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Introduction

This thesis aims to understand the affective experiences with specific attention directed to the concept of affect regulation, particularly the regulation of negative affect.

I will use migration as an example to understand affect regulation within the perspective of negative affect experiences. Freud himself did not consider the migration and cultural variables in his work and, following his footsteps, the latter generations of analysts refrained from exploring the migration and its possible trauma on human psyche, including negative feeling experiences. The psychoanalyst Salman Akhtar says the migrant psychoanalysts were “too intoxicated with the discovery of psychoanalysis”, and “they did not want to be seen too different from their patients.” Psychoanalysis began to expand, both theoretically and culturally, particularly in the last 20 years or so. Study of affect is leading much of current psychoanalysis.

Affect, particularly the study of negative feelings, has taken a central role in the contemporary psychoanalysis. While some contemporary theorists have taken the courage to say, “we are all survivors”, Professor Julie Reshe’s work has given most thought to negative affectivity as she emphasizes the normality (not a deviant), indeed a fundamental principle that trauma is given in human experience from the very early on, with anxiety and depression at its core. Furthermore, the traumatic self is not demarcated by specific geographical, cultural, linguistic boundaries.

What is Affect Regulation?

Contemporary theorists suggest that affect regulation implies the process by which we monitor and control their experience and expression of feelings and emotions. The monitoring of affect occurs largely at an unconscious level. In essence affect regulation is the capacity to endure anxious and depressive affective states.

In affect regulation, the feelings of anxiety and depression are not substituted with positive feelings, instead the traumatic feelings find a ‘relational home’ with the help of the other through co-regulation. Robert Schrauf, a cultural linguist, notes that human communication that requires reflection and depth entails negative emotions, and languages have more negative feelings than positive ones.

The infant reaches out to his mother when his affect is ruptured. Fonagy and his team propose, “that the infant’s perceptual system is at the start set with a bias to actively explore and categorize external rather than internal stimuli.” This is vital to consider because some theorists may assign much innate capabilities to the infant from very early on as if the child is

dependent on his mother. This is the position of Professor Julie Reshe who also notes the mother-child. Research in neurobiology in the study of affect is central.

Rapid changes in the limbic system and autonomic nervous system (ANS) occur during critical period (from birth till age 2). Human brain is an open system which interacts with the other brain via both unconsciously and consciously. Trauma damages and changes the limbic system and the connection between various structures. The subcortical is not plastic. The damage to subcortical, which has properties of “destructive plasticity”, cannot be repaired by definition.

Next, up higher to the limbic system, is the cortex, and the later forming left brain is involved in reflection, and the ability for language, logic and analytic thinking. These remarkable changes take place, within the mother-child dyad, by the time a child reaches 2 ½ years of age.

Fonagy and his team notes, “This interactive process can be conceived of as a case of intuitive instructed learning in which the “teacher” role is played by the repeated presentation of the parent’s affect-reflective emotion expression that is contingent on the presence of the dispositional emotion state in the infant.” At the core of the mother-child interaction is the mother regulating her child’s negative affect.

Employing a clinical case study, I consider the integration of three modes of affect regulation: (1) teleological mode; (2) psychic equivalence mode; and (3) pretend mode. The consolidation of these three psychological modes helps us understand affective experiences and trauma.

Separation and individuation has been the hallmark of human development in the West. There has been a paradigm shift in the West as the classical theoretical framework is scientifically questioned by contemporary theorists.

There are far more complexities within a culture making it difficult to compartmentalize or group psychological experiences, or to label affective experiences. If we are to make a broader and all-inclusive, and in-depth understanding of the research in affect regulation, there is an urgency to modify the existing research work, particularly considering the prime importance of negative affect.

Much in-depth understanding of human relationship began with the paradigm shift introduced by John Bowlby, however, there is a tendency among even attachment researchers to hastily negate, substitute negative affect with positive feelings. In their recent publication, Jeremy Homes and Arietta Slades note within attachment framework that, “Staying alive is hardwork”, however, they appear to suggest possible positive outcomes. Professor Julie Reshe cautions, “But solidarity is not about happiness, it is about a form of hard work where it implies that we engage in never-ending exposure to social anxiety.