, but alas, we all learned to be educated and to cherish thinking, not just free thinking, but thinking according to the taught order of correct thinking (e.g. mathematics, logic, etc.). Once the rules of thinking were learned we were graded on our ability to reproduce the method in our every walk and talk of life, including how we talk to ourselves.

One day, incorporating our learned methods of thinking with our acquired meanings or values to events and words, we subverted our natural selves to the higher order of being what we should be--unnatural. Our extended dependent maturation made us particularly vulnerable to basic needs such as protection and nourishment, and therefore, additionally vulnerable to supplanting ourselves with the personification of what was expected, what was accepted, what was tolerated, what brought reward and avoided punishment. To that extent, even in rebellion, we formed a bond with a self that was perhaps alien to our true selves. Moreover, we anchored all of this emotional memory in, and with words, and then we explained ourselves using a socially acceptable vocabulary such as, "It's okay to get even." This only further masked our real feelings (insecurities such as fear and isolation) while encouraging additional distortions. Of course, there was always the alternative--outright rejection; albeit, this too is a distorted perspective. For many this distortion translates into a poor self-image, "I'm no good." My research with the criminally incarcerated suggests there is yet another step or level to this kind of distortion, the step from high self-alienation to and including high social alienation. When this occurs, the self-image is verbalized more like this, "I'm no good and neither are you. You [people like you] did it to me. You [someone] made me this way."

As semantic descriptions (sd) are built, semantic reactions or responses (SR) are encoded and a semantic belief (SB) system is coherently hinged, to the degree that coherence is

possible within the rules of thinking as we have learned them. When incoherence is obvious, a defense mechanism is employed to mask the failure, and semantic distortions (SD) are created. The outside world, together with the inside world, has at this point become more or less a series of semantic anchors (SA) composed of sd, SD, SR, and SB, all seamed together like a fisherman's net with semantic references definitionally reinforcing each other.

Our world, to use the words of Alfred Korzybski, has now become, perhaps more often than any sane person would like to admit, false to fact and therefore necessarily distorted. As Korzybski puts it, paraphrased here, the difference between sanity and insanity can be found in false to fact distortions that are semantic in nature (1994). Ergo, it is precisely the mechanism of semantic distortions that underlies thinking processes that are or become neurotic or psychotic. It is also this very same mechanism that gives rise to self-sabotaging behavior and self-limiting beliefs. This very same mechanism, and mechanism is a good word since the process becomes so automatic that it operates without conscious awareness, martials our defenses to action whenever our sd, SD, SR and SB are challenged. In fact, the unconscious pervasiveness of the mechanistic nature of these sd, SD, SR and SB is such that, even the most knowledgeable of specialists on the matter must maintain a constant vigil to guard against them. This may explain why an individual can be very successful in a given field and fail miserably in another.

Our language usage, the value and meaning one attaches to words, can literally blind rational thinking. One could effectively argue that genius escapes this language barrier, in order to be genius, to go beyond the boundaries, to see the common differently, to gain a perspective not formerly found. Our world not only assigns values to words but insists on a sort of "isness" property that is somehow supposed to give the word an existence of its own. The label, noun, becomes the thing. The verb may even vicariously become the action.

We all can be fooled by word propositions that address definitional meanings, isness and rules, the so called logic of our methods and use, or should I say misuse, of language and thinking. A theist could argue that God is all-powerful while the atheist might refute this claim with a question such as, "Can God create a stone so large He can't lift it?" Word traps and their confusion can and literally have led to many atrocities.

It's easy to forget the nature of personal truth when it masquerades in an argument of reason. Logic and linguistics make assertions about many things that are simply false to facts. For example, a gallon is equal to a gallon. This is simply not true. Not true from many perspectives including the most obvious. A gallon of water added to a gallon of alcohol does not equal two gallons of combined fluid. Ergo, $1 + 1 = 2$ is not necessarily so of the "real" world. No two things are alike in every way. Additionally, it is not possible to know the so-called "total" of anything. Words are not the things they represent and what they are supposed to represent is much more, and much less, than could ever be written. Indeed, as has been said many times, probably in its most noteworthy form by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "whatever we say about

something, it is also not that.” (1967). Words are not things and word things such as a griffin do not necessarily exist.

