DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 607 CG 015 563

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TITLE Surprised by the Other: Choice Points in Relationships.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (89th, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-26, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Research; *Decision Making; *Friendship; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Perspective Taking; State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *Significant Other

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that most individuals assume that they have realistic perceptions of the significant people in their lives, be they family, friends or adversaries. However, under special circumstances, images of significant others may be shattered as they are seen "for the first time." A phenomenological analysis of 60 descriptions suggest that this transformation occurs in one of four basic types of contexts. For example, persons may become empathically aware of others when they are seen responding emotionally to an unanticipated occurrence, such as the death of a friend. Fundamentally, the situation in which this new awareness of the other occurs is one in which a person is deeply engaged and which strongly speaks to basic values and concerns. But this new awareness does not simply happen; it requires an implicit decision to remain open to the implications of the other's behavior and to allow one's preconceptions to be challenged. The characteristics of this decision process are in contrast with decision making as it is typically conceptualized in the psychological literature. (Author/KMF)

SURPRISED BY THE OTHER: CHOICE POINTS IN RELATIONSHIPS

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA, August 1981.

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Imagine, for a moment, discovering that someone who has an important role in your life is really quite a different sort of person than you thought he or she was. I suspect that at first most of us will think in terms of letdowns or disillusionment and thus the feeling tone accompanying this imagined prospect would be one of discomfort or uneasiness. For example, we might imagine that a colleague and trusted friend is promoted and suddenly becomes preoccupied with gaining power while apparently disowning what we had thought was a relationship of genuine mutual concern. Fortunately, not all awakenings are so disappointing. In this presentation I will address an experience of discovery which is primarily gratifying.

Jacob Needleman has given a striking illustration of this kind of experience in a recent book (Needleman, 1980). While spending a week at a major Catholic University as a guest lecturer, he had to share accomodations with a priest named Father Vincent. From Needleman's perspective, Fr. Vincent was an annoying, puzzling, and unattractive person to be with: his major activities consisted of watching television, guzzling beer, eating and belching, and only when Needleman invited him to play cards did he show much sign of life. Not until their last night together, did the two men become involved in a conversation which allowed Needleman to recognize that Fr. Vincent had an extraordinary spiritual presence and sensitivity even while he was indifferent to ordinary social amenities.

Through the vantage point of this phenomena of surprise -- which I call "seeing a significant other as if for the first time" -- I will offer some

reflections and observations on the kinds of situations in which such moments of empathy become possible, as well as on the role of decision in this experience. When someone we think we know well surprises us, for better or worse, we are faced with a decision as to how to respond to the person at that moment, and with respect to the future of the relationship. Further, we are apt to ask ourselves how we could have so seriously misread this person.

Most of the time we take it for granted that our perceptions and attitudes with regard to the significant people in our lives -- be they family, friends, or colleagues -- are both fair and realistic. Within an everyday attitude of preoccupation with specific problems and tasks, our conceptions of most of the people we know can be characterized as having a high degree of continuity and stability (e.g., Hastorf, Schneider, and Polefka, 1970). Given this attitude of relative inattention to the nuances of interpersonal experience, growth and change in our relationships may appear to be so gradual as to be almost imperceptible. Under special circumstances, however, our image of a significant other may dissolve or shatter as we come to see him or her "as if for the first time." Such moments of surprise and of immediate and empathetic understanding render our previous notion of the person inadequate at least. Obviously, I am not just speaking of an experience of seeing a person differently than before, but of coming to a recognition of that person in his or her individuality and basic humanity. This "awakening" to the other is likely to be a milestone in our relationship with that person, and has ramifications for our view of ourselves as well as for the future of the relationship. Later, I will give several brief examples of this experience which should help to bring these points to life.

Being Chosen and Choosing

"Science," writes the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 159),

"manipulates things and gives up living in them... it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals." (By "real world" he means the world as it is given in experience). His statement also applies to much of psychological theory and research; no doubt this is a state of affairs which is not entirely avoidable. Yet phenomenological psychology aims to return to phenomena, to dwell in them and to circumscribe them. There is a section from Martin Buber's I and Thou (1962)[2] which may serve as an aid and a pointer in this return. This in spite of the awkwardness of its syntax! Buber's discussion also will help us to see more clearly the role of choice in relation to our experience of being surprised by another.

