Character Feelings

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Abstract

This article delineates two types of feelings: character feelings and reactive feelings. Historically, at times character feelings have been misdiagnosed as rackets. The difference between rackets and character feelings is described.

This article develops a theory of character feelings: what they are, how they develop, and how they can be used in treatment. Feelings are crucial to human functioning, and, therefore, it seems appropriate that one continue to add to the transactional analysis theory of emotion. An examination of the *Transactional Analysis Journal* shows that there is a need in this area. Undoubtably, one must begin with English (1971, 1976) and her work on rackets. However, since then, and particularly in the past ten years, there has been little in the *Journal* on the theory of emotion in general. There have been many discussions of the different emotions; they tend to be of the type such as "Expressing Anger Safely" (Fisher & Hallet, 1989) or "A Case of Severe Depression" (Maggiora, 1987).

More recently, the *Transactional Analysis Journal* theme issue on shame (O'Reilly-Knapp, 1994) looked briefly at some theories, but again its focus was on one emotion. So the development of a theory of character emotions is meant to be part of the process of developing the transactional analysis theory of emotion. What is presented is a pragmatic side of such theory, as many of the concepts developed out of observation in the clinical setting, particularly with children.

This article will first define the concept of character feelings and how they develop, and then compare this to racket feelings as presented by English.

Temporary Feelings and Character Feelings

In surveying the literature on emotions, an area of confusion that commonly appears is the delineation made between temporary and character feelings. These two types of feelings are different in nature and hence need to be dealt with in two different ways.

These two types of feelings basically refer to what has been historically called "reactive" feelings and "endogenous" feelings (Rycroft, 1972). A temporary feeling is a reactive feeling, whereas a character feeling is an endogenous (or trait) feeling. The graph shown in Figure 2 refers to temporary feelings. This was originally presented by White (1986) and, interestingly enough, was also presented in a different form six years later by Cornell and Olio (1992), who also drew from Reich (1942/1971).

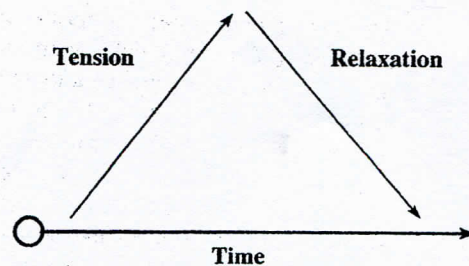Reich (1942/1971) said that the sexual act can be conceptualized as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Sex-Economic Energy Process
Adapted from Reich (1942/1971, Figure 1, p. 88)

Initially there is a buildup in bodily tension, which is then followed by relaxation after orgasm. Reich related this process to sexual feelings only. In this article it will be expanded to all types of feelings. That is, this process is the same for anger, scare, sadness, happiness, and so on. The resulting graph is shown in Figure 2.
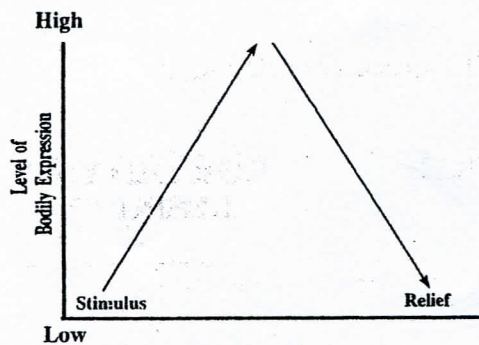
Figure 2
The Feeling Graph

The process begins with the occurrence of a stimulus, which is anything to which one has a feeling response. Examples may be stubbing one's toe, seeing a child get hit in a supermarket, reading about nuclear war, winning a $250,000 lottery, getting told off by your boss, seeing a horror movie, and so on. It is important to note that the stimulus can come from either an external or an internal source. Obviously, stubbing one's toe is an external source stimulus, to which one could feel angry. However, the same individual could later recall this event and again feel angry. This recall or remembering is an internal source stimulus. The external source stimuli are environmental events with which the person is confronted. An internal source stimulus is the recall of those events in one's mind days, weeks, or even months later.

Each stimulus results in an increase in bodily tension. We have all heard such phrases as, "I could feel the anger build up inside me." This refers to the increase in bodily tension that a person experiences when feeling a feeling. As a brief example right now, adopt the bodily posture you would have if you were watching the climax of a scary horror movie. Feel the tenseness in the posture. If you were actually watching the movie, you would probably be much more tense. Figure 2 shows how a stimulus will result in a buildup of this sort of bodily tension.

This leads us from point one to point two on the feeling graph.