Behavioral scientists basically agree that there are four basic drives: fight, flight, feeding and the propagation of the species. In order for a drive to operate there must be an underlying urge, even urgency, what I shall just call arousal. There are different thresholds of arousals relative to differing stimuli. Often the threshold requirement is met without conscious awareness. William James asserted over fifty years ago that we see a bear, run, and are afraid. (1884 and 1890) For years this statement was criticized. We see a bear, consciously determine that it is life threatening, and then flee. Fear followed our conscious comprehension of the threat. Modern research shows rather clearly that the fact is just as James described it. But then, for years students were also taught the so-called limbic system as the emotional center of the brain. Today, the best of modern technology has failed to locate any such limbic system or center, at least as described. In fact, one of the preeminent scientists in the field, Joseph LeDoux, flatly insists that there is no such thing. LeDoux’s research clearly suggests that most, if not all, emotional memories, for that matter, emotion itself, is amygdala dependent. (1996). “Good old cortex,” as one of my teachers, Professor Carl LePrecht, used to put it, “is at its best when inhibiting a response.”

Cortical inhibition works well when the system is rational. However, since almost all cortical inhibition is word driven, irrational SA, supported by SD and irrational SB, not only fails to properly inhibit an irrational emotional response but, indeed, only further distorts or reinforces the existing SD.

The human condition needs arousal. To paraphrase John Kappas, modern man has chiefly substituted fight and flight for anxiety and depression. Words produce anxiety and certainly can lead to depression (1978). Words spoken by another and words spoken to ourselves. For many, sd is more often SD (distortion rather than descriptions). The arousal level necessary to produce chronic anxiety and clinical depression requires a semantic distortion. True fight/flight responses are rare for most in today’s society, but if they do not really exist in the neighborhood, then they can easily be fulfilled from our entertainment. Vicariously experiencing some outrage and revenge is what much of our television, videos and movies are all about. Violence, sex, arousal--that’s entertainment.

Where feeding and breeding are concerned, everyone recognizes quite readily the required arousal stimuli. What is most interesting to me is to watch the threshold of arousal in our day and age seem to systematically require more and more stimuli. A patient suffering from anorexia-bulimia is a classic example of one with SD. (Semantic distortions therefore fail us in some real descriptive way and thereby handicap how we judge some. It also suggests that semantic distortions are emotional).

SR are further distorted given that the human condition has both a need for arousal and that today it is virtually immersed in a constantly ever more stimulating arousal oriented environment. It should come as no surprise that our society is built more on irrational expectations and threshold needs than ever in recorded history. Our semantic responses

(SR) are systematically altered by the combined effects of our arousal need (AN) and our increasing arousal threshold (AT) as effected by our semantic expectations and environment (SE). The impeachment of Bill Clinton is evidence of at least one aspect of this interactive function. The daily discussions of oral sex and other acts, as nationally televised, were to many disgusting, titillating and outrageous. To some, they were all of these things at the same time. The charges seemed, to most, to stem from a pernicious investigation that entered into an area believed to be personal and private. Today there is nothing outrageous about the reporting and little concern about the acts that led to the news story. The early sensationalism gone, what remains is the damage in the psyche of the mind and in the precedent allowed investigators, journalists and so-called spin meisters. Without this desensitization, it is highly unlikely that NBC would have aired the alleged rape story, which although apparently could not be disproved by NBC, could not also be proven. My point is neither political nor moral, it is rather an illustration of how easy and quickly our SR can be manipulated, or conditioned, by our environment. The media creates much of our environment through the images portrayed of adventuresome heroes, comely lasses, romantic encounters, sexual fantasies, and the like. It also operates on us, in just this same way, through less obvious means such as the news or the latest so-called health report which itself is designed to create the expectation of illness and sell the remedy. After all, this all only reflects the “normal” condition of the average person--doesn't it?