> The Thou meets me through Grace--it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being.
>
> The Thou meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, undergoing and undertaking in one; any undertaking of the whole being is bound to resemble an undergoing, for it does away with all partial actions, and thus with any sense of action or undertaking which always depends on limited exertions.
>
> The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my own agency, nor can it take place without me. I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou.
>
> All real living is meeting.
>
> (Buber, 1962, p. 15)

First, a disclaimer. I am not suggesting that the phenomenon which I have been researching is directly equivalent to what Buber calls the I-Thou encounter. However, as will become evident there are significant areas of overlap. For example, when Buber speaks of being chosen and choosing, undergoing and undertaking, he is using words which very much fit the descriptions I have collected.

Both the language and the thought with which Buber presents us here is quite different from that which we are used to as psychologists or in everyday discourse for that matter. This kind of language may offend our theoretical

sensibilities, but it also has the power to provoke us into thoughtfulness.

It is evident that Buber regards meeting between persons as the event which most fundamentally is the occasion for the development of our personal identities. It has been a long time since Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) suggested that psychology and psychiatry should be the study of interpersonal relations rather than of the abstract individual. And yet there has not been any wholehearted abandonment, in either discipline, of the notion of the encapsulated ego. Many psychologists still appear to believe that our knowledge of others is at the level of an inference.

Buber's discussion of the interplay of choosing and being chosen may strike us as strange. From the perspective of our more vigilant, categorical, and carefully anticipating stance towards reality, we see ourselves as carefully weighing alternatives before moving towards the unknown. Here the seat of choosing and decision making is thought of as a carefully protected domain "within" our own personality. Thus life seems to be a sequence of never-ending dilemmas.

Social psychological research has often conceptualized decision making in a similar manner. A person may be thought of as external to, and equidistant from, two or more alternatives, deliberating about the pros and cons of each alternative. It has long been evident (e.g., Simon, 1957) that people do not weigh out alternatives in the highly systematic and rational fashion that would appear ideal to a logically minded and dispassionate observer. But the notion of deliberation proceeding decision, and good decision making involving a sustained exploration of alternatives, is still taking for granted in much of the literature. Janis and Mann (1977), for example, have developed seven "ideal" procedural criteria which they believe are appropriate for evaluating any decision-

making process. According to them:

> The decision maker, to the best of his ability and within his information-processing capabilities
> 1. thoroughly canvasses a wide range of alternative courses of action;
> 2. surveys the full range of objectives to be fulfilled and the values implicated by the choice;
> 3. carefully weighs whatever he knows about the costs and risks of negative consequences, as well as the positive consequences, that could flow from each alternative;
> 4. intensively searches for new information relevant to further evaluation of the alternatives.
>
> Janis and Mann, (1977, p. 11)

These kinds of criteria may be useful in promoting good decision making in specific contexts, such as purchasing or management. But it is very doubtful whether these criteria have much relevance, either at an empirical or a normative level, for the decision-making that is so much a part of our personal lives. The quote from Buber suggests otherwise. If we pay attention to our own experience, we find that in many instances we discover, surprisingly, that the action or line of thought in which we are engaged implies a decision already made.[3] Thus, I think we would have to agree with Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 435) that

> In reality the deliberation follows the decision, and it is my secret decision which brings the motives to light, for it would be difficult to conceive what the force of a motive might be in the absence of a decision which it confirms or to which it runs counter.

One last comment on the quote from Buber: most of us probably recognize something of ourselves in Shapiro's (1965, p. 33) description of the obsessive who equates pushing or driving him or herself with action and freedom. As Buber suggests, acting with the whole of one's being may not resemble what we ordinarily think of as choice or action. Indeed, it may be viewed, subsequently, as an almost involuntary lapse. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that Janis

and Mann (1977, p. 13) recognize that someone who takes their criteria for good decision making too seriously, perhaps applying them even to minor issues, would be caught up in obsessional ruminations.

