

Binding and Connections: Collective Coherence and Contagion

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I have been preparing a series of essays with my colleague, Suzanne Brennan-Nathan, that concern the nature and dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Specifically, Suzanne and I are focusing on the “binding” (Ligato) power of interpersonal relationships –both good and bad. In this essay, I wish to consider the power of collective coherence and contagion.

Stories of Collective Binding and Connections

I begin my exploration by offering several stories about collective binding and connections.

LA Sports Arena

The first story concerns what occurred in Los Angeles during the late 1950s. A “patriotic” rally was held at the Los Angeles Sports Arena. Herbert Philbrick, the author of *I Led 3 Lives*, was featured at this rally. His book on Communist infiltration became a very popular TV series from 1953 to 1956. He had served as an undercover agent and was fully “knowledgeable” regarding all the communists who had infiltrated the US government. Out of sheer curiosity, I decided to attend the rally with several of my college friends. This was probably an early stage in my preoccupation with mass social psychological phenomena.

The Sports Arena was draped with many large American flags. The place was packed with men and women (mostly with pale complexions) wearing patriotic gear (usually red, white, and blue) with buttons or hat banners declaring the need to purify America and rid the United States of communist influence. The evening commenced with many fiery speeches delivered by lower-level conservative California politicians. Then a couple of Hollywood stars spoke dramatically of the dangers hidden in the leftist movies being produced in Tinseltown. Finally, out came Herbert Philbrick. The place erupted. Chants began, and flags were waved. It was right out of a Nazi rally. Philbrick was shouting about the Communists. His rhetoric became more extreme.

All members of the audience stood after each of his declarations. In front of the row where we were sitting was a man who seemed to struggle with repeatedly standing up. At one point, he remained seated. Those around him began to scream at him (above the very noisy clamor of the arena). They told him to stand up. He remained seated. Other men near him began to beat him with their fists and flags. He fell to the ground. At this point, we, college students, decided to leave the arena. It was not safe for those who were not “patriotic” in their immediate reactions to Philbrick’s pronouncements. It is not known what the fate was of this man who did not stand.

What we witnessed was a powerful regression. Everyone in the arena became more “primitive” in their emotions and actions. There was even aggression in the beating of someone who would not stand up. The words spoken by all of the rally presenters focused on sources of frustration for those in attendance:

Food prices were high because of Jewish price-gouging. The American military was crippled by the insidious infiltration of “Socialists” and “Communists.” Russia was winning the Cold War because of this crippling impact. The God-given Gospel of Jesus Christ was being perverted by left-leaning preachers affiliated with liberal churches. These false prophets were no longer accepting the liberal truth of the Bible. Police officers were failing to enforce the law of the land because they were being monitored for “bad behavior” by soft-minded city officials.

Most importantly, California and other endangered states were being run by corrupt politicians who were kowtowing to the moneyed liberal establishment. And you can throw in the biased liberal newspapers and the Commie movie industry. We are witnessing the destruction of a God-given American way of life! This voice offered no thoughtful consideration of the facts. There was little understanding or empathy for people holding different beliefs or being born with a darker skin pigment. Childish fear of the dark (ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty) was on full display that evening at the LA Sports Arena. I witnessed frustration leading to regression up close and personal. Contagion was in full, ugly bloom.

Madison Square Garden and Nuremberg

Something similar has occurred much more recently in the rallies staged at Madison Square Garden in 2024 by the MAGA folks. We also find a similar strategy operating in the 1930s. In this case the strategy was addressing frustration that led to aggression against Jews, Gypsies, and left-wing intellectuals. This strategy was manifested in the regressive power of Hitler's rallies. These rallies made extensive use of primitive processes—such as symbols (flags, banners, and the prominent Nazi swastika) and repeated pronouncement of elementary themes.

Attention was directed to ancient Aryan history and myth (much as was done by Richard Wagner in his 19th-century operas). And the aroused emotions were old and ugly, aligned in many cases with primitive urges regarding destruction and death. Captured in the documentaries prepared by Leni Riefenstahl, the Nuremberg rallies and other events orchestrated by Hitler and his Nazi cohort exemplified powerfully and disturbingly the way in which collective frustration can lead to collective regression. Is this also a disturbing way in which Ligato is formed among people in a crowd. Is the binding of relationships sometimes created at the expense of creating, despising and acting against the best interests of the "Other" (Oshry, 2018).

Frustration and Aggression

It should be noted that Clayton Alderfer (1972) offers a much less dramatic (and nonpolitical) version of the interplay between frustration and regression. Building on the theory of motivation offered by Abraham Maslow, Alderfer proposes that the frustration of specific Maslow-based needs leads to a regression back to the gratification of lower-level needs on Maslow's hierarchy. Applying an ERC (Existence, Relatedness, and Growth) principle to his understanding of human motivation,

Alderfer conveys a behavior pattern that is found in daily life—far away from the insanity of Nazi rallies—and (hopefully) far away from the rallies of Madison Square Garden and the LA Sports Arena. However, we should not discount what Alderfer is suggesting. The inability to meet higher-order needs (such as a sense of meaning in life and a sense of personal achievement) can certainly create conditions that lead to a primitive search for authority. These conditions can also encourage an accompanying search for something (or better yet, someone: the "Other") to blame for the frustrating inability to meet these higher-order needs.

Oakland Colosseum

I offer a quite different recollection. Or is this story quite different? I attended a rock concert with his teenage daughter. The concert featured the then quite popular band from Ireland called U-2. The concert was held at the Colosseum in Oakland California. Holding more than 60,000 people (with a large number standing on the stadium turf), this was a concert "to end all concerts." My wife and I accompanied our daughter, purchasing seats up on the second tier of the colosseum for all three. However, their daughter soon escaped and joined her friends and other totally enthralled teenagers "out on the field." Durkheim (1912/2008) would have aligned the affairs of this stadium with the Collective Effervescence that he observed in many religious traditions.