What is normal? Perhaps Karen Horney describes normal in her book title, *The Neurotic Personality of our Time* (1993). Perhaps as Robert Laing suggests in his fabulous work, *The Politics of Experience*, the condition of the normal man is one of self alienation, where he loses himself in order to become normal (1967). We do live in challenging times. Violence, sex and feeding are just as dominant today as ever. However, in my view, a fifth force has been added. Today we want more. More and more and more--more sex, more violence, more scare, more thrill, more things, more of everything. I don't want to admit that for myself, let alone find a single kernel of truth in the statement. Yet, deep down, I know that for me, it is often true. I am aware of my need to constantly defend against the input of ever increasing changes in semantic relationships, ranging from arousal stimuli to definitional impingements, on feeling and thinking.

Is it possible to arrange all of this in a series of simple relationships? I think so and I think it might also be helpful. To that end, here goes: $SA \gg SB$ and $SD \approx SB \& SR \approx SD$. Therefore: $SR \approx f(SD) \approx f(SB)$. Arousal Need and Arousal Threshold are “hard wired” in the species and then interpreted and reinterpreted according to semantic conditioning (SC). Since the threshold must, by definition, be approximately equal to the need for there to be an arousal, we could say $AT \approx AN$ and SR, SD and SB are functions (f) of SC. Further, we should rightly conclude that the manipulation of AT and AN vary proportionally with SC. As such, we can therefore say $SC \propto \Delta AT \approx \Delta AN$ or semantic conditioning is an increment of arousal threshold which is approximately equal to arousal need. (This direct and at least initially linear process can be taken much further, although for the central purposes in this paper, it is unnecessary. Still, for those involved in semantic correction, a sort of one, two, three formulation is provided as an addendum).

It is worthy of noting something often overlooked in the literature. The so-called drives of the human condition (fight, flight, feeding and breeding) are reward-related functions. That is, the reward for escaping danger is a sort of high, the reward for winning in battle can be manifold despite the wounds that may be suffered, the reward for feeding can be as simple as a feeling of fulfillment or much more complex, and the reward for breeding needs no discussion. The point is this: the system is rewarded for responding to drive related needs. Any so-called punishment that may follow is not a wired in necessity, like the neuro-chemical response that follows from danger. For example, eating brings the pleasurable feelings of taste and fulfillment, which are purely biological. Any accompanying feelings of guilt related to food are due to societal impositions. It could be argued that over-eating brings its biological punishment, but like the systematic desensitization to violence and horror, the body adjusts and is generally able to consume more. The combined forces of biological adjustment and SD can often be seen hand in hand as with our earlier anorexia/bulimia example. This is important, particularly when trying to understand why the human condition seems so driven toward such things as violence and violent entertainment. The answer is obvious and simple, the human animal finds reward in these things. Just as a bungy jumper finds the thrill addicting, a marathon runner may find the pain addicting. The fact is, the human animal is made in such a way that the brain will adjust, compensate, and produce pleasure. Indeed, evolution has provided a selective advantage in the human animal to the confrontation of fear and fear accompanies all drives as the polar opposite to reward.

There are always opposites. Fear is an interesting emotion, particularly within the context of the human animal, for only this animal seeks out fear experiences. The human animal is also probably the only animal that fears the future. Humans have the cognitive ability to wonder and worry about such things as death, dying, mutilation, and so forth. It is this very ability that leads the human to explore the limits of their fear threshold.

All animals have evolved to react to danger. The brain learns from experience. This learning is a part of the preparedness required to both succeed and survive. Throughout nature, mock battles between young illustrate at least one level of the built-in need to learn and prepare. It would seem that the human urge to meet and challenge danger (fear) is both totally natural and adaptive. The survival basis of evolution is based on adaptation. The fit adapt. It's easy to imagine an early band of humans confronted by danger. It's as easy to imagine a leader emerging willing to confront the danger. In fact, it's difficult to conceive of human evolution complete with most, if not all, of its early technological advances, devoid of this danger force.