The Question of Context

At this point I want to address the question of what kinds of interpersonal contexts can evoke from us a response of our whole being, such attentiveness to the other, that we might speak of seeing him or her as if for the first time. This question of contexts is important since the stability of our perception of significant others presupposes, in part, a certain continuity in terms of the circumstances within which we relate to them. Before presenting a descriptive classification and an analysis of these interpersonal contexts, I want to touch briefly on the kind of "data" and approach on which this discussion is based.

Over the last several years, I have asked a number of people to describe for me their experience of seeing a significant other "as if for the first time." In most cases, their descriptions have been in the form of written accounts. Altogether I have collected sixty descriptions, seven of which emerged through lengthy interviews while the remainder are in written form. I have gathered these descriptions from students, colleagues, and friends: people with a diversity of backgrounds, personal histories, and outlooks, but obviously not a random sample from any clearly defined population. My approach was within a phenomenological attitude, trying to understand these experiences in an as open and unbiased way as possible, interpreting these events within their own context, while also uncovering essential themes or constituents across examples.

According to these descriptions, there are basically four types of contexts in which an awakening to the other takes place.

In the first type, the significant other person initiates a change in the

relationship. Specifically, he or she directly and intentionally reveals to us, in a way which engages our attention, aspects of an "inner life" previously hidden. The occasion for this self-disclosure may be a crisis within the relationship itself, or in the other person's life in general. This self-disclosure can take place in a variety of ways, but one example will suffice for the purpose of illustration. A single parent who is very much involved with being a good mother to her four-and-a-half year old son Davey describes feeling taken aback when he approached her looking very determined and said that he was angry at her. In spite of her initial surprise and displeasure, this mother listened to her son as he told her that he was annoyed at her for kissing him goodbye in front of his friends at school. When he was asked what she should do instead, Davey suggested that they shake hands. At first his mother was amazed, and then she realized something she had not seen in this way before: "...Davey had a right to react in his own way, in objecting to the way I do things. He had a right to express himself whether it would make me happy or sad, because he was an individual, a person in his own right, that was learning to think a little on his own, and feeling concerning certain subjects."

The second type of context is a variation on the first. Again, both of the persons become involved in a face-to-face interaction, unlike the ones which ordinarily occur in the relationship. Here, though, the initiative comes from oneself rather than the other person. It is in the context of one's own initiative and self-disclosure that the other responds by revealing himself or herself in a particularly poignant way. One's own approach to the other is, once more, in the context of a situation of some urgency or crisis. An example of this kind of transformation was provided by a student named Sheila who described a specific episode in her relationship with her roommate in a college dormitory. Sheila was having a serious conflict with her teacher, a nun. Be-

cause of other circumstances in her life, she was finding it very difficult to maintain a sense of perspective about the conflict with her teacher. She considered confiding in her roommate, a person Sheila ordinarily felt comfortable with, but hesitated because she too was a nun. Sheila feared that her roommate would side with a fellow nun. Finally, however, Sheila took a "leap of faith" and confided in her. She discovered, with a real sense of surprise, that her roommate was both accepting and understanding, thereby giving her the opportunity to see her as a person rather than as just a nun.

The third type of context is distinctly different. Sometimes we gain a deeper awareness and appreciation of another when we see this person involved in a situation which is part of his or her world apart from the world which we share with him or her. Here it is not a matter of a face-to-face interaction, but of one's becoming attentive to another as he or she is meaningfully engaged in some activity or situation which has no direct reference to us. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we allow ourselves to understand the person's activity in terms other than its relation, in any immediate sense, to our own situation. One example is provided by a woman who attended a Christmas party and dance with her husband. The event was sponsored by his company, and so the occasion gave her an opportunity to see him interact with his colleagues. Most significantly, she sat in the audience with everyone else as her husband directed the company choir. During this performance she became aware of her husband in a new way, precisely as someone who was more than just her husband, someone who had a life, a series of involvements beyond his involvement with her. Her experience was not, in any thematic way, a sense of being excluded, as it might well have been. Instead, she wrote, "I can remember carrying with me throughout the remainder of the evening the strangest feeling that, in a sense, I had met someone new."