While there was a wonderful band that preceded U-2, the stadium fully erupted when the four members of U-2 appeared on stage. Their music soared over the crowd with fully amplification. The teenagers (and some adults) in the infield swayed in mass with the heavy beat of the U-2 base player and drummer. Inspired by Woodstock 1969, Lights were also flickering as night fell on the stadium. In most cases, the lights were generated by lit matches or cigarette lighters. [This was before the era of handheld LED lights and portable strobe lights.]

While the U-2 music was fully appreciated by my wife and I, it is not certain that much of their music could be heard by the screaming, constantly moving crowds on the grass. This hearing of the music might not have been that important since those in the crowd knew all the words and melodies. They often sang along with the band. This was a fully staged ceremony of exuberant celebration for a very popular music group. The music was almost secondary (much as in the case of the early Beatle concerts) to the greater goal of manufacturing and maintaining Ligato among everyone in the stadium. Lovely coherence was in full blossom.

I often now wonder if it was truly safe to let his daughter race down to the infield, so that she could sing and dance with her friends and other teenagers. Were similar concerns found in the minds and hearts of the German parents who let their children attend the Nazi rallies. And what about the teenagers who attended the Herbert Philbrick rally in Los Angeles? My wife and I didn't seem to worry about "bad things" happening to their daughter at the U-S concert. There was no violence at this concert, as there was at the Philbrick rally, and at their request, their daughter did check in with them several times during the concert.

The outcome of the U-2 concert was quite positive. Bonds of trust had been established. Ligato was directly experienced on the field and some of it flowed up to those sitting in the seats. Both parents and daughter left the Oakland Colosseum humming U-2 songs. There was no aggression to serve as an outlet for pent up frustration. If the teenagers at the concert were frustrated with their life, then the U-2 music and their presence in Oakland as supporters of movements emphasizing peace and freedom may have served as the outlet for their frustrations.

Woodstock, Edmonton and Paris

A similar outcome was achieved at the earlier and much bigger concert held at Woodstock in 1969. While there were logistical problems at Woodstock regarding food, sanitation and drugs, there was no reported violence. Often called the pinnacle of "peace, love and harmony", the concert at Woodstock exemplified the way contagion can yield positive outcomes. People can assemble in ways that increase cooperation and mutual sharing—while the music plays.

They can also peacefully assemble and celebrate the wonders of poetic imagination and the life of children and nurturing parents. I recall traveling to Edmonton Alberta to meet with one of my Canadian students. Depressed and discouraged about the prospects of my graduate school, I spent time helping my student complete her doctoral program. This was not an easy relationship and conflicts erupting in the course of study at this student's home did not ease the depression or discouragement. Sorrow hung in the air as my student and her husband invited me to join with them and the child of a dear friend at a reading of children's books by a noted Canadian author. This was the last thing I wanted to do. Listen to silly stories that relate in no way to my sorrow. I decided, however, to accept the invitation so that more conflict could be avoided.

And what a healing miracle it was that I accepted the invitation. The author was Robert Muensch, who had written many edgy, humorous and very un-childlike stories, ranging from a tale about a Fart that would not depart a respectable family ("Good Families Don't") to the courageous princess who needed no prince to protect her (or marry her). The highlight of Muensch's presentation, however, was the reciting of his most famous poetic story: "I Love You Forever". It concerned a mother who sang her child to sleep:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,

As long as I'm living
My baby you'll be.

Later in life, it was she who was held in the arms of her now grown-up child. He was now the one holding and cherishing his now elderly and declining mother. The remarkable thing is that members of the audience—both children and adults—began to chant the key lines “I love you forever . . .” along with Robert Muensch. Out of childhood love and the reflective love of adulthood, there was a shared, contagious, binding delivery of enduring and exchanged nurturance. I left the auditorium after Muensch shared his stories, feeling much less depressed and certainly less discouraged about my school. Here was one of my students “gifting” me with just what I needed: some uplifting, storytelling that connected people (including me) together.

Another incident recently occurred outside the United States. A colleague of mine who lives in Paris attended a rare event in front of his home. It was a partial eclipse of the Sun. On a very hot day, these Parisians came together to view and celebrate this wondrous, natural phenomenon. They collectively gazed up at the retreating Sun and shared words of appreciation for this awe-filled solar occurrence.

Fear and Security

I'm sure there was no fear exhibited among the Parisians watching the Sun, though there have been public shootings in France, as there has been throughout the world during this troubled century. What about events in the United States. As parents, my wife and I seemed to have deep-seated sense that this was going to be a safe experience for our daughter at the Oakland Colosseum. A similar sense of security would probably be found among the parents who had children on the fields at Woodstock. While parents might have been troubled by the naked dancing and drug use captured in news releases from Woodstock, they probably were not worried about their mature child being harmed. I also have no doubts that the parents of the child in Edmonton had no fears about their child's experience at the story-telling event. They trusted their dear friends who escorted the child to hear Robert Muensch. And they knew that the stories would be anything but threatening or violent. They would be funny, warm and perhaps a bit naughty. Just what every kid needs!!

Would the massive commitment to Hitler at Nuremburg have led parents to assume safety? As a curious participant in the Philbrick rally, I did assume safety but soon found out that this was not a safe environment and that aggression could easily shift from outside the LA Sports Arena to those participating in the rally. The bonds within the arena were broken. I left this rally feeling unsafe and was not humming any of the patriotic songs presented at this “American” rally.

Collective Binding and Connecting: Growing and Intensifying Interpersonal Contagion

We get high together in a crowd, get closer together, and bind together when we are together with other people. Some of these bindings yield positive outcomes while other bindings in different settings yield quite negative outcomes. Regardless of the outcomes, there are several common features found in all forms of collective bonding – they range from the chemicals we receive in our nose, to the regressive dynamics operating in a large crowd. These features produce a form of *Contagion* that intensifies the bonding and leads to the emergence of a powerful force of *Ligato*.

Pheromones

Like most (if not all) sentient beings (and perhaps all organisms), humans are strongly influenced by what they smell. Specifically, there are six protein-coupled receptors in the human olfactory system (epithelium) that are particularly sensitive to certain chemicals (pheromones) emitted by other beings of the same species. Taken from the Greek words “I carry” (phero) and “stimulating” (hormone), pheromones serve many attracting functions in animals, ranging from the food tracking of ants to the alarm signals initiated by wasps.

