Response to "Caught in the crossfire"

Thank you for sending me a copy of Thomas Joiner's paper (1). I see he is working in the tradition of James Coyne, taking an interpersonal, systems approach to depression. I had not run across his work before, and in fact only in the last year or two have I encountered James Coyne himself, and I am certainly guilty of not acknowledging the latter's ideas, such as when expressing them myself some years later (eg, 2). In the recent series of journal clubs I took with the Wellington psychiatric registrars (residents), we spent one session dealing with two of Coyne's papers (3,4) and the students considered them a revelation. So I think you are lucky to have Thomas Joiner in your department. I wish you many years of hedonic collaboration.

I found the Joiner paper interesting, and I have only one criticism which I will get out of the way first. I think it is confusing to use the terms "positive" feedback and "negative" feedback for "positively reinforcing" and "negatively reinforcing" feedback. In terms of feedback, positive and negative already have very precise meanings, of " deviation amplifying" and "deviation reducing" respectively; so, although I do not think there is any real danger of misunderstanding, I think we should, if possible, avoid semantic confusion. If "positively reinforcing feedback" is too much of a mouthful, what about "rewarding feedback" and "aversive feedback"? Of course, if you want to use ASCAP terminology, you could always use "anathetic feedback" and "catathetic feedback", as these are the meanings of those terms (to raise and lower self-esteem, respectively).

Joiner et al. studied mildly depressed college students and got their room-mates to rate them on a scale of "satisfactoriness as room-mates" five weeks later. They found that the depressed students were rated as less satisfactory than non-depressed students, and they try to account for it by the signals the depressed students gave to their room-mates. The authors make the point that depressives request both anathetic and catathetic feedback at the same time, the anathetic to boost their lowered self-esteem, and the catathetic to validate their low self-esteem. Any signal which boosts them invalidates them, and any signal which validates them puts them down.

This crazy and unsatisfactory interpersonal exchange reminds me of Bateson and his double-bind (5) (e.g., "I command you to disobey me!" Whatever you do, you disobey this two-edged command). The four criteria for a double bind are: 1) the eliciting of two incompatible responses at the same time, both of which are punished; 2) frequent repetition of the foregoing; 3) inability to "leave the field"; and 4) inability to metacommunicate (comment on the double-bind). These criteria seem to be met by the situation of Joiner's depressed students and their room-mates. So, if the room-mates felt "double-bound", it is not surprising that they found their depressed friends unrewarding to be with.

I think it might be interesting to apply our "hierarchical basic plan" system to these students.

(insert Table 1 about here)

It is possible that the depressed students are using affiliative (closeness-eliciting) behaviour that is trying to establish a hedonic asymmetrical relationship, with the depressed student in the one-down position. The two components of their signal (eliciting rewarding and aversive feedback) relate to two different aspects of the relationship they are trying to get. The reward-eliciting signals are part of their attempt to get a hedonic relationship, of the type, "I like you, you are my friend". But the signals which elicit aversive reinforcing feedback are their attempt to establish themselves in the one-down position; they are submission signals; they are requests to be treated as a subordinate.

One can compare the depressed students with de Waal's chimpanzees seeking "conditional reconciliation". This is a kissing and hugging session which follows the fight and the loser's submission. The reconciliation is contingent on the loser establishing the fact that the other is now the dominant partner in the relationship. Once this is established, and the loser is reassured that the winner accepts his submission, they start the hedonic process of hugging. It's as if the depressed students are trying to do the two things simultaneously, to have the hugging before they have reassured themselves that the room-mate has accepted their "submission". Until they get this reassurance they are going to continue to be anxious and depressed, and feel that the relationship is in the agonic mode.

Another reason that the room-mates may be uncomfortable is that they do not want an asymmetrical relationship. They may want to be equal, and the offers of submission are unwelcome. Not only are they being double-bound, they are being double-bound to achieve something that may be repellant to them.