The fourth type of context is one which brings two people together in an unsual way. Due to a special set of circumstances, neither anticipated nor planned, the participants find themselves sharing a context of meaning in a way that is discordant with the relationship they have had up until that point. When there is a history of long standing and intense antagonism, or where people have come to take ach other for granted, it may well take an extraordinary convergence of events to bring about change. The following example shows this vividly. Heather who had been working in a social service agency for several years became very annoyed when a new person was hired, contrary to policy, without consultation with her and the rest of the staff. To make matters worse, the new person, Linda, struck Heather as extremely manipulative, condescending, and self-serving. Heather's discomfort with Linda continued unabated over a period of months, reaching at times almost unbearable proportions. The episode which allowed Heather to see Linda in a new light occured one day when Heather came to work and found Linda crying and in deep sorrow. She asked Linda what was wrong and found out that a close friend of hers was dying from a terminal illness. This friend was also a woman whom Heather deeply admired and appreciated. That afternoon they were able to share their sorrow as Heather saw Linda as a person with human feelings, vulnerability and pain.

Values and Participation

What, then, do all these four types of contexts have in common? The German philosopher Max Scheler has said that a genuine understanding of a person depends on the person's making him or herself available to us (Scheler, 1970, pp. 224-225). Each of the sixty accounts of "seeing the other as if for the first time" describes situations which engage the other person wholeheartedly and at a highly personal level. Not only does the nature of involvement and

expression of feeling of the other person surprises us, but it strikes a responsive and empathic chord in us. The other's behavior and expressiveness is seen by us as a readily understandable manifestation of the person's basic humanity since the situation in which he or she is engaged is one which strongly speaks to our basic values and concerns.

Standing in the face of death is one such situation. It was mentioned as the occasion for the change in one's perception of the other in one fifth of the descriptions. Death is one of the basic horizons of human existence as especially Heidegger (1962) reminds us. Death brings us to the realization that our time is limited as is the time of those we love, and in the face of the urgency to which this realization gives rise our inhibitions and reservations may dissolve. The Dutch psychiatrist J. H. van den Berg (1975, p. 94) writes, "And the people we love, those few who are with us for a while, how could we love them if they did not grow and die? It is the light of death that makes them dear to us." The imminence of death also sweeps away the habitual roles and contexts which constitute our ordinary being together. Linda, who was very concerned about how her colleagues viewed her under other circumstances, cried freely when she heard about the illness of her friend.

Clearly then, in this experience of being surprised by the other there is a powerful shift in the context for the relationship, and in the manner in which one responds to the other. One's response involves more than just paying attention to the person as one discovers some new fact about him or her. In The Visible and the Invisible (1968, pp. 10-11), Merleau-Ponty describes a moment in which we live in the "private" world of another as we participate in what has engaged this person. Similarly,

Scheler (1970, p. 167) has written, "The person of another can only be disclosed to me by my joining in the performance of his acts, either cognitively, by 'understanding' and vicarious 're-living,' or morally, by 'following in his footsteps'." [emphasis in original]. The notion of participation is what I want to stress here. It is not a case of our gaining a sort of detached awareness of the internal perspective of the other. Rather, we allow ourselves to be addressed by the other person's visible involvement, in a sense placing ourselves in his or her world so that it compellingly unfolds for us. In Buber's words, this is both an undertaking and an undergoing.

This is where we discover that we are already living out a decision: a decision to affirm the invitational aspect of the other's availability in these unusual circumstances. The ground for our participation can be understood as the discovery of basic values common to oneself and the other, values which previously either were not evident or were present only in a marginal way. (For an exposition on the intersubjective nature of values, see Scheler, 1973).

I would like to sum up this discussion of participation and values in this experience by paraphrasing George Kelly (1955, p. 523): a person chooses for himself, in a situation presenting the possibility of involvement with, or distancing from, a significant other person that alternative through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and affirmation of his own basic values.