The modern human practices facing fear, just as our ancestors did. Instead of ritual dances and rites of passage, perhaps we indulge in horror movies, play violent virtual games, join motivational fire walks, and so on. The important point here is that the human condition is essentially driven to explore and practice fear responses. Equally important is the evidence that the primitive brain responds to synthetically produced danger just as it would to a real danger, despite our various so-called "protective frames" that inform modern brain, cortex, the danger is synthetic. The amygdala reacts, blood

pressure and cardio functions alter, skin conductivity changes, body temperature drops, etc. Further, the brain usually rewards the danger/play with euphoria.

Now all of this is not as tangential to SDs as it might initially appear. The built in desire, which exists in the human to explore and evaluate fear thresholds, literally frames much of a child's development and underpins a large part of society's entertainment, recreation and identification. It is this identification with which the semantic environment enters.

A well known theory originally set forth by Robert Ardrey (1966) known as the territorial imperative, asserts the need all animals have to establish a space that serves basically two needs: center and boundary. The center is the place of family, nourishing, rest, etc. while the boundary is the limiting edge of that space. Research has repeatedly shown that an animal behaves differently within their boundary than when on the outside. While within the boundary, a territorial aggressiveness is portrayed, but when on the outside, a non-assertive, non-aggressive posture and action is assumed. Territorial fish have actually been demonstrated to literally change from aggressive to non-aggressive as they were moved about in an aquarium. The so-called dominant became non-dominant when in another's territory.

Eligio Stephen Gallegos makes an interesting and compelling argument. He insists the human ego has its territory, a non-physical yet very real territory. In his book, *Animals of the Four Windows* (1996), he puts it this way, "In the structure of a human identity we find such similar dimensions and functions that I can only conclude that the substructure of identity is territoriality. However, in the human identity words and concepts have come to play a dominant role a bounding elements around conceptual space. This is what I call a conceptual territory."

Conceptual territories often occupy nearly the same space. Take for example a modern crowded High School. Many students fill the halls, share lockers, bump into each other on the stairways, push and shove each other and compete for attention, peer acceptance and grades. Each student has their own ego (conceptual territory) and their need to both assert and protect their boundaries. If SDs form the basis of the territory, then violations of that same territory may well be met with extreme or irrational defenses. Due to much of the current violence in schools and the work place, it is imperative and essential that this conceptual territoriality is understood. It cannot be understood without first coming to grips with the nature of distortions underpinning the semantic content that defines the territory. In other words, the verbal account of self is a territory. This verbal account sets out the boundaries. Gallegos believes that language may have evolved for largely this purpose. In his words, "It is also possible that thinking itself originated from the establishment of territories. After all, the territory is a kind of abstraction that is in fact created by the animal and his relationship to that terrain; it does not exist as a separate entity in itself. In treating this space as an entity the animal is in fact thinking, although not in words. . . Perhaps language as a coherently interrelated aggregation of sounds had a lengthy origin in the animal's need to announce and protect a territory." (1996)

Just as with any animal, the edge of an identified territory would be a place of constant potential danger and threat. This would of course produce an ever-alert state that may well give rise to some simple explanations as to why some people take innocent comments as threats. Further, however one describes themselves, a polar opposite exists. If the description is strong, then weak opposes it. Wherever there is opposition, there can be a need to defend. A proud mother describes herself to a new acquaintance as a full time mother. The acquaintance responds with a comment such as, "I went to college so I work at the hospital." Proud Mother becomes defensive, "I graduated from college. I choose to be a mother." This first meeting is headed down hill fast unless someone is alert to the nature of semantic distortions (SDs) and boundary defenses (territoriality).

The overcrowding, the lack of loving attention, the semantic disturbances, all of this and more, combined with overtly sought out thrill/arousal stimuli, and the result can be thought of as a stress induced response. But then, what is the role of stress in our context?

The Role of Stressors and Thrillers

A heightened state of arousal is a state of stress. Arguably, the state described as "My life sucks," is a chronic state of stress. It is a state that requires constant vigilance in order to defend the right to live which is, if nothing else, the evolutionary biological prime directive. Unfortunately, one of the more pervasive aspects of stress within the individual and society at large is denial. This is, in part, because stress is easily misunderstood. That may sound strange, but the fact is, stress impacts everyone in some way, yet it is often unrecognized and more often ignored. After all, everyone has a little stress in their lives--don't they?

