

**PSYCHIC NUMBING IN INNER CITY ADOLESCENTS REFERRED FOR SPECIAL
EDUCATION ASSESSMENT**

by

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Abstract

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Psychic numbing is a reaction to extreme life events and affects the capacity to symbolize and integrate experience, impairing the ability bring cognitive controls or defense mechanisms to bear on affective experience. The premise of the study is that inner city life conditions constitute an extreme life event and result in a form of numbing. The subjects are 90 adolescents who live in public housing projects and 26 who do not. Following an interview, each subject was assigned a numbing score, then administered the WISC III, Rorschach, and Human Figure Drawing tests. The subjects' social histories were scored for the severity of life events. A group of experts was asked to identify the variables associated with psychic numbing, creating a numbing profile. A significant relationship was found between the numbing score and the severity of life stressors. The variables selected by the experts were found to be significant predictors of the numbing score. The implications of the findings are discussed in the context of a psychology of evil. Key Words: Psychic numbing, adolescents, inner city, stress, psychology of evil.

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The purpose of this study is to identify the effects of life in inner city public housing projects on adolescents. The underlying premise is that the prevailing life conditions, namely systemic generational poverty, hopelessness, pervasive violence, and intense frustration constitute an extreme life event, and that their adjustment is based on mechanisms similar to those identified in the survivors and/or victims of wars and concentration camps.

The problems of stress and resilience are approached differently by Lifton (1976,1979,1986) and by the overwhelming majority in the field of stress research. The hypothesis testing approach prevalent in the field, based on rigid methodological positivism, yielded a wealth of data, but the cumulative body of knowledge, as Kasl (1983) notes, has progressed little beyond common sense.

Lifton's methods are completely different. By conducting structured interviews with people who had been exposed to extreme life situations, such as Hiroshima survivors, concentration camp victims and victimizers, and Vietnam veterans, he explored their thoughts, their feelings, their coping strategies. He noticed similarities across persons and across situations. Based on his theories of personality and culture, and on the observed commonality of reactions to extreme situations, he proposed two psychological mechanisms of adjustment: psychic numbing and doubling, that are crucial for the understanding of the

psychology of adaptation to extreme situations.

Gergen (1982) argues that "the chief criterion for theoretical evaluation (by traditional standards) namely empirical validity (or its close associates, "truth value", "empirical content", and "resistance to falsification"), is inappropriately applied to theories of human conduct". He proposes as a replacement the "generative capacity" - the capacity to raise fundamental questions, to challenge the basic assumptions of a culture concerning social life, to provide alternatives for social action. Rapaport (1972) differentiates between the explanatory power of a theory and its explanatory appeal. Lifton's theory has major generative capacity and explanatory appeal; its explanatory power remains untested due to the divergence of methodology between his approach and the hypothesis testing approach prevailing in the field of stress research. The present project proposes to bridge - in part - this gap, by providing some experimental support for the mechanism of psychic numbing and shedding some light on the nature of what I feel is an important and needed concept.

Psychic Numbing: A Theoretical Discussion

In order to properly address the theoretical implications of numbing, a short presentation of Lifton's general theoretical approach is necessary.

Drawing on Freud and Erikson, Bowlby's (1958, 1969)

developmental theory, as well as Langer's (1953, 1962) and Cassirer's (1957) emphasis on symbolization, Lifton characterizes his approach as "formative - symbolic" since it "takes into account the increasing awareness of symbol formation as a fundamental characteristic of man's psychic life" (Lifton, 1976). The ongoing process of symbolization, the continuous creation and re-creation of images is, in Lifton's opinion, the essential, "basic" psychological process, an inner ordering that conveys meaning to life experiences: "in human mentation we receive no perception or stimuli nakedly, but inwardly re-create each exposure" (Lifton, 1976). Lifton's concept of image - an anticipatory interpretation of the environment and a scheme for action - is similar to Piaget's concept of representation. During the formative process, the images evolve into forms - more highly symbolized, complex, more enduring structures, the result of a more intricate re-creation of experience. Each image and form is at the same time a configuration in itself and part of larger configurations, or to use Lacan's (1966) words "like rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings". I believe that Lacan's (1966) view of this process is useful and relevant: each image is the intersection of an associative chain of images and may symbolize them; in turn, images may be divested of their emotional valence which can be attached to other associated images. The adaptive value of such a combinatory, ongoing and autonomous process is that it orders experience by relations of similarity and contiguity while dissipating tension.