If this is followed by the appropriate expression of a feeling, then the person will move from point two to point three on the feeling graph. The expression must involve some bodily component. A simple "Get lost" (vocal chord expression) may be enough to release an anger buildup. In other cases in which there is a severe tension buildup, whole body movements may be required to release that tension. If this process occurs with a wide variety of feelings, then that individual is emotionally healthy.

As shown in Figure 2, the individual who reaches point three will sense a feeling of relief. In fact, from point two onward the sensation of relief is felt. That is, the actual expression of a feeling (i.e., tension reduction) is pleasurable in itself. For instance, if you are comfortable with the expression of anger, then with close self-monitoring, you will find that the actual process of expression is pleasurable, as are the after-effects.

The other point about these feelings is that they do not last more than five to ten minutes in normal circumstances. That is, the feeling is felt and then expressed, and this should take only a few minutes. It is possible to make it last longer by replaying the recall of an incident over and over in one's mind. However, then one is only having a reactive feeling to an internal stimulus. These temporary feelings last only a short period and are related to a specific incident. We have many of these each day.

The opposite of these temporary feelings are character feelings, which are much more permanent. These feelings tend to remain with the person all through life. Even if they are not in the forefront of a person's mind, he or she still feels them deep down. Such individuals report that they "just seem to feel scared (or angry or sad) all the time." These are called "endogenous" feelings or sometimes "trait" feelings because some believe them to be due to an inborn predisposition. They form part of the person's basic character.

Just as any feeling can be a temporary feeling, so can any feeling be a character feeling. Anger, scare, sadness, or happiness can all be basic character feelings. People who seem basically
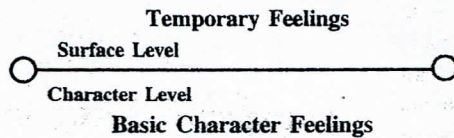

Temporary Feelings
Surface Level
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Character Level
Basic Character Feelings

Figure 3
The Two Levels of Feeling
(Adapted from White, 1994, p. 270)

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scared over an extended period of time are of a scared character. People who seem basically angry over a period of time have an angry character and so on. As a result, when discussing feelings, one needs to distinguish between temporary feelings and character feelings (see Figure 3).

In Figure 3 the basic character feelings are drawn under the temporary feelings because a person may have the entire range of feelings on the surface while feeling scared, angry, sad, or happy deep down. Character feelings do not change rapidly, whereas temporary feelings do.

I have used this model of character versus temporary components of the personality previously in discussing life positions (White, 1994). I noted that the character life positions and surface life positions are not mutually exclusive, but can interact with each other. The same applies to character and temporary feelings. In particular, the nature of the character feeling will affect the surface temporary feelings. The character feeling will from time to time surface as a temporary feeling in various forms.

For instance, a person with a character scare may show a variety of surface scares. Phobias are a good example of this. With a phobia of spiders the person has a clear stimulus for the feeling. However, this temporary feeling can result from an underlying character scare that has come to the surface in this form. When this is the case, the phobia will either be resistant to treatment or, if it does cease, then another "scared" symptom will result. This may be repetitive nightmares, other phobias, separation anxiety, generalized anxiety feelings, panic

attacks, and so on. Thus the underlying anxiety will keep popping up in a variety of forms.

One further point: Some character feelings are the result of normal human development. This is one exception to the rule that character feelings do not change quickly. An example of this is adolescent anger. Adolescent rebellious anger is character anger. The anger is ever-present, and if not being currently shown, it is lurking in the background, as many a parent will tell you. This anger surfaces from time to time as arguments about values, curfews, cleanliness, drugs, and so on (see Figure 4). The variety of stimuli at times seems endless. The onset of this anger can be quite rapid with the advent of the adolescent stage, and it disappears at the end of the stage when the person reverts to the previous character feeling. One hopes that this is a happy character feeling, which can be seen as the healthy state.
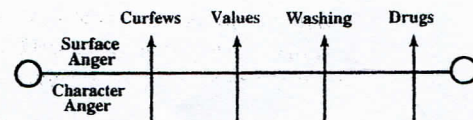

	Curfews	Values	Washing	Drugs
Surface Anger
Character Anger

Figure 4
Character Anger Surfacing

The Formation of Character Feelings

The child develops its basic character mainly through its relationship with the primary parenting figures. Included in the basic character, of course, are the character feelings. These develop early in life and are deeply rooted in the personality.