Among humans, the most notable impact of pheromones on human biological functioning is the reported synchronist cycling of menstrual periods among young women living together in a dormitory. However, the impact of pheromones might range far beyond the biology of young women. They may also help to create a loving relationship, set up territories, and, more broadly, promote aggregations.

Neighborhood effect

I would point to the behavior of flocking among birds and swarming among fish. These behaviors are being engaged so that predators can't focus on a clear single target for attack given the many fish and birds that are moving together. When considering the mechanism that enables this coordinated movement to occur, recent studies have shown that this mechanism is quite straightforward. The bird or fish simply does what its neighboring bird or fish is doing. While there is a bird or fish at the outskirts of the group that first identifies the predator and being the movement away from the predator, there is no "lead" bird or fish to coordinate the entire movement. Rather there is a set of quick decisions made by each bird or fish based on the decisions made by the bird or fish located right next to it. A whole field called agent-based modeling has emerged from and found direction in this neighborhood effect.

One can't help wondering if the movement and power of the assembled crowd, whether in Nuremburg or Oakland, is replicated this flocking and swarming. Are the Nazi-sympathizer and the daughter attending the U-2 performance moving in concert with other sympathizers and U-2 fans? Is binding and connecting often a matter not just of pheromones but also the proclivity to "do what others are now doing." Do we model our behavior after that of people around us?

There appears to be neighborly binding. Ligato is related to interpersonal proximity.

Competing neighbor effect

It seems that people not only gather together to connect, they also congregate to compete. The spirit and juice of "one-upping" the other person or group is contagious. Many years ago, Gregory Bateson (2000) observed (as an anthropologist) and wrote about something he called "complementary schizogenesis". This rather convoluted phrase is engaged to describe the tendency of individuals and groups to compete with one another by seeking to outdo the other. Annie Oakley competed with Frank Butler when singing that she can do anything better than him. National soccer teams compete with one another at World Soccer tournaments. Their national followers form an even more competitive spirit when singing songs over a flagon of their favorite national beverage at their local bar. The competition is "complementary" in that it tends to increase over time. As one individual, team or nation gets stronger, the other individual, team or national also attempts to get stronger – whether this be a shouting match between members of two tribes in New Guinea or an arms race between two powerful nations.

According to Bateson, the competition is "schizogenic" in that the two parties to the competition tend to grow apart from one another. They perceived the competitor as increasingly unlike them and as profoundly evil and alien—becoming Barry Oshry's (2018) "Other". Thus, there is a neighborhood effect that moves in an opposite direction from that identified by agent-based modelers. People next to one another begin to compete and they soon become un-neighborly. At this point, one of the "neighbors" is likely to move away from those with whom they are competing. The binding is undone with the "other" but it strengthens with other members of their own team, tribe or nation.

Regression in service of the ego

Late in the 19th Century, a very conservative social observer, Gustav LaBon (1895/2022) proposed that crowds are inherently more primitive than individuals or small groups of people. He writes of the "crowd mind" and has very little good to say about the contagion that is produced by large assemblages. A somewhat less politically biased account was offered during the mid-20th century by Ernst Kris (1953) and his ego psychology colleagues (such as Heintz Hartmann and David Rappaport). Called "regression in the service of the ego" (RITSE), this dynamic should sometimes be called "regression in the dis-service of the ego"—for regression can sometimes be quite counter-productive regarding the adaptive functions that the ego psychologists so strongly admire.

However, in many instances, RITSE operates in a quite positive manner, at both the individual and collective level. For instance, as the individual level, we can point to Carl Jung's (1963) regression and experience of madness as reported in *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, his autobiography, . It all centers on the work done by Carl Jung between 1914 and 1930, following his intense period of self-experimentation from 1913 to 1916 known as his "confrontation with the unconscious." (Bair, 2003) At his home in Küsnacht, near Zurich, Carl Jung would do his professional work in the morning and then turn a bit "mad" in the afternoon, carving stone sculptures, drawing intricate paintings (often mandalas) and writing down his creative and often quite aberrant thoughts in a notebook that became his *Red Book* (Jung, 2009).

While it is disturbing to conceive of a noted physician and psychotherapist like Carl Jung seeming to "lose his senses" part of the day, while serving as a guide to "sanity" for patients in the morning, it is also to Jung's credit that he was able to manage this remarkable transformative process throughout this highly productive period in his life. He was regressing on behalf of the nurturing of his own ego. While Jung identifies this as his confrontation with the unconscious, Kris and his ego psychological colleagues would use the phrase, "regression in the service of the ego" to describe not only Jung's creative work, but also the remarkable work done by artists, scientists, and spiritual leaders.

RITSE is a concept engaged by ego psychologists to describe a controlled, temporary, and partial relaxation of the mature ego's critical and realistic functions. This ego-based process allows for access when we are asleep as well as when we are awake to primitive, unstructured, and often highly symbolic unconscious material, such as created by Carl Jung. RITSE is adaptive, unlike pathological regression, where an individual reverts to immature coping mechanisms under stress. RITSE provides "play space" and sanctuaries. The mature ego deliberately deploys this mechanism to retrieve preconscious or unconscious content, typically for constructive purposes such as problem-solving, insight generation, or creative expression. The "service" aspect means the ego initiates the process not as a defense against anxiety, but as an active strategy to overcome intellectual or emotional impasses. The desire to successfully engage this active strategy can be quite contagious when people come together. The group provides protection and collective assurance that members of the group are only going "mad" for a short period of time.

During the 1940s, Ernst Kris (1953) formalized the concept of RITSE, describing it as the means by which preconscious and unconscious material appears in the creator's consciousness. Kris' formulation helped shift ego psychology toward a more positive view of regression, linking it to creativity and innovation. In art and music, RITSE can manifest as a return to a childlike perspective. It is simple, fresh, and unencumbered by adult logic yet skillfully integrated into the final product. Within a group setting, the individual is free to engage in the same kind of simple, fresh and unencumbered thoughts and feelings. Supported by the neighborhood effect and perhaps a whiff of pheromones, the group member can regress—and engage in behavior that moves far beyond Le Bon's "crowd mind."