Lifton does not consider the unconscious a mental realm, but rather a formative ordering process which takes place outside awareness. Rejecting a dynamic based on repression, resistance, and defense, Lifton believes that the essential dynamic factor of the formative process is the self's awareness of its own vulnerability and mortality. He sees the self as permanently and simultaneously involved in proximate and ultimate matters. In this context, "ultimate" matters connect the individual to what Berger and Luckman (1968) call "symbolic universes": a socially determined, shared system of beliefs, values and expectations that impart a transcendental and historic context and meaning to individual experience. The linking of the self to a symbolic universe alleviates the pain and anxiety caused by the awareness of impermanence. The major source of psychological impairment is "not so much a problem of relegating unacceptable ideas to the unconscious, or the experience of identity confusion. The more basic difficulty is the impaired capacity to feel and to give inner order to experience in general" (Lifton, 1976).

The formative process takes place along three polar dimensions: connection - separation, movement - stasis and integration - disintegration, each evolving "from physical inclination to enactment to inner imagery to symbolization... Each takes shape initially in relations to bodily impulses and physical relationships to sources of nurturance and protection: each issues ultimately in complex adult capacities for participation in love and communal relationships, for moral and

ethical commitment, and for maintaining a sense of self that includes symbolic development, growth and change" (Lifton, 1976).

In turn, this process depends on two interrelated capacities which enable the self to order its experiences: centering and grounding (similar to the social process and Ego process described by Erikson (1950, 1968). Centering orders the experience temporally -connecting the event to older forms and images in order to facilitate anticipation; spatially -linking proximate, immediate and distant, abstract meanings; and emotionally -differentiating between valences, as well as central and peripheral images. In fact, centering is only one component of a dialectical process. In order to make judgments on experiences that transcend the self, a degree of detachment is essential. The process that allows for that is decentering - a suspension of integrations in the anticipation of new, more inclusive ones. Without a centering - decentering balance, the self is unable to either consolidate or evolve: impaired centering makes the integration of new experiences impossible, while impaired decentering leads to stasis.

Both processes are made possible by grounding, which is defined as "the relationship of the self to its own history" (Lifton, 1976) and provides continuity during decentering. Without adequate grounding, decentering leads to an inability to deal with change and to anxiety, rage and vulnerability. The underlying process is "desymbolization" - a loss of the ability to inwardly re-create (form) experiences which is characterized

"by various degrees of inability to feel and by gaps between knowledge and feeling" (Lifton, 1976). This is the very essence of psychic numbing, "a cessation... of the formative process, the impairment of man's essential mental function of symbol formation or symbolization... (Psychic numbing) refers to an incapacity to feel or to confront certain kinds of experience due to the blocking or absence of inner forms of imagery that can connect with such experience" (Lifton, 1976). Numbing occurs along a continuum, ranging from reactions to extreme life events to highly circumscribed adaptations, for example the professional detachment of a surgeon. The subjective experience of numbing can take different forms: apathy, rage, guilt, shame.