To explain how the primary parenting relationship affects the development of the character feelings, one can consider Berne's (1961) concept of a stack of pennies. He wrote that an individual with a "trauma-free life" (p. 53) will have a straight stack of pennies (Figure 5a). Those who have various traumas in their lives will have bent pennies which leave the stack unstable (Figure 5b). Finally, Berne indicated
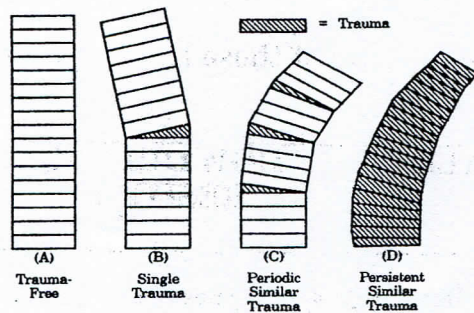
Figure 5.
Types of Trauma
(Figures 5a, 5b, and 5c are from
Berne, 1961, p. 53, Figures 4a, 4b, 4c)

that one can have a series of periodic similar traumas (Figure 5c). The formation of character feelings involves an extension of Figure 5c, as shown in Figure 5d.

Diagram 5d shows a child's experience of parents in a case in which there are mini-traumas of a consistent type every day. Thus, every penny is bent daily in a consistent fashion. Indeed, as noted by Holmes (1995), this scenario leads to a cumulative effect. For instance, if a child is humiliated every day, then after a time he or she will begin to expect such treatment. So he or she will behave in such away that humiliation is likely to result and will interpret parental behavior as humiliating even when it is not. This causes more pennies to bend in the same direction, and thus expectations and games become more ingrained.

As a further example of how character feelings are formed, I will consider parenting styles along the smothering—abandonment continuum (Figure 6). This refers to the psychological separation of the child from the parent. If the parenting style falls outside the normal range, then some unhealthy basic character feeling will result. (For a similar perspective, see Bowlby, 1973/1987).

The separation scale has two extremes, one at each end of the continuum, with normal range being in the middle. The right side is the smothering extreme.

This is the case when the child is smothered or overprotected by the parents. Children at the first stage of overprotection most often develop a mild angry character, if this parenting style is consistent throughout childhood. This is shown by the mild anger section of the continuum and is also described well by Levy (1943). The stack of pennies for this child is bent each day in a consistent manner so that the feeling of mild anger results.

This child will seem to be basically angry. This attitude will pervade all aspects of his or her life in one form or another. In children, this anger is often directed at peers. This most often results in a decrease in the number of playmates for the child, which means he or she will further gravitate to the parents for interpersonal contact. Thus we can see the cumulative effect as shown in Figure 5d.

If the smothering is more extreme, there are two possibilities. The child may develop an outright aggressive character, with spitting, hitting, and other forms of physical violence used against both the parents and other children. This anger is more extreme than the previous type of anger. The individual who develops a basic aggressive character is an unfortunate one, because he or she is likely to come into contact with the authorities a number of times during his or her life, particularly during adolescence.

The second possibility is that the child will become passive and dependent. This will usually lead to either a sad or a scared character. This child does not have an angry reaction to the smothering, but is instead more accepting and does not fight it. Hence the more passive emotions of fear or sadness may develop. If the
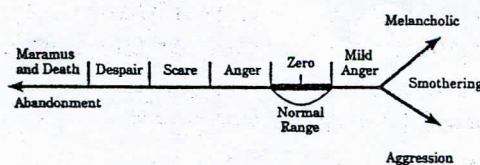

Figure 6
The Separation Scale

smothering is done by a powerful, controlling parent, this form of reaction is more likely. With the other anger type, the smothering comes from a more doting, noncontrolling attitude.

On the other side of the separation scale is the desertion or abandonment extreme, the opposite of overprotection. These children were under-protected and forced to stand on their own two feet before they were emotionally ready. Often this is the oldest child, who is given the respon-sibility of looking after younger siblings before he or she is psychologically capable of doing so. In others cases, parents who have their own problems may be restricted in how much love and nurturing they give to their children. This leaves the child feeling emotionally abandoned.

Obviously, parents can be physically and psychologically unavailable in varying degrees. The more severe the unavailability, the more damaged the resulting character feeling in the child. If the parenting is just outside the normal range, then the child will develop an angry character. Statements such as, "It's not fair," are common for children in this group. This anger is not severe, but the child who is consis-tently raised in this way will develop an angry character, which is basically an attempt at paying back the parents for leaving him or her.