To gain a full appreciation of RITSE's scope, it is important to note that regression occurs in at least three ways. We regress in time, revisiting our childhood and the collective history of our society and culture, possibly through our social unconscious (Hopper and Weinberg, 2019) or our collective unconscious (Jung, 1978). We also regress in our use of form and structure. This is where Ernst Kris's perspective on RITSE in art comes into play, and where Jung's *Red Book* is in full display. Third, there is regression in defensive structure. We deploy increasingly primitive defenses, such as repression and displacement (A. Freud, 2018), once again, not on behalf of coping with stress, but rather on behalf of some adaptive purpose.

Acceleration: the bigger the group/crowd the bigger the bang

The rally at Nuremberg was BIG, as were the Philbrick rally in Los Angeles, the MAGA rally at the Madison Square Garden, the outdoor concert at Woodstock, and the U-2 concert at the Oakland Colosseum. These large events are certainly newsworthy and dramatically photogenic. However, something else must be noted. Being big, these events are also amenable to particularly large group cohesion and group coercion effects.

A mass of people is contagious, the “virus” being a blending of the pheromones, neighbors, schizogenesis, and regression. Much as a bacterial virus flourishes in the environment of a living host, the viruses operating in groups flourish when the group is very large, when there is some stimulus (often primitive) to stir up passions, and when the group is in some way constrained (such as in a stadium, on a large field, or at an urban plaza).

Expanding bubble of belief

It is not only that the strength and velocity of the binding and connecting intensifies when people congregate in large groups. The Bubble of Belief held by each member of the group expands in size. Furthermore, the Collective Bubble of the entire group grows – even exponentially. There is an expanding Bubble that is filled with content eliciting joy, hopefulness and optimism. An expanding Bubble of fear, hopelessness and pessimism can instead be present in many assembled groups. This expansion seems to arise from the neighborhood effect coupled with something called *Balance Theory*. To keep our perspective, practices and interpersonal relationships in “balance,” we reinforce, correct or even change our attitudes and beliefs based on our strong need to find balance in our relationships with other people.

We wish to be aligned with what they believe (Heider, 1946). It is hard to be friends with those holding widely divergent beliefs. As a result, we either change friends or change beliefs. Balance is also found in our relationships with people we admire and wish to emulate. Our sports hero supposedly eats the “Breakfast of Champions” cereal every day, so we must do the same. Our favorite movie actor can’t live a day without their nutritious drink or their exercise regime, so we follow them in our own routine.

We discover an expanding Bubble of Belief when we couple this balancing act with the neighborhood effect. Our neighbors in the crowd obviously share at least one belief with us. They are attending the same rally, concert or recitation. Perhaps they share other beliefs with us. This must be so, if we are to remain in “balance” with them at this gathering. So, our beliefs begin to expand as we acquire the beliefs of our neighbors (balancing them and integrating them with our own existing beliefs). A collective belief is formed alongside individual beliefs. The collective belief is often reinforced by the speaker or performer’s impassioned utterances, be they speeches, songs or stories. Growth of the Bubble at the collective level is often exponential (a power law) (Taleb, 2010), given that there is a reverberating reinforcement of the beliefs that sweep (flock) through the crowd, and that the presenter is often integrating and providing evidence and rationale for the clustering beliefs within the collective bubble.

The Big Bang consists of not only the exploding of Ligato strength and velocity, but also the expanding size of the Belief Bubble that accompanies Ligato. It is within the context of Ligato that our beliefs are personified and become an integral part of what we will often refer to in this book as the reality we create when interacting with other people (Brothers, 2001).

Contagion: Our Negative Interpersonal Relationships Vectors

We get high together in a crowd, get angry together, and get fearful together. Our gathering on behalf of an evil cause only amplifies the psychological and physical damage we can do by ourselves. We turn once again to the factors that contribute to contagion.

Pheromones of Hate

Could there be specific pheromones in human beings that promote and/or sustain hate? We do know among some species that pheromones are used to make territory. We witness this every day when our male dog or cat decides to pee on something or someone. As noted, pheromones in some species provide a shared signal that something is threatening and that defense against this source of threat needs to be engaged. For some of us, this behavior has been painfully experienced when we have been stung by a threatened swarm of wasps.

Is it possible that pheromones serve these same functions in human beings. Could we also become territorial and wish to defend the boundaries. Several noted (and controversial) authors declared many years ago that primates (including human beings) are particularly territorial and devote considerable amount of attention to this collective activity (Ardrey, 1966) (Morris, 1967).

And pheromones certainly may play an important role in the activation of the human fight/flight/freeze behavior that we repeatedly reference in this book. While the physical sighting (or imagined sighting) of a threatening entity (be it a lion or impending court hearing) can provide strong defensive behavior, the “smell” of threat and accompanying “smells” of fear and hate might also play an important activating role in humans. Were “pheromones of hate” swirling around the L.A. Sports Arena during the Philbrick rally, around the crowds at Nuremberg, and the MAGA crowds recently gathered at the Madison Square Garden in New York City?

Neighborhood effect

Many years ago, Albert Bandura (1977) conducted a series of experiments with children. He invited them to observe an adult beating a bobo doll and shouting aggressively about the doll. He then observed them in a playroom and noted that they were more likely to be aggressive in their play. Children who did not observe the violent bobo doll act did not exhibit this aggression. The “neighborhood effect” seems to be at play. The child became violent in part because their “neighbor” (the observed person) was being violent. “I’ll do it because they’re doing it.” Bandura’s study led to a new emphasis on reducing violence in TV shows intended for children. However, what about adults. Aren’t we also influenced by bobo-type violence that is no display whenever we turn on our TV, watch cable news or a super-hero movie? We know that the violence in the movie is not real (much as the bobo doll isn’t a live being that is being hurt)? We also are viewing the TV news violence from a comfortable distance. Still, we may be influenced to the same (or even greater) extent than Bandura’s children.