Why are the depressed students seeking the one-down position in an asymmetrical relationship with a room-mate who is a peer and should be equal? One possibility is that they have difficulty in establishing and maintaining equal hedonic relationships, either as a personality trait ("authoritarian" personalities) or because they are depressed. Being

depressed, they cannot cope with either the attempt to be one-up, or the maintenance of an equal agonic relationship (which is much the same thing, if both room-mates are competing for the one-up position). As authoritarian personalities, they are operating according to the pernicious Peter Principle that "he who is not one up is one down", possibly learned on the school playground.   Another factor affecting the room-mate relationship is the self-focus which is characteristic of depression. It is difficult to enjoy the company of someone who is self-focused. Why are depressives self-focused? We tackled this question in our debate about levels of submission. Voluntary submission is other-focused; therefore depressive submission has to be self-focused. Self-focused submission is more submissive, and therefore more effective. Other-focused submission (flattery, ingratiation, appeasement, arse-hole creeping, etc.,) is a form of social climbing, and therefore not all that submissive. In a hierarchy of X, Y and Z, active submission by Z to X is a threat to Y, whereas the self-focused submission of depression is not threatening to anybody.

    The two room-mates are a dyadic relationship and therefore focused submission is not going to threaten anyone. If one were to counsel these students, one could encourage the depressed one to flatter his room-mate, replacing involuntary submission with voluntary submission. To the non-depressed room-mate, one could say (apart from warning him about the anticipated flattery, which might be as unwelcome as what went before) that he should satisfy both of his room-mate's needs by saying something like, "you are a wimp, but I love you". Perhaps the dominance could be expressed physically, as in play wrestling, and the affiliation both physically and verbally. In other words, they need to have a fight, and then go to the bar and be reconciled over a drink.

Cultural factors

Family backgrounds vary very much in robustness, or "rough and tumble" qualities, both within and between cultures. Some males seeking friendship are aggressive, expecting the other to be equally aggressive, and to indulge in a certain amount of play fighting. Males from other backgrounds do not do this, and might find it off-putting, or even misinterpret it as an attempt to establish dominance. For instance, the Maori welcoming ceremony is extremely aggressive and frightening for the guest being welcomed; it is only knowledge of the convention that enables one to stand one's ground and wait for the friendly stage of the ceremony. Were such cultural factors relevant to the miscommunication between the depressed students and their room-mates?

    An after-thought. We have said that depression is one way of achieving low self-esteem, but it is only one way among many, and it can be done by philosophy and religion or it may come naturally. It is possible to be perfectly happy while believing truly that one is worthless. In our predictions about depressives, it is important to eliminate these voluntary low self-esteem characters. Therefore we need a depression scale which does not include self-esteem items. And the reverse holds. We need a self-esteem scale which does not include any depressive items other than those directly related to ideas of self-worth. In most situations our predictions about the depressed and happy low self-esteem people would be different, and in some cases opposite. Basically, the happy low self-esteem people love themselves, and the depressed low self-esteem people hate themselves.

    I hope that the approaches of the ASCAPIANS and the JAMERS will be cross-fertilising (I think this is a metaphor about two hermaphrodite individuals and therefore does not contain any implication of asymmetry of any kind!). Certainly, I have found this to be the case with "Caught in the crossfire". They are sufficiently like us to be compatible, but sufficiently different to be stimulating company.

References

1. Joiner TE, Alfano MS & Metalsky GI (1993) Caught in the crossfire: depression, self-consistency, self-enhancement and the response of others. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 12, 113-134.
2. Price, J.S. (1991) Homeostasis or change? A systems theory approach to depression. British Journal of Medical Psychology, 64, 331-344.
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4. Coyne JC, Downey G & Boergers J (1992) Depression in families: a systems perspective. In Developmental Perspectives on Depression ed D Cicchetti & SL Toth. New York: University

of Rochester Press. Pp. 211-249.
5. Haley, J. (1976) Development of a theory: a history of a research project. In <u>Double Bind: The Foundation of the Communicational Approach to the Family</u>, (eds C.E.Sluzki and D.C.Ransom). New York: Grune and Stratton. Pp 59-110.

Table 1. Some characteristics of the hypothesised basic hierarchical plans.

	Agonic mode	Hedonic mode
a) stable hierarchy		
dominant basic plan	punitive indignant "keep him down"	protective caring "improve him"
egalitarian basic plan	rivalrous one-upmanship	sharing friendship
subordinate basic plan	fearful coerced into obedience "placate him"	respectful voluntary obedience "honour him"
b) change in hierarchy (second order basic plans)		
up-hierarchy beh-avioral package	elevated mood rebellion "bring him down"	elevated mood receipt of honours "surpass him"
down-hierarchy beh-avioral package denial of former	depressed mood attitude high rank former rank	philosophical devaluation of

(Note: In order to take account of variation along the "horizontal dimension" we could have produced separate tables for close, middling and distant relationships, but this would not have altered the classification we have suggested.)