

Ambivalence and the ambivalent response in interpersonal relationships by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

In 1988 I wrote a four-page article "Concretizing Ambivalence" 1 and these statements were part of the introduction: "Ambivalence occurs whenever there are opposing views. The ambivalence becomes lessened or resolved when one position is more clearly preferable. It is when the opposites are felt with an equal or similar intensity that efforts to come to a decision are most difficult and may require assistance. The psychodramatist's task becomes one of helping to identify that factor which will add the greater weight to one position over the other__ to reveal the "deciding factor"; or, to assist the protagonist in what Kurt Lewin referred to as "a relative calm type of behavior while the conflict remains unresolved." 2 Eighteen years later I would add that there is no external push to resolve ambivalence unless a person is needing to make a clear decision to engage, choose, or make up one's mind.

In our relationships with others at the moment of choosing we are paying attention to factors which ultimately direct our actions, or non action. We are also giving facial and body cues which are communicated to others non verbally. Ambivalence is communicated as "blocked energy", a halting of decision to act until a specific condition prompts the release of that energy and freedom to act. It has been instructive for me to read Gong Shu (2003) as she describes the creative process.3 "Blocks to creativity undercut the "now" and deflect the individual's contact or involvement with the full, immediate present environment. Creativity becomes blocked when one's mind is preoccupied, and when one's attention is directed to the past, to the future, to memories, to anticipations, or to ideas__ to the constructions of reflective awareness. Ideally reflective awareness flows spontaneously. It records ongoing presence but does not interfere with it. When it does interfere, the mind abides somewhere, and one's attention is not fully engaged in each fleeting, flowing moment."

At the moment of choice the ambivalent person stops being in the here and now and brings to the moment "what ifs", "I should" and "I should not" and other reflections which delay the emergence of the congruent and true intention that is knowable by the person. It can be helpful for a person to get more here and now by stating : "In this moment something is preventing me from being able to be clearly yes or clearly no in response to this choice."

To explore the quandary in action the Diamond of Opposites (Carlson-Sabelli, Sabelli, 1989) 4 makes it possible to go to a still point which is the zero and look toward yes and look toward no.

As I am unable to get the scanned diamond to appear in this answer I will give instructions for making one on your printed document.
Draw a square and place it on one of its tips.
At the bottommost tip place a zero. To the left

place a + plus sign and on the right place a - minus sign. At the top place a + and - sign. Draw a dotted line from the top straight to the zero point. Write the word "ambivalence" to one side of the line.

The diamond can be taped onto the floor using masking tape and the person can walk along the line toward one of the vectors and speak aloud what is going on that feels positive, and then walk along the other vector and speak aloud what feels negative. It helps to identify how strong the pull is and to stand in that place and make statements and get in touch with the fuller dimension of what is occurring in the here and now. The person facilitating can suggest that the person move to other positions along the line and speak about the conditions which would have to occur to change the position to even more positive, or less positive, even more negative and less negative. If the person is responding to "shoulds" and "should nots" the language of the action can change from feeling an internal pull to feeling pushed, and name the source of the external force being applied. The action can stay within the diamond, or it can move into another enactment or improvisation.

There is also a time to collapse the exploration of opposites and stand in the point within the diamond where both points intersect in what is termed "phase space" within the field of the question. If both pulls are equal the person will find themselves on the line of ambivalence which stretches from zero to the most intense conflictual, a point where bifurcation or splitting can occur. The intensity of the two pulls may no longer be able to be held within the container which is the body and dissociation can occur or other dramatic leave taking. It is important for the facilitators to know the various places within the phase space and to assist an exploration and de-escalation via return to one or the other polar opposites and speaking about what needs to happen in life here and now to decrease the intensity to a more neutral range, or a range where the person can move with the negative dominance or the positive dominance. If experiencing the bifurcation point is the only true position the person can take then the facilitator must first create a safe place for the person to arrive upon leaving the field of the exploration.

Another way to explore ambivalence in action is to have the ambivalence mirrored back to you via an improvisation called "pairs".⁵ This is a structure within the ritual of Playback Theater where two actors stand one in front of the other. They listen as a brief story or moment is described where a person is feeling two opposing feelings at the same time. The actors stay within the same field, as if "two buds on the same twig" and begin to interact at the same time shifting the dominance and embracing both into a whole. The person has recounted many times in performances around the globe that this is what it is like. There is frequently a shift, a relaxing into the moment when the ambivalence is mirrored back and there is understanding from others of how this can be true. The bravery of the improvisation actors can also call forth bravery in the person to choose.

1 Hale, Ann, (1988) "Concretizing Ambivalence" unpublished .
Roanoke, VA, Blue Ridge Human Relations Training Institute, p.1.

2 Lewin, Kurt, (1935) A Dynamic Theory of Personality, NY, McGraw-Hill, p.
116.

3 Gong Shu,(2003) Yi Shu: the art of living with change, integrating
traditional Chinese medicine, Psychodrama, and the creative arts. Taiwan,
F.E. Robbins and Sons Press, p. 75-76.

4 Sabelli, Hector (1989) Union of Opposites: A comprehensive theory of
natural and human processes. Lawrenceville: Brunswick. This is also
described in "Sociometry and sociodynamics" by Linnea Carlso-Sabelli,
Hector Sabelli and Ann E. Hale In Psychodrama since Moreno Edited by
Paul Holmes, Marcia Karp and Michael Watson. London, Routledge, 1994,
p. 150-151.

5 Salas, Jo (1993) Improvising real life: personal story in playback theater.
Dubuque, Iowa, Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

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