Stress leads an attack on the immune system. A simple cold or flu often follows a stressful event. This is not a coincidence. Let stress accumulate over a long period of time and there is nothing simple about the kinds of diseases that have been linked to immune system failures. Ignore it, deny it, and everything undesirable from immune failures to complete nervous breakdowns are possible.

Here are some facts about stress:

1. Stressful stimuli (stressors) lead to the "stress response" which is an excitation or arousal of the central nervous system (CNS) and this raises the activity in the CNS.
2. Stressors may summate where the total sum of stressors lead to a suppression of the immune and endocrine system.
3. The stress response initially affects the discharge of sympathetic neurons and the secretion of catecholamines and later the increased level in cortisol (perhaps a tail off affect).
4. Increased levels of cortisol have been dramatically linked to everything from memory loss to the destruction of selected brain cells.

5. The summation and accumulation of so-called ordinary stress can lead to a helpless and hopeless attitude which itself negatively influences the immune system to say nothing of its potentiation of heightened anxiety or depression.
 6. Some stressors are actually “thrillers” depending upon the human context in which they are viewed. Thrillers can aggregate with stressors.
 7. Stress affects and influences behavior, sometimes toward inhibition (fear and anxiety) and in the opposite direction (anger and hostility).
 8. Stress uses energy. It can deplete energy levels leaving one exhausted even upon waking after a night's sleep.
 9. From serious psychiatric disorders, including bi-polar and affective personality disorders, to simple acne, stress is a disrupter.
 10. Accumulated stressors and/or thrillers lead to a continued state of heightened arousal which in turn fundamentally alters brain chemistry, of particular interest in this context, corticosteroids (most important of which is cortisol) and the catecholamines epinephrine and norepinephrine.
- (Stanford, S.C and Salmon, P., 1993)

According to the cognitive approach in psychology, there are temperamental and cognitive vulnerability factors that exacerbate the effect of continued arousal. They are:

1. A strong desire to convey a favorable impression and marked insecurity about doing so.
2. A fear of behaving in an unacceptable fashion.
3. A belief that an unfavorable impression will lead to catastrophic consequences in terms of loss of status and rejection. (Wells, A., and Clark, D.M., 1995).

According to Sullivan's compensation model of behavior, a certain portion of the population with the described vulnerability factors would naturally compensate for their perceived failure in the following self-expressed attitudinal manner:

1. The hell with them!
2. I'll show them--I'll really piss them off!
3. It doesn't matter, life sucks and then you die anyway! (Goleman, D. and Speeth, K., 1982)

These cognitions, distortions, have been categorized by Jennifer Campbell, as:

1. All or none thinking: matters of black or white only.
2. Over-generalization: concludes that because something happened once it will always occur.
3. Mental filter: choose the negative detail from any situation).
4. Disqualify the positive
5. Jumping to conclusions: usually involves so-called mind reading--I know what you think.
6. Magnification and minimization: exaggerating the negative and minimizing the positive.
7. Emotional reasoning: taking feelings as evidence of reality.
8. Should statements: creating unnecessary self-shame--I should have...

9. Labeling and mislabeling: using meaningless derogatory labels--semantic distortions.
10. Personalization: assuming the guilt or responsibility for events such as, when someone says "this room is too crowded," assuming they mean you should leave. (1999).

Where these descriptions are helpful, they can also be deceiving. For most of the elements, if not all, of those found in the profile of a school shooter, or the "at risk" characteristics for bi-polar or affective disorders, stress induced depression, continued states of anxiety, and so forth, could just as well fit some of the world's best leaders and thinkers. Indeed, according to many biographies, they do!

What then is the difference? Again, the difference is in the practiced killing and the semantic distortion. Justification has always been a motive or a defense mechanism for behavior. However, the type and means of justification have dramatically altered particularly since the arrival of the mass media and the so-called information age. Perhaps also, there is a difference in the social values that implicitly leads stereotypes and self concepts that are central to the affective constructs referred to by social psychologists as attitude and self esteem.