If the unavailability of the parents is more prolonged and pronounced, the child will be-come anxious or scared. Some phobias result from the basic scare that a child feels in re-sponse to his or her abandonment. At this point the child has gone past the "It's not fair" stage and realizes that the parents are serious about being psychologically unavailable. In response, the child feels insecure and scared: "I don't know what to do" or "Can I cope?" are common thoughts of children in this position. A scared character results from this type of childhood. Some children, however, cover it up by being angry on the surface. In these cases it is neces-sary to get under the surface feeling and find out what is really below. It should also be realized that it is emotional abandonment that is being referred to here. The parents may provide good physical protection—such as a roof over the child's head, food, and clothing—but they are emotionally unavailable.

When parents are psychologically distant from a child, he or she may move into the despair group. At this point the child has gone through the anger and scare and becomes despairing about life. Such children consider giving up because life seems too bad. They tend to have poor emotional development, be apathetic, display rocking behavior, have a weak cry, sleep excessively, and show little spontaneous excite-ment. This leads to the sad, melancholic, or depressive character. This person sees no hope and hence feels hopeless. There are not too many people who are of a true melancholic character; in most cases in which people are diagnosed with endogenous depression, the depression is merely covering another feeling. With the mobilization of feelings such as anger and excitement, the sad or depressed feelings automatically diminish. With a true melancholic character, this will not happen. The melancholic feeling will best be diminished through the use of the transferential relationship.

The final extreme group is marasmus and death. Whereas in despair the child considers giving up, in marasmus the child actually gives up and so will not even give a weak cry for help. Such children have been abandoned psychologi-cally and physically. Without physical or psy-chological attention, a child will develop mental and physical deterioration, even to the point of death (as was described by Berne, 1964, p. 14). This tends to occur to children in large institu-tions who are rarely picked up or touched.

Children in the normal range of the separation scale develop the basic feeling of being loved. They know that their parents basically like them and will look after them. They do not fear being abandoned, nor do they feel smothered or stifled. In adult life they are capable of loving others because they have a loving character. Those who do not fall in the normal range are not capable of truly loving another individual. That only becomes possible after they have been through some remedial program, which permits the alteration of basic character.

As a consequence, we can see that character feelings result from what happened to the child in its relationship with its parents. This refers to the overall flavor of the relationship over the entire childhood and not to specific incidents. If, overall, the child was smothered, then he or she

will be basically angry or dependent. If, overall, the child was underprotected, then he or she will have a scared, angry, or despairing character. Finally, if throughout childhood the child was neither smothered nor deserted, then he or she will develop a happy/loving character. Each one of these has a different consistently bent stack of pennies leading it to a different character feeling.

Finally, it is instructive to note the similarity between character feelings and what Goulding and Goulding (1979) called a third-degree impasse: "The *third degree impasse* is one in which the patient experiences himself as *always* having been whatever it is he experiences. . . . He doesn't experience his feelings as being the result of parental injunctions and a decision to adapt, but rather as his natural state of being. He was 'born' that way, he states" (pp. 47-48). Consequently, in descriptive terms, a character feeling and a third-degree impasse feeling are similar. The pennies were consistently distorted from a very young age so the person feels he or she was born that way.

Character Feelings are Not Rackets

English (1971, 1972, 1976) in her work on rackets wrote about rackets and real feelings. Such feelings tend to be repetitive and stereotyped. They are also substitutes for real feelings. That is, at the point of having an authentic reaction to the environment, the person substitutes another feeling for the original one. Character feelings have this repetitive quality and can sometimes be misdiagnosed as a racket. The following case illustrates this point.

This is the case of Sandra, as she was prior to treatment. On the surface she had clear access to some common feelings, such as happiness, fear, and sadness, but she rarely expressed anger. As far as her character feelings went, she was of a scared character. In psychiatric terminology, she would have been diagnosed as having endogenous anxiety. The status of her affect can be diagrammed as shown in Figure 7.

As noted earlier, a feature of character feelings is that they surface from time to time in various forms. Hence we have the arrows in Figure 7. Some of the forms in which character scare can surface are panic attacks and phobias,

particularly agoraphobia. Character scare can also surface in the form of horror stories that the individual may tell himself or herself (e.g., ruminating about family members dying, going crazy, losing control, and so on). Such events may also occur in the individual's dreams.
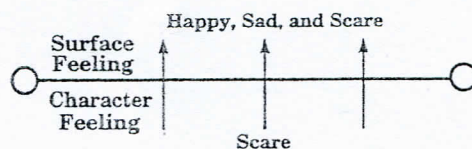

Figure 7
Two Levels of Sandra's Feelings

This surfacing tendency of character feelings is productive as it allows the character feeling to be dealt with directly. Unfortunately, as described earlier, it is common for such feelings to be misdiagnosed as a racket. Previously I described how character feelings result from the natural emotional reactions to parenting styles that are present every day and hence become deeply ingrained in the personality. However, character feelings have a repetitive quality about them, as do rackets, and this is one reason they are misdiagnosed. However, character feelings are not substitutes for another feeling and therefore cannot be called a racket.