Is numbing a defense mechanism or coping? In the field of coping research, some authors such as Murphy (1974) believe that coping and defense mechanisms are completely different processes; others consider them the poles of a linear dimension (Haan, 1977, 1982), or see defense mechanisms as "adaptive devices gone wrong" which compared to coping "are rigid, partially blocking or distorting the cognitive field" (Mechanic, 1974), while yet other viewpoints stress the continuity between defense mechanisms and coping (Kroeber, 1970). In depth psychology oriented literature Hoffer (1954, 1968) proposed the concept of an integrated defensive organization which includes both coping modalities and defense mechanisms; Sampson, Weiss et al. (1976) illustrated how a defense gradually changes from a segregated structure which does not function in harmony with the rest of the Ego, to an

integrated, Ego syntonic voluntary action of self control. Lifton believes that numbing is essentially different from defense mechanisms because it implies neither a repressed content nor a compromise between internalized societal norms and impulses. While originally a simple mechanism, related to the freeze response, numbing acquires complexity only due to its unique position in the defensive organization: it has a voluntary component (Lifton, 1979), but at the same time, most of it takes place outside of awareness. I believe that numbing occupies, within the defensive organization, an intermediate position between defense mechanisms and coping, being part conscious, part unconscious, part voluntary and part autonomous. It is this almost unique characteristic, which it shares with Lifton's "doubling" and Milgram's (1968) "agentic state", that imparts its explanatory appeal.

At the same time, I believe that the unconscious component of numbing is at the root of its wide ranging impact on a variety of behaviors. As mentioned previously, Lifton considers the unconscious an active formative process, consisting of the combination and re-combination of images. Freud (1915) wrote that repression "does not hinder... (the repressed representation) from organizing itself further, putting forth derivatives and instituting connections". The ability to express the repressed representation acquires flexibility through this process, which makes symbolic satisfaction and compromise possible; the complexity of the associative chain, which is

dynamically related to the intensity of the repressed affect, enhances the ability to symbolize. I think that in the case of numbing the process is reversed: what starts out as a relatively simple defensive reaction, with its origins in the freeze response, gains complexity when the causative event is extreme and important. The blocking of inner imagery, the loss of the ability to symbolize, do not remain limited to the event, but spread, retracing the associative chains, and extending the blocking to imagery which is only symbolically connected to the initial traumatic event. What started out as an almost reflexive protective reaction of selective desensitization loses its specificity and expands in direct proportion to the centrality and intensity of the causative event, increasingly impairing the formative process. The appropriate metaphor (or controlling image) here is malignancy.

Numbing and Resilience

I believe that numbing has both a quantitative aspect - a restriction of the formative process, and a qualitative one - a poorer fit between the imaging process and life events. The degree of numbing - the extent and degree of generality of desymbolization - is related to the severity and centrality of the causative event as well as to the resilience of the individual. From a developmental standpoint, resilience is related to acquiring Erikson's (1950) "basic trust" or Kernberg's (1976) "Ego identity", and depends, I believe, on a successful effort to integrate the positive and negative aspects of the

initial nurturing relation, a position consistent with the conclusions of Bowlby (1969) and Mahler (1965), among others.

The issue of resilience is approached differently in the field of stress research. According to Endler and Edwards (1989), resilience can be conceptualized in terms of cognitive factors (Kobasa, 1979, Lefcourt, 1980), in terms of interaction between traits and situations (Endler, 1980, 1983, Chesney and Roseman, 1983), and in terms of the interaction process (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

A factor that influences vulnerability to stress is perceived control. Lefcourt (1980) has found differences in coping strategies and emotional response to stressors between subjects with external or internal locus of control. Campbell, Converse and Rogers (1976) equate internal locus of control expectancy with competence, coping ability and relative invulnerability to stress. Johnson and Sarason (1979) have found a weak but significant correlation between anxiety and depression and negative life events for externals but not for internals, and suggest that locus of control may be a mediator of the effects of life events.

Kobasa has postulated "hardiness" as a personality characteristic, differentiating individuals who do -or do not - become ill as a result of high levels of stress. Hardiness has three components : commitment, control and challenge. The hardy persons perceive themselves as being in control, feel deeply committed to their activities, and perceive change as an exciting

challenge. Kobasa (1979) and Kobasa, Maddi and Kahn (1982) concluded that hardiness influences both the appraisal of an event and the resulting coping strategies, defusing the effects of stress, while allowing the individual to attend to the situation rather than avoiding it. This is one of the few occurrences in the field when the personality factor is considered fully: as an active participant in the transaction with the environment, determining how the situation is appraised, and as a modifier of the relation with the environment, ensuring adjustment and continuity.