Fantasy Formation

It is not an aside to discuss a well known mechanism known as fantasy formation at this point. For as a stimulus is systematically increased leading to a new threshold which in turn requires an ever greater stimuli to meet arousal requirements, the accompany fantasy is also altered. That is, as everyone incorporates material suggested by outside sources in their fantasies, as the threshold of arousal changes so does the fantasy. Take for example sexual fantasies. The initial fantasy held before a sexual experience is greatly different than say the fantasy of an older male who has traveled the world. The experience of forming a fantasy, fantasizing about it, whether carried out or not, fundamentally changes the fantasy. Further, the introduction of ideas also fundamentally alters fantasy. The fantasy formation mechanism is such that in order for a fantasy to satisfy its basic definition, it must lead to arousal of some nature, even if the arousal is only a passing feeling of self gratification. The "copy cat" crime is an a priori example of how suggestion becomes intertwined with fantasy, which in turn all too often leads to the actual acting out of the fantasy.

The so-called vicarious experience that arouses anger, sex, revenge, etc., portrayed in entertainment is particularly dangerous when offered up with justification. It's natural for Rambo to seek revenge since he didn't draw first blood. Some people are just "natural born killers." When the fantasy has socially accepted framework, particularly that which leads to one's ability to blame something or someone else for the behavior, then the likelihood of the fantasy turning into some act is increased.

Much of what society accepts today as socially understandable in some overt or covert form, is truly socially unacceptable. However, a developing mind often fails to

discriminate between the socially understood and the socially okay, to say nothing of society's greater problem in failing to maintain more rigid social values in face of a free society.

Many years ago I was researching the influence of fear stimuli when presented subliminally. Together with a young researcher, we designed a pilot study that employed a polygraph measurement of blood pressure, galvanic skin response (GSR) and upper and lower breathing. Teenage subjects were divided into two groups. Both groups were informed that they would be hearing the gentle sounds of ocean waves for four minutes while their breathing, blood pressure and GSR were monitored. Both groups were informed that the reason for the study was to measure the effect of nature sounds on the relaxation response. The first group listened to ocean waves. The second group (the experimental group) listened to the same ocean soundtrack but with a message that repeated every 60 seconds. That message was, "Look out! Danger--danger--danger!"

Both groups were debriefed after the experiment. They had both been asked to watch their reverie and report their thoughts while sitting back, eyes closed, listening to the peaceful ocean sounds. Not only did the experimental group all have physical indications of stress as measured by the polygraph, but also their reverie differed from group one totally. Group one, which showed no physical signs of stress, reported almost unanimously peaceful scenes at the beach as their reverie. Whereas the experimental group reported violent scenes ranging from assault to war. Of particular note here is the nature of the reverie. The experimental subjects incorporated their own fantasies and fears in the reverie from the undetected and unknown "danger" stimulus. For example, one young man told us of how he saw himself in the jungles of Viet Nam killing the enemy. The Viet Nam era had long been over at the time of the experiment, but the movies were playing everywhere. (Taylor, E., 1995)

Fortunately, in post Columbine fashion, many people get this connection today. Therefore Congress may finally enact some responsible bill that precludes certain types of entertainment from being available to children. However, even if this happens and even if it is enforced by parents and others, the great mass of young people today have largely been overexposed to what we wish to protect tomorrow's children from. What about them? Additionally, not all forms of entertainment are even being considered. Children listen to music that literally instructs them to commit suicide or to act in other totally unacceptable ways. Some of this music has been taken to task in courtrooms only to be relieved of any and all responsibility on the basis of first amendment rights or some other less obvious consideration.