The way to treat character feelings, in part, is to encourage them to surface and then deal with them appropriately. Unfortunately, if the feeling is misdiagnosed as a racket, then the usual therapeutic procedure is to confront it and encourage the patient to turn off the racket and address the "real" feeling. Temporary feelings can be turned on and off while character feelings cannot. Hence, misdiagnosing a surfaced character feeling as a racket is countertherapeutic.

When dealt with appropriately, a surfaced character feeling allows the character to be treated directly. This technique will only work if the overall therapeutic relationship permits it. In Sandra's case, her scared character resulted from an infantile relationship with a mother who

made her grow up before she was ready. Her mother was narcissistic, had little Nurturing Parent, and consequently tended to use the Parent in her Child ego state to care for Sandra. Such a patient will come to treatment wanting a competent Nurturing Parent but expecting to be given the Parent in the Child ego state. If the therapist can successfully confront and avoid giving this "little parent" parenting, then character change is more likely to result. This sounds much easier than it is, as the patient will unconsciously use a whole series of subtle maneuvers to set up a general relationship in which she does not get looked after. The therapist's goal is to seek out these maneuvers, confront them, and offer an overall relationship in which the patient gets competent help. Since these maneuvers are so subtle, it can take quite a while to recognize them. While this is being done, one also deals with the surfaced character feeling in the same way as a temporary feeling.

To summarize, let us first consider the feelings of sadness and scare. For instance, Sandra experiences scare as the result of a surfaced character feeling. The procedure is as follows:

1. Identify scare in the body. Where does the patient feel the scare?
2. Offer physical and/or verbal reassurance for 10-15 minutes.
3. This caring *must* result in some diminishing of the scare in the body. If it does not, then cease the caring.

If the reassurance is being accepted, then in that time period (perhaps a bit longer) the patient will feel satiated and not want any more. Those who do not feel satiated are doing this for other reasons. Under these conditions the reassurance is stopped.

Surfaced character feelings that are dealt with in this way are productive to the treatment of character. Consequently, the way by which a patient surfaces character feelings must be actively sought by the therapist from the beginning of treatment.

Transference and the Treatment of Character

In addition to dealing with character feelings when they surface, one can approach them through the transferential relationship. Since these feelings developed from repetitive, maladaptive parenting on a daily basis, one uses the same approach to develop the new character feeling. One begins by establishing a transferential relationship without a symbiosis. At this point, however, there is a "battle" between therapist and client in which the client endeavors to establish the same archaic relationship that he or she is used to (i.e., the transference neurosis), and the therapist endeavors to establish a new relationship that will, among other things, alter the character feeling.

As a case in point, consider Figure 6 and the client who would fall into the despair section of the separation scale. He or she will feel this feeling daily, in either a rudimentary form or in a highlighted form when the feeling surfaces. Once the therapeutic relationship forms, the same feelings will obviously continue. So initially the transference will support the pathology of the despairing character. There is nothing that can be done about this in the beginning, as the therapist must establish the basis of the relationship so that day after day pennies begin to be realigned, and unfortunately that takes time. Thus, not playing the games in which the client ends up despairing and actively seeking an alternate feeling to the despair is indicated. Then the mechanism to develop that feeling is established, and hopefully the client uses it regularly. Also, avoiding the maneuvers as was mentioned earlier is of central importance.

After the nonsymbiotic attachment is formed, the client will go through the separation stages, as indicated by the presence of negative transference. Thus the attachment decreases in intensity until finally it plays no great part in the individual's life besides warm memories and feelings for the therapist. Also, the pennies are realigned so the individual now gets new day-by-day experiences of a happy/secure character feeling. For more on how this works, readers are referred to the treatment style known as psychoseparation (White, 1985). This is particularly relevant to those clients who have character feelings that result from difficulties on the separation scale.

Summary

This article represents an introduction to the

concept of character feelings, in particular, how these feelings differ from temporary or surface feelings even when they surface. These feelings are often misdiagnosed as rackets, and the difference between them is demonstrated. That is, a character feeling is not a substitute for another feeling even though it can be repetitive like a racket. Finally, treatment strategies are presented. Character feelings can be treated when they surface or by establishing a transference relationship that counters the preexisting feeling.

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