Another theoretical viewpoint on resilience - namely the inoculation effect - has similarities with numbing. Its basic hypothesis is that certain repeated stressful experiences lead to better coping with stress. Eysenck (1985) and Berndt, Gunther and Rohle (1980) found that cancer patients score lower on neuroticism than controls; Eysenck (1985) also found a negative correlation between cancer and psychosis, while Ahnve et al (1979) and Dimsdale et al (1978) have found a negative correlation between neuroticism and coronary heart disease.

Unfortunately, the inoculation hypothesis is placed in the framework of the relation between personality and disease, making comparisons with numbing difficult. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the effect of inoculation and numbing are congruent in chronic stress situations.

Longitudinal approaches to resilience are based on long term studies of children at risk. The most commonly used risk factors

are low parental socioeconomic status, parental psychopathology, abuse and neglect.

Garmezy's (1981) studies of families in poverty reached the following conclusions: children who were more stress resistant had at least average intellectual ability, were better able to maintain a socially decentered perspective, were better able to remain engaged and attend school, showed good cognitive control displayed a capacity for divergent thinking and a good sense of humor. These findings are consistent with those of Murphy (1974) and Felsman and Vaillant (1987): more resilient children have an increased level of sensory neural integration, show a reflective rather than impulsive cognitive style, a more creative approach in problem solving, use flexible coping strategies rather than a rigid, brittle type of reaction and have good impulse control and good frustration tolerance. They are more independent and capable of goal oriented strategies and planing.

Werner (1989) in a 30 year longitudinal study found that resilient youngsters came from smaller families and had a space of two years or more between themselves and their siblings, allowing them to establish a close bond with at least one major caretaker; they also had the ability to find social support outside their immediate family and tended to be well liked.

I believe that the characteristics of resilient children put forth by these studies are indicative of the capacity for a richer, more finely tuned symbolization process which may well mitigate the effects of numbing. However, numbing and resilience

are not polar opposites; there are adaptive aspects of numbing, such as the professional numbing of the surgeon, that actually enhance resilience.

Anthony (1974a, 1974b, 1987) defines "representational competence" as the individual's ability to make meaningful sense out of the traumatic and/or chaotic events that confront him. He developed a typology based on his concept of an interaction between vulnerability and risk, comprised of the following categories:

- hypervulnerable: low risk/high vulnerability
- pseudo invulnerable: high risk/high vulnerability
- invulnerable: high risk/low vulnerability
- non vulnerable: low risk/low vulnerability

Anthony studied the invulnerable offspring of manic-depressives and schizophrenics, following them up for 15 years. He found that they seem to utilize mechanisms such as distancing, isolation of affect, rationalization, intellectualization which are not conducive to the maintenance of good object relations with adequate levels of intimacy. They tended towards relationships with problematic objects, towards diluting and diffusing relationships by adhering to cults and fads, and also sought treatment for reasons they could not specify.

While one should note that "invulnerability" as discussed here may not equal "resilience", these results indicate that it comes at a price: the children identified as "invulnerable"

showed characteristics which are highly consistent with numbing.

Steps Toward a Psychology of Evil

Numbing is a condition that Lifton (1976,1979,1986) identified as essential in facilitating the average individual's participation in acts so extreme, and which run so counter to any established norm of human behavior, that we need a moral category to define them, namely evil. While numbing does not constitute a comprehensive explanation of participation in evil, it is a necessary condition of it. In order to elucidate this point, a discussion of the cognitive-emotional context of psychic numbing becomes necessary.

Is evil a legitimate subject of study for psychology? Making it the object of scientific inquiry requires impartiality, a difficult position to assume relative to moral categories.

As already noted, Gergen (1982) believes that the old fact - value dichotomy is misleading and that values hold a legitimate place in the creation of knowledge. Lifton (1986) traces the reticence of psychology to address the issue of evil to a fear that understanding the process implies forgiveness; however he notes that if understanding includes moral issues along with individual issues, such need not be the case.