The Judas Priest case in Reno, Nevada, comes quickly to my mind. Two young troubled teenagers shot themselves in the head. One braced the shotgun and he died immediately. The other blew off the front of his face and his death came a few years later. There is no question about the fact that the boys played a particular song over and over again containing a subliminal command. There is also no question in this case as to the presence of the subliminal command, "Do it!" This command comes in the lyrics of a song that encourages suicide. Further, there is no question that there was no prior

knowledge about the command and yet both boys chanted "Do it" before taking their own lives. However, the Judas Priest group somehow successfully convinced a judge that there was no connection to the act and/or in the alternative, the subliminal command was a pure coincidence of sound. That is, where they admitted putting subliminal messages in some music, they denied doing so in this particular soundtrack. Since several subliminal messages were present and recovered for the Court, the explanation was a simple denial, asserting that when the soundtracks were mixed together, the vocal command occurred as only a coincidence of vocal noise.

The Judas Priest case is instructive in other ways. The mass media attacked the family, witnesses and attorneys who allegedly were only seeking personal gain from the poor picked on defendants, Judas Priest and their record company, CBS. Indeed, the Judge warned the attorneys for CBS with respect to what some have said was an outright manipulation of the press. Press management or press manipulation? The point is simple, the media has its interests, as does the politician, as does the entertainment industry, and so forth. It therefore becomes more of an individual responsibility for each member of society to look out for themselves, each other and their children. Perhaps the cynicism most hold for politics should paint a broader brush and include those informing us of the so-called "news."

An idea is a powerful thing. Ideas have revolutionized the world around us. Ideas are the stuff of thought. Ideas hold alternatives. Ideas can kindle passion. Passionate ideas can be irrational. Persistent irrational ideation leads to mental illness. Emotional disturbances are anchored by ideas that are experienced in irrational expressions. The word, the idea, the emotion, the passion, the fantasy formation, the justification, all lead a certain path to the outlet. Each outlet, each experience, compounds itself and changes the brain. In the words of Bruce Perry, "...to understand that the physical properties of neurons change with experience is crucial to understanding the concept of memory. Simply stated--the brain changes with experience--all experience, good and bad." (1999).

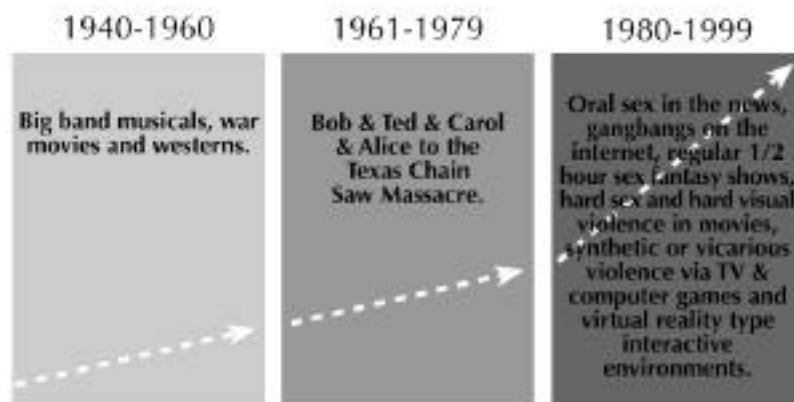
Discussion

Words as threats. Words as territorial imperatives. Words as self defining/self fulfilling boundaries (egos). Words to fight over. Words to inspire. Words leading reality- Lewis Carol and his "rosy colored lenses." Distorted words, distorted reality. Systematically distorted? Has the human condition come to a point in its history where the distorted is normal? Have young people become systematically desensitized to violence through constant exposure and framed distortion. Have identities been created around distorted perceptions of what it means to be male or female? Have film and entertainment, technology and information, unwittingly joined forces with primal drive functions in such a way as to reinforce distortions as desirable? One might think so when they think of the gross violence and senseless killings the United States has recently seen in its schools. Words define our territory, they describe our self image formed from experience and after models, they prompt our danger rehearsals, they both temper and enlarge our fears, they map, and in some ways, have become who we believe ourselves to be - - -our ego.