We should also note that the neighborhood effect takes on a specific form when it comes to threat and the prospect of a negative outcome if coordinated effort is not taken. The movement often looks like something quite different from flocking or swarming. It looks more like the stampeding of threatened cattle, or the massive crowding at exit doors when a movie theater is on fire. There is initially no coordinated effort when a stampede begins. There is only *hard coercion*. There are often fatalities when people surge to the exit doors. Eventually, there might be coordinated activities as the cattle settle into their rapid movement across the plains. People do eventually begin to flow in an orderly manner out the exit doors—often at some expense in terms of injuries and even deaths.

There is another important distinction to be drawn between the hard coercion of a negative neighborhood effect and the soft cohesion of a positive neighborhood effect. The hard coercion (as the name implies) is based on an external locus of control. The cattle and movie goers are not assembled as a collective crowd until the threat appeals. The cattle are grazing in the field, being pretty much indifferent to one another. The movie goers are simply focused on the movie and could care less about other people attending the movie, other than to be softly influenced by the laughter or fear that emanates from specific scenes in the movie. Then the threat appears. Collective fear engulfs the crowd and an Enemy is identified. Fight or flight (usually the latter) kicks in, with the appearance sometimes of highly destructive freeze under highly stressful conditions.

Better than neighbor effect

Bateson’s (2000) complementary schizogenesis is fully in effect and, as Bateson notes, is likely to produce nothing but pain and suffering for both competing parties. Not only are there likely to be costs (injuries, diminished resources, unproductive time). There are also likely to be firmly set attitudes about one’s own team and culture but also similarly rigid attitudes about the “Other”.

Imagine what could have been done with the money spent on tanks, missiles and nuclear devices during the American “cold war” with Russia. Are the lingering hostilities between the many Hatfield’s and McCoy’s of contemporary times producing anything other than distractions, lingering anxiety and deteriorating health associated with the stress associated with this inter-family schizogenic hate?

Regression in service of the ego

In our regression within a group or crowd setting, there can be regression that is clearly not in the service of the ego. All three forms of regression can be present, when collectively confronted with threat. First, there can be regression in time. Old grievances can be brought up (as in the case of the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s). One of us witnesses this form of regression when working in the country of Estonia during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under conditions of stress

and threat, I talked with many Estonians about the troubles in their life. They often did not mention the political collapse that was occurring all around them. Rather, they identified a problem they were having with their neighbor. They identified a whole list of grievances. When I inquired about the occurrence of these grievances, the dates were often quite far in the distant past. The Estonian's grandfather had lost land to their neighbor, or their great grandmother had been jilted after being promised in wedlock to a member of the now despised and mis-trusted family. It was often hard to identify what was recent and what was historical in this distressed country.

Regression under conditions of collective threat and stress often is evident in the symbolic representations being used to identify and portray the threat or source of stress. Representations are often in the form of monsters, evil people and powerful threatening forces. The Nuremburg rallies were particularly illustrative of primitive representations (many references to the evil forces threatening the homelands), much as the Herbert Philbrick stories were dramatic and highly fictionalized (as presented not only at the rally, but also in the book and during the televised version of the book). We similarly see these primitive representations in the comic books and super-heroes of each era. There are the "slant-eyed Japs" in the Terry and the Pirates comic strips of World War II, as well as the menacing Black men in the jungle fantasies of Tarzan (in the novels, serialized accounts and movies). These compelling fantasies were widely consumed during the days when Black power was only a menacing possibility. The Black man in America was often viewed as menacing if he was not portrayed as a fool, gambler or drunk.

Finally, we find regression is often dis-serving the individual ego and the collective well-being when it assumes the form of violence—as it did during the Philbrick rally. When powerful images are conveyed of the threatening Other than violence is waiting in the wings. It is important to note that the threat can take one of three forms, and each of these three forms precipitates a different kind of violent response. Based on the semantic differential proposed by Charles Osgood (1957), we propose that someone or something is threatening if it is evil (not interested in our welfare), strong (not weak) and active (not inactive or passive). Furthermore, we propose that this template of threat is embedded deeply and emotionally in our Amygdala. So, the template can be easily triggered and is hard to extinguish. We might even find that Amygdala activation is related to the emissions or reception of pheromones.

When we are confronted with a person, group or institution that is evil, strong and active, then we are likely not to find violence as a viable choice, for we are likely to lose the battle. This is the condition found in the lives of many minority groups in America and elsewhere in the world. Humor might be a "safe" form of verbal violence; however, the violence is more likely to be turned inward, leading to an overall sense of helplessness and hopelessness (Seligman, 1992), and to accompanying substance abuse and depression.

Violence is more likely to be a viable option if the threatening person, group or institution is viewed as weak or inactive, even while being evil. For the Nazis, Jews, Gypsies and Gays were considered fair targets since they were perceived as both weak and passive. They could "take" the abuse without fighting back. "So, let's get them!" In other cases, we might find the threatening person, group or institution to be menacing (evil and strong) but not active. This often requires a cautionary and non-regressive response: often "wait-and-see" or a form of preemptive violence (an option too-often selected by American governments). Finally, there are the "big bluffs." These are the people, groups or institutions that are evil and active, but not very strong. Those who are threatened often have to "call the bluff" of these threateners. Once again, this may call for the thinking and acting of those who are thoughtful and not operating in a regressed state. Creativity and innovation should not be the focus of this discernment about intentions, strength and weakness; these forms of regression are fine when there is no threat waiting in the wings. Effective management of the Amygdala should be the focus.

Acceleration: the bigger the group/crowd, the bigger the bang

This is where the matter of large group acceleration becomes quite serious. We find large groups stampeding not just to avoid a threat, but also to exact revenge on a seemingly evil person, group or institution. Black men are lynched, wayward wives are stoned to death, and "troublemakers" are tarred, feathered and driving out of town. The bigger the crowd, the greater the violence in both intensity (level and type of harm) and scope (number of people being harmed).

Each of the contagious factors we have identified contributes to the group acceleration. However, there is another critical factor. This concerns a reduction in personal responsibility for the violent act—what is often called the “by-stander effect”. As Eliot Aronson (2018, p. 49) suggests:

... the large number of people witnessing ... tragedies militate[s] against anyone’s helping – that is, a victim is less-likely to get help if a large number of people are watching his or her distress.