What is being sought is a specific configuration of social, cognitive and emotional factors that facilitate the average person's participation in evil, and, at the same time, constitute the context of numbing. I believe that participation in evil is made possible by the interaction of several universal

interpersonal, intrapersonal, and social phenomena with adaptive value: humankind's acceptance of symbolic reality, the function of which is to foster socialization; the denial of mortality and the quest for symbolic immortality in an effort to avoid anxiety and pain; and several psychological mechanisms whose function is to dilute responsibility and to help coping with extreme situations, namely obedience to authority, numbing, doubling, and self deception.

We live, in Lifton's words, "on images". The mental images dominate our inner world and prepare and motivate our actions. We are a symbol-making species - a process described by Langer (1948) as a primary activity "essential to thought and prior to it". By acting on symbols and images "man ... in a very concrete sense creates his universe" (Bertalanffy, 1968). This process is made possible by the human tendency to accept symbolic reality as the equivalent of reality "proper". It is impossible to trace this universal trait back to its beginnings, but by Plato's time, as illustrated in his allegory of the cave, it was argued that the universe of ideas (i.e. the symbolic universe) was the "real"one, while the universe of objects was seen only as a poor reflection of it, mere shadows distorted by the limitations of our senses.

By positing a universal need to find and integrate meaning Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that reality is a social construct. They trace its emergence through several steps, from the bridging together by language of the constancies of everyday

life, to the formation of different spheres of reality - sub universes - which are finally integrated by incorporation in the same overarching universe of meaning. The symbolic universe "constitutes the universe in the literal sense of the word because all human experience can now be conceived as taking place within it." (p. 96), and fulfills the functions of conferring meaning to experience, sheltering the individual from the "ultimate terror" of aloneness, and ordering history.

These symbolic universes are sustained by universe maintenance mechanisms, which insure their internal consistency and continuity, and act as a safeguard against dissonance. Mythology, theology, philosophy and science are all universe maintenance mechanisms.

Ernest Becker (1976) argues that culture has evolved from humankind's attempts to master the awareness of its own mortality and that the main function of culture is to provide transcendence - in essence death denial.

Lifton follows a similar line of reasoning, but emphasizes the role of culture in fostering a sense of "oneness" and continuity, creating a context in which one can "both die and continue" (1983).

While mankind became more and more immersed in symbolic reality, the forms of death denial also changed: continuity with nature was substituted by continuity with culture and survival was replaced with symbolic immortality. Power, wealth and prestige are "immortality symbols" conferring symbolic

immortality to their owner: ordinary people who cannot attain them identify with those who do, subordinating themselves in order to share in the quest for symbolic immortality. This leads to a paradoxical situation: humans may try preserve their immortality rather than their lives. Death denial and the promise of symbolic immortality have become intrinsic parts of our symbolic universe, being in fact universe maintenance mechanisms. Culture performs a sleight of hand by substituting symbolic immortality for survival and mankind is ready to die for ideas. The pressure to conform, to share in the common quest, is considerable. Asch's (1951) classic study provided a startling example of the effects of perceived pressure to conform to even an ad-hoc group. Following the same line of reasoning in a more socially meaningful context, Milgram (1969) took this conclusion even further: in order to conform and obey authority, a significant number of "normal" people are ready to hurt their peers.

Their moral scruples are, according to Milgram (1969), overridden by the demands of authority because of a special condition - the "agentic state". The agentic state is the opposite of autonomy and occurs when "a self regulating entity is internally modified so as to allow its functioning within a system of hierarchical control... In this condition the individual no longer views himself as responsible for his actions, but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others" (p.134).

The keys to understanding the agentic state are the person's acceptance of the definition of the situation by those in authority and the person's self definition within this situation.