So, what's in a word? It seems that a great deal is in both a word and the words we choose to understand ourselves and the world around us. The words that go round and round in our heads, from the lyrics of songs to the self talk of doubt and fear, those are the words that mirror our beliefs, predict our responses, fulfill our needs, meet our arousal standards, in short, perhaps they are who we have become. Perhaps the "isness" of words is more similar to the "isness" of who some of us have become than we would like to think. Individually and as a society, our implicit acceptance of ideas, or values, goals and ambitions, stereotypes and role models, and so forth, are often deeply masked behind so-called rational constructs that are inherently deceptive, distorted and irrational. Perhaps, as the prominent psychologist researcher, Anthony Greenwald, has pointed out, the only way to truly get to a direct assessment of who we are and what we truly believe is through indirect implicit means. (1998).

Conclusion

In summary, the human animal has basic evolutionary drives and biologically related functions. The human primitive brain thrives on arousal. The system is set up to reward arousal with pleasure. The human maturation requires education, experience, and practice. Danger stimuli both satisfy arousal needs and provide practice, education and experience with fear. The human animal is the only animal that actively seeks out fearful stimuli, usually within the context of a safety net or "protective frame." The human animal defines itself, its ego, in classical territorial terms. Its territory, identity, beliefs and behavior are built from the description of experience. The human animal imitates just as other animals, but often the imitation is of a false to fact reality as that provided in much of our film entertainment. The need for arousal may remain constant while the arousal threshold, continually saturated with more and more stimuli, ever increases. This increasing threshold is in fact a systematic desensitization of lower older thresholds. A simple curve illustrating this can be easily depicted from our history of sex and violence in the cinema (see below).



All of this leads to distortions inherently semantic in nature. These semantic distortions delimit our experience and our ambitions. They decide what and who is acceptable. They decide when we will find peace with our selves and our neighbors. They are the criteria upon which mankind builds its sanity. And for many, this sanity is a special form of modern neurosis full of false to fact descriptions of oneself and reality.

ADDENDUM

1. Since a stimulus is required to generate arousal;
2. Since arousal is **needed**; and
3. Since the vicarious experience and fantasy formation are natural aspects of stimulus response;
4. It is therefore probable that our entertainment, recreation, habits and much of our thought processes would provide stimulus substitution or sublimation (SS) leading to practiced arousal (PA) which in turn either requires MORE, MORE, MORE (MMM) in terms of synthetic (ideation/vicarious) stimuli and/or an actual acting out of the fantasy which is naturally formed while experiencing the synthetic stimuli. (In a very real sense one can think of the MMM as a fifth drive).
5. Fear (F) bends belief (B) creating semantic distortions (SD). There are four major fears that shape attitudes and influence behavior. (There are more than four fears obviously, but I believe the four listed below are the most significant when it comes to matters of bending/shaping belief.) Further, please note that the fear of death is not one, although arguably this fear could be said to underlie much of what is known as religious belief. Nevertheless, particularly with violent acts, the fear of living in an unacceptable manner is stronger than the fear of death).

The four fears are:

- a. Fear of rejection;
- b. Fear of humiliation;
- c. Fear of failure; and
- d. Fear of success.

Therefore, as one increases stimulus (S) strength they increase the amount of S necessary to reach PA. Ergo, $S > S_1 > S_2 = PA$; then $PA > PA_1 > PA_2 \dots PA_n$ as PA increases semantic responses (SR) distort and become SDs which always exist with emotional disturbances (ED). Consequently, threshold arousal (TA) need increases (TA_n) proportionally to the stimulus arousal relationship. $S + S_1 + S_2 \dots TA_n \dots PA_2 \dots SD$ since SD must be variable to meet species arousal need (AN) and stimulus response and/or in humans, stimulus response/semantic reaction (SR). As $S \propto SR$, therefore $S + S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \dots S_n = SR_n$, ergo SR_n is relational to AT ($AT, AT_1, AT_2 \dots AT_n$) which equals PA and becomes the manipulated (PA_n).

Special Note:

Since the original publication of this paper, school shootings have continued. School violence is escalating! The attention given a recent shooter by President Bush, publicly referring to him as a coward, was probably ill advised. This almost uniquely American problem must be addressed. Failure to do so, at whatever economic cost, will most certainly lead to disastrous results.

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