When there are many other people around us, why should we take the blame for someone’s misfortunes. There are many other people who could help. Why look to me? Furthermore, it would be “uncool” (socially disapproving) to show my emotions and take action. As Aronson (2018, p. 49) has observed, “when we are with other [people], most of us try to appear less fearful, less worried, less anxious, or less sexually aroused than we really are”. We trade in social responsibility for a stance of acceptable in-action. We don’t “lose our cool” when there are many other people observing us.

Expanding bubble of belief

The potential for mischief and even serious violence can expand when people are gathered tother for wrong, inhumane reasons. The individual and collective bubbles of belief are filled with additional misleading anecdotes and “alternative” realities regarding potential threats, sinister conspiracies, and menacing counter-leadership.

My colleague, Kevin Weitz and I (Weitz and Bergquist (2024, p. 9) put it this way regarding the contemporary crises of expertise and belief, as these crises relate to the power of collective gatherings in the generation of conspiracies:

What has turned a loose collection of people who support an illegitimate expert and his flawed expertise into a tight-knit enclave that found threat, danger and enemies everywhere? What makes many people believe that they must protect that which (they believe) is true, virtuous and life-affirming? What, in other words, creates a conspiracy? If we are to better understand the crisis of expertise and belief, we need to appreciate the complex and powerful dynamics associated with how large groups of our population begin to believe conspiracy theories and often take self-defeating action based on these flawed beliefs.

The two of us (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024, p. 9) observed that:

Conspiracy theories result from the basic human orientation as a social animal to detect and explain threats—and specifically from the human tendency to categorize the world into ingroups and outgroups. There is a corresponding desire to protect one’s ingroup from powerful outgroups that might be dangerous. While this process is innate in humans, and has a survival component, it can also yield major negative outcomes for both in-groups and outgroups—particularly when people’s susceptibility to conspiracy theories is manipulated by unscrupulous leaders for their own benefit.

Later in their book, we (Weitz and Bergquist (2024, p. 45) dig deeper into the nature of conspiracy. We quote Karen Douglas:

... “conspiracy theories result from the basic human tendency to categorize the world into ingroups and outgroups and from the corresponding desire to protect one’s ingroup from powerful outgroups that might be dangerous”. While this process is innate to humans, and has a survival component, it can also have major negative outcomes for both in-groups and outgroups, particularly when people’s susceptibility to conspiracy theories is manipulated by unscrupulous leaders for their own benefit. In particular, unscrupulous leaders can undermine, demean and demonize leaders and experts in out-groups who put forward opposing ideas.

Kevin and I (Weitz and Bergquist (2024 p. 45) then turn to insights offered by Jan-Willem Vam Prooijen, another social scientist:

Van Prooijen ... describes the enabling effects of a conspiracy theory. First, the conspiracy theory enables those who believe in this theory to demonize outsiders. Extremist fringe groups make rather sharp distinctions between “us” versus “them.” Conspiracy theories enable these groups to solidify a strong identity among their members by fueling aversion against different groups. The second form of enablement is engaged when a conspiracy theory directs extremist groups to discredit criticism within the group. Dissenting voices may threaten the cohesion of extremist groups, but conspiracy theories enable these groups to portray critics as part of a hostile conspiratorial threat.

There is a third form of enablement. Conspiracy theories can give extremist fringe groups the feeling that the threat is existential and that violence is the only remaining option to protect themselves and their way of life. More specifically, conspiracy theories can add to the sense that the group – or the cause that the group stands for – is under imminent attack by a hostile enemy. There is an urgent need for an adequate response. A peaceful reaction is unlikely to be effective.

Finally, we (Weitz and Bergquist (2024, p. 45) note that Conspiracy theories may have always been with us, but may be particularly prevalent and dangerous in our contemporary world filled with the aforementioned VUCA-Plus conditions: We envisioned the threat of a neighboring tribe or the mal intentions of that family living down the street.

These theories are a natural function of people attempting to understand a complex and increasingly rapidly-changing (VUCA-Plus) world. These theories are a guide for developing reasons and rationales that serve a protective function. In terms of the formal definition of a conspiracy theory, there is always some form of threat that is omnipresent, multifaceted and complex. People viscerally respond to these threats by attempting to identify patterns, causality and culpability.

These patterns, causalities and sources of culpability are incorporated in the Bubble of Belief formed and protected by those who fearfully embrace conspiracy theories. It is at rallies and in the virtual gatherings occurring in the social media, that these sources of conspiracy expand and are reinforced.

Those attending the MAGA rallies and accessing websites such as BitChute or 4chan are rapidly expanding their Bubble of Belief in symmetrical conjunction with fellow “true-believers”. Conspiracy-oriented neighborhoods are formed on the Internet. A collective Bubble of Belief is created and individual Bubble of Belief receive further false but “confirming” evidence that our community, our nation or are entire world might be “going to hell” and is in need of repair, reform or even revolution.

Coherence: Our Positive Interpersonal Relationships Vectors

We get high together in a crowd, celebrate together, fall in love together. The same factors that lead to conspiracy and violence also lead to collaboration, caring and love.

Pheromones of Love

We know that many chemicals (pheromones) that are drawn in by the human nose might produce the territorial imperative or the fight/flight/freeze reaction; however, these chemicals might also serve what biologists call an “aggregation” function. While aggregation is found in lower order species such as the boll weevil and butterfly, it is also found in higher-order species such as many species of birds and whales. Could pheromones contribute to these higher order aggregations, even though these animals are communicating with each other over large distances?

And what about human beings? Do we “sense” love for another person via our nose. Those providing perfumes would certainly suggest so. Are the pheromones that serve as food trails for ants, also lure us into restaurants, into the consumption of certain foods that are not particularly nutritious but smell “great”. And does a food trail lead us to the person we love.

Were “pheromones of love” swirling around the Oakland Colosseum during the U-2 concert?