Decision and Dilemma

So far it may seem that this experience involves a decision, but neither dilemma nor deliberation. This is not the whole story. The extraordinary circumstances which make possible this transformation give way to those which are routine. The assimilation of a particular moment of deep appreciation of

the other person into ongoing and habitual modes of relating may be difficult or threatening. Thus one woman said, "If I were to think of my brother the way I saw him before the change in our relationship, I would have no reason to think of him." Initially, we may tend to hold onto that which we have recently discovered about the other person--for example, that a co-worker is caring rather than callous as we previously supposed--as the real truth of the matter. Yet the person who is caring and trustworthy at one moment may act in quite a different manner in subsequent situations. Also, insofar as we come to the realization that our previously restrictive and unduly negative view of the other was both self-protective and all too convenient we may be faced with a painful struggle with ourselves.

Nevertheless, the descriptions I have collected suggest that in most instances where there were possibilities for ongoing contact, a deepening of the relationship followed the experience of 'seeing the other as if for the first time." This is not surprising, but perhaps it becomes more understandable if we remember Scheler's (1970, p. 156) famous dictum that the essence of another person becomes manifest only in and through an act of love. In fact, the most enduring changes appear to have taken place in those relationships which we most readily associate with the attenuation of strictly defined roles and unequal status and the possibility of love. Friendship and relationships among siblings in their mature years are obvious examples.

Conclusion

For years the gestalt therapists (Perls et al. 1951; Perls, 1971) have discussed many of the issues which I have mentioned in this paper. Perls has suggested that genuine "contact" with another person occurs spontaneously

when we are deeply in touch with ourselves, and is not the result of deliberate effort. At such moments--creative moments indeed as we have seen--we break away from roles and patterns, and are open to the novelty of the situation. Within the gestalt therapy orientation, such creative moments, be they in the context of relationships or other life issues, are explained with reference to "organismic self-regulation." (Latner, 1974, pp. 11-15). However, to do justice to the specifically social and psychological nature of our existence, we need an approach which focuses on personal values and their role in guiding our actions and decisions. There is no longer a lack of research and theorizing which recognizes the importance of human values, and which, in addition, does not adhere to a strictly causal analysis of behavior. Instead, a number of researchers have adopted a view of human motivation which is similar to that suggested by Merleau-Ponty (see above, pp. 2-3). It is interesting to note what kinds of problems these researchers address. Smelser and Erikson (1980) have brought together some of the contributions of these thinkers in a recent book entitled Themes of Work and Love in Adulthood. The contributors to this volume are sociologists and psychologists who are concerned with the dilemmas and satisfactions of adult life, its continuities and discontinuities in terms of values, decisions, relationships and, obviously, work and love. These writers, who include Daniel Levinson, Robert Gould and Janet Giele, speak directly of the actuality and complexity of life events. Why the difference in terms of directness and perspective within this field? A number of reasons can be given. These researchers have been influenced by disciplines such as history and literature which emphasize a qualitative approach to the person. There is less of a tradition of orthodoxy in terms of research methods in adult developmental psychology than in other areas within the discipline. Perhaps there is also another reason. A number of social psychologists have expressed doubt that any but a few psychological theories are used very much, even by

professional psychologists, to make sense out of everyday experience. When we are talking about issues of love and work in adulthood, we are talking about issues which each of us struggle with, more or less satisfactorily but seldom easily or without some sense or urgency. It may just be that this affinity with these issues provides psychologists with a motive to stay closer to the "real" world.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Los Angeles, August 24, 1981, as part of a symposium entitled, "Dilemma as Threat or Challenge: Phenomenological Perspectives."I am indebted to my wife, Mical Goldfarb, for critical comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

2. This translation is based partly on the original German text and partly on the translations rendered by Walter Kaufman and McGregor Smith. My thanks to Professor James Risser of the Seattle University Philosophy Department who helped with the re-translation.

3. Research in the area of prosocial behavior suggests that people either help almost immediately when asked or when an emergency situation arises or they don't help at all. (Fellner & Marshall, 1970; Latane & Darley, 1970).

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