The moral restraints on the use of violence, already weakened by the pressure to conform, are further undermined by the use of stereotypes to dehumanize potential victims. There is a clear correlation between dehumanization and disinhibition of aggression: Bandura (1975) found that dehumanized subjects are treated more punitively, and Zimbardo (1973) believes that deindividuation of both victim and victimizer facilitates aggression. In fact, the relationship between numbing and violence is cognitively mediated by negative stereotyping, specially when the violence is based on group membership. In this context, negative stereotyping constitutes a moral sanction for evil.

As Milgram points out, the above processes contain an element of free will. There is a considerable amount of "as if" behavior involved; nonconformity, albeit subjectively difficult, is always possible and personal responsibility is never fully eschewed.

Aside from numbing, another psychological mechanisms described by Lifton (1983, 1983a, 1986) provides relief from stress and guilt -namely and "doubling". In an obscene congruence both victims and victimizers benefit from it. The psychological principle of doubling is, according to Lifton "the division of the self in two functioning wholes. In that way, a part-self

becomes, in effect, an entire self" (1986). By doubling one could "not only kill and contribute to killing, but organize silently, on behalf of that evil project, an entire self structure (or self process) encompassing virtually all aspects of his behavior" (1986).

Doubling differs from splitting or dissociation because there is a continuity between what Lifton calls "the Auschwitz self" (his findings are based on interviews with Nazi doctors who performed experiments on prisoners) and the prior self, and the two selves are syntonetic: "the Auschwitz self had to be both autonomous and connected to the prior self that gave rise to it" (1986).

The controlling image that facilitated this continuity in perhaps the most extreme of cases - the Nazi doctors - was described by Lifton as "killing in the name of healing" - a rationalization helped by simplistic imagery describing the victims as a danger to the "health" of the nation, their disposal being "a question of political hygiene". (Please note the similarities with the current fad of "ethnic cleansing").

While doubling does not eliminate conscience it "transfers" it: "the requirements of conscience were transferred to the Auschwitz self which placed it within its own criteria for good ... thereby freeing the original self from responsibility for actions there" (Lifton, 1986). Although this process is very similar to the agentic state, it represents a further step: the demands of authority have been internalized and given autonomy

within the self. It should be noted that both the acceptance of the agentic state and doubling are greatly facilitated by numbing and by self deception.

In order to have become a co-participant in evil, one has to make decisions; while not always made with full awareness of motives, the decision itself is a conscious act - no one becomes "unconsciously" a drug dealer. This is achieved by self deception: one has only to feel convinced that, in fact, there is "no choice" and the moral dilemma disappears.

But is this a conscious act? Is there an awareness of the self deception?

Paul Ricoeur (1967) has proposed the concept of the "intimate core of personality": while there are successive layers of truth, half truth and falsehoods, at the level of the intimate core self deception is impossible. It is not a moral arbiter, but merely an incorruptible witness.

The multiple layers of truth and lies permit the forging of coherent versions of reality and of versions of the past - or life stories - consistent with them, at different levels of self deception corresponding to different levels of justification.

Orwell named this phenomenon (in a more drastic form) doublethink - a vast system of mental cheating that flourishes in totalitarian society, and, by extension, in totalitarian situations.

Without dependence on a particular historical condition or on psychopathology, this theory tries to provide an explanation

of the "common man's" participation in evil: the readiness to accept symbolic reality facilitates the emergence of symbolic universes and replaces survival with the search for symbolic immortality. In order to share symbolic immortality, humans accept others' definition of reality and, by implication, tend to become subservient to authority, to accept and share the stereotypes that facilitate the use of violence. Psychic numbing and doubling insulate them against the consequences and self-deception allows them to create life stories consistent with the sense of meaning and history of the symbolic universe they belong to.

This demonstration is neither rigorous nor comprehensive, but rather the outline of a possibility. Its purpose is to establish a context for numbing, to help explain why widespread numbing has such dire social consequences, as well as to emphasize the fact that numbing is an essential first step in one's involvement in the more complex processes described above.

Psychological Consequences of Numbing

Describing the long term effects of severe numbing, Lifton (1976) wrote: "the environment is experienced as a perpetual threat to existence, and the self