Neighborhood effect

As we have just noted, the neighborhood effect looks quite different when love rather than threat is in the air (perhaps assisted by some pheromones). We observe this among birds and fish when everything is peaceful. The birds are soaring together in the breeze, while the fish are swarming in beautiful dance-like displays in the shifting currents of the water. They are choosing to “play” in the flock or swarm. An internal locus of control is in effect. The bonding is deliberate and generated from within the bird or fish (whether instinctive in origin or a “learned” Legato proclivity).

Among humans we can talk about *Soft Cohesion*. People come together because they want to be together or there is some aggregate attraction such as a U-2 concert that draws them together. The Parisians might have assembled so that

they could be assured that it was alright at some point to look directly at the receding Sun: “It must be OK right now since the person next to me is looking up at the Sun.” Those at Woodstock came together at least partly to show the World what an “alternative” lifestyle looks like. It was not just the music that conveyed something about a “different” way in which to live; the clothes (or lack of clothes) and the collaboration “spoke volumes” about the utopian vision of the hippy generation.

In a spiritual domain, we might speak of the sense of individual love and collective aggregation that comes from a shared commitment to some greater cause or allegiance to some higher being. There is the gathering to celebrate something much greater than ourselves, this being the Sun. There was also, unfortunately, the gathering at Nuremberg and at the Los Angeles Sports Center in which something greater than the participants was being acknowledged—this being either Hitler or Philbrick, or the warped sense of nationalism that they both represented. As we have already noted, the Greeks labeled this *Agape* and distinguished this form of love and aggregation as differing from other forms of love such as eros and philia.

Better than neighbor effect

We can also provide the positive side of Bateson’s complementary schizogenesis. The binding that occurs when competition is controlled (sports) and healthy (morale, pride, enjoyment), produces a form of stress, called “u-stress” that motivates, energizes and promotes personal growth and wellbeing. Often associated with the aforementioned concept of *Flow*, that was introduced by Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990), the u-stress of competition occurs when the two groups or “teams” are evenly matched (support) and when they are both performing at a high level (challenge).

Under these conditions, we find that schizogenesis takes on a unique form. The two competing groups and teams do begin to identify themselves as different from one another. However, this “difference” often takes on a playful form. Each team is adored in different colors, featuring a unique name and mascot. There may be cheerleaders, marching bands, and extended celebrations to honor the group or team, whether successful or a failure. As Huizinga (2008) proposed many years ago, human beings might be particularly playful. As *homo ludens*, we may find resolution of our deep desire to exhibit competence (White, 1959) when we are competing on the playing field.

Regression in service of the ego

Regression that is truly in the service of the ego will often involve a dose of appreciation (a perspective that we will often emphasize in this book). This appreciation can appear in the regression to an earlier time. Old stories of success and heroism are repeated one more time around the fire. And they are told at an auditorium in Edmonton, Canada. The reframing of present-day narratives by blending them with regressive stories from the past can also be of value: “This event reminds us of the time when one of us was in Edmonton, Canada and attending a reading of childhood stories. A childhood of love is fondly remembered when the phrase “I’ll Love You Forever” was repeated. For some adults in attendance, there might even be regressive memories of caring for their own elderly parents. The regressive story can even be about past failures, from which the group, organization or nation recovered. Or it is a tale about defeat that puts it all in perspective: “Afterall, this was only the loss of xxx; not the loss of life, liberty or happiness!”

Naturalistic displays (such as the eclipsed Sun) and symbolic representations can also serve a positive regressive function. We find a shared Awe when witnessing the receding Sun, or when joining with other people at Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon. We find regressive expression in religious visions of heaven or in the fanciful stories about fairy godmothers. Lullabies are not just for children, and stories with happy endings are not just for the young. As Martin Seligman has offered on many occasions (Seligman, 1991) and in many forms, there is valuable advice to be embraced regarding *Learned Optimism*.

With all of this comes a regression in Form. We would suggest that there is no more regressive, primitive or life-giving form than the act of falling in love or at an earlier time in life, growing infatuated with another person (perhaps this is also found among us older folks). Even if Love is not “all we need,” it is an elusive emotion that “only fools care to define” but that we seem to need in our life.

There is one other way in which we regress in the service of the ego that pertains in particular to our participation in a large group. There are some of us living today who find very few “safe places” in which many of their feelings can be

expressed. For example, it is not safe for a Black man in an urban area of America to be shouting at the top of their lungs that “the ^%&%@#%^ should be stomped on and given a good kick in the head!” However, this exclamatory phrase can be declared at full voice when this Black man is sitting in the stands at a major sporting event. He can threaten members of the opponent team without meaning any harm. And this includes no harm to him. This man will not be arrested, handcuffed, or sent off to prison for his verbal violence. He was only being a “fan” (as in “fanatic”).

Roger Brown (1986) writes about another type of “fan” who finds a safe place to express their emotions. Addressing his own “fanatic” devotion to Grand Opera, Brown identifies the way his operas serve as an outlet for emotions he usually cannot express as a “true” man. It is only at the opera that fanatics like Brown can cry, wildly applaud, and become immediately infatuated with one of the singers. Brown (1986, p. 555) describes a Ligato phenomenon in describing the benefit to be derived from being a fan (fanatic) of a specific sports team, movie star or (in Brown’s own case) opera singer:

The test of being a fan is very simple. Your own self-esteem must rise and fall with the successes and failures of your object of admiration. In addition, though you may be a solitary fan with no nearby like-minded group, a fan cannot rest content with his private opinion but must try to convince others that his evaluation is objectively correct. That means he must make propaganda to build a social consensus that will establish the reality he believes in.

In essence, we surround ourselves with other people who look and sound like us. They will like (and not challenge) what we share about ourselves. As in the case of the Black man, Sanctuary is provided to this man with pent-up emotions—and this regression is certainty of benefit to the Black man’s or opera goer’s sanity (just as the temporary regressive “madness” provided sanity for Carl Jung). Regression is taking place in a safe place and, as a result, is being engaged on behalf of the adaptive, stress-reducing, self-esteem-building ego.

RITSE is truly an extraordinary capacity of the human psyche. We can move backward in personal and collective history to explore alternative portrayals of reality and to be selective regarding how best to guard against the massive intrusion of anxiety-producing memories, impulses or existential concerns. Someone like Carl Jung could plunge for a short while each day into “madness” as he chisels on granite blocks and as he prepared the visual illustrations and the narrative (written in beautiful old Gothic script) in his *Red Book* (Jung, 2009). An artist such as Edvard Munch, can enter his Oslo Norward studio and create a series of deeply troubling paintings depicting anguish and despair without slipping into deep depression himself. Thomas Wolfe (2011) retains his sanity while write “madly” on tablets about his troubled childhood in North Carolina and about his inability to ever “go home again.” We protect ourselves and find support inside ourselves for insightful and creative endeavors, while pushing the boundaries of emotional regulation.

Acceleration: the larger the group/crowd, the bigger the bang

If there is a reduction in personal responsibility when we are in a crowd, then why do some people take action to help others who are stressed. Why did the temporary “citizens” of the Woodstock world go out of their way to help other “citizens” who are struggling with lack of food, lack of sanitation or a drug-trip? Why, in other words, is there altruism in the midst of potential group indifference.

Sometimes this altruism has to do with focus. In the movie about Oskar Schindler taking responsibility for the safeguarding of Jews in his factory during the Holocaust, there is a scene where Schindler is looking at one small girl dressed in red (only color in this movie) wandering through the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, while atrocities are occurring all around her. When attention is directed toward the distress of one person, then a binding sense of morality might be engaged. As Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) would put it, we become moral men acting responsibly in an immoral society.

It might be that altruism has a deep hold in the human bosom (probably resulting from the production of a nurturing hormone, Oxytocin, in the hypothalamus and its release in the posterior pituitary gland). Robert Sapolsky (2017) extends his analysis beyond Oxytocin, by adding vasopressin to the potential altruism priming hormones. Like many other primate researchers, Sapolsky notes that homo sapiens are among the weakest and slowest of the primates—and certainly are at the bottom of the line regarding traditional survival skills.

What we as “smart” (sapient) animals have is a highly developed cortex that enables complex interpersonal relationships to be established and maintained (complemented by an equally as complex communication system). It is with these Ligato-related skills that we humans were able to survive on the African savannah (and elsewhere in the world) for many centuries. We use these skills to form alliances, protective leagues—and the everyday habits of the heart (nurturing, caring and guarding our very weak young and our aging and vulnerable seniors). In a survival mode, we set aside our self-interests on behalf of our family’s, group’s and tribe’s welfare and continuing existence. This is altruism and it is a critical feature residing and playing out in any viable human system.

Expanding bubble of belief

While attention is often directed to the way negative belief systems are reinforced and expanded at rallies such as those held in Nuremberg and Los Angeles, there are also many instances where the gathering of people can produce positive results and can help to expand Bubbles of Belief about the purpose and potential of human existence. There are peace rallies where attendees learn more about the history and strategies of peace from the speakers and from other rally participants (perhaps over a cup of coffee or glass of wine following the rally).

The neighborhood effect and balance theory are in full operation: I like people who attend peace rallies and are likely to accept other beliefs they articulate while sipping on the coffee or savoring the wine. I learn about a peace-directed candidate running for office in the next county. I made a small campaign contribution to support her campaign. I find out that there is an article to be read in the *Atlantic* that I must read. And I do. Perhaps there is even a favorite recipe that my new “friend” suggests, or a coffee bean or wine varietal that I have never considered before. I haul out my pen and paper and take notes.

To return to an actual positive expansion of beliefs experience:

When I entered the auditorium in Edmonton, I had never heard of Robert Muench. I had a vague positive attitude about the value inherent in “liberating” children’s books that portray liberated women and a caring attitude about the wellbeing of all people. However, my attitudes expanded and became more articulate about how the books written for children could accomplish these laudable goals. My Bubble of Belief expanded when I witnessed Muench’s insightful observation that the caring we are shown as a child can translate into caring for one’s parents when they grow old.

This was a refinement of my belief that in certain ways we return to a childlike state when we grow old. We often need physical assistance once again when we grow old. I now was offered the powerful image of the older person being physically held by their grown child. And they are being sung to, with a lullaby, just as they did the singing when a much younger parent.

The strength of this expanded set of beliefs was reinforced by the neighborhood effect. I observed many other people, gathered at this auditorium located in another country, hold this same set of beliefs. They came to this auditorium with these beliefs already in hand (actually in heart). These “believers” came to collectively reinforce these beliefs, much as the teenagers in Oakland came to reinforce beliefs extolled by members of the U-2 band. Furthermore, the adults and children in Edmonton gathered to collectively celebrate these beliefs by accompanied Muench when he recited their favorite passage.

At a more mundane level, my knowledge of Robert Muench’s work expanded from zero to awareness and appreciation for several of his other books. A large collection of these books was for sale on the back table. I bought those about being loved forever, family farts, and independent princesses. When I returned home, I regaled my family with my story about the Muench audience and encouraged members of my family to read these books. I also began ordering copies of these books and giving them as gifts. I was being the “neighbor” who helped to expand the Bubble of Belief held by other people about children’s books, a life of love, a life of courage as a princess (or young girl) – and maybe the life of farts . . .

Much as the expansion of our collective beliefs regarding the positive side of human behavior has been led by advocates of Positive Psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), so in a more limited but very powerful way, an

auditorium in Edmonton Alberta and a Canadian author of children's books can help to expand someone's Bubble of Belief about the positive side of sustained caring, childhood courage and bodily smells.

Conclusions

An old Beatles song is appropriate here: "I get by with a little help for my friends". We would modify this a bit: "We get by with a little help from our friends and our neighbors".

But what does it mean to "get by"? Is it at the expense of those who are not our friends or neighbors? Or is getting by an altruistic action taken on behalf of not only our friends and neighbors, but also all human beings and, pushing it further, perhaps our entire planet.

The choice between the conspiratorial and altruistic pathways resides at the heart of the matter regarding Ligato. Are we binding together on behalf of the greater good or a primitive evil? Both reside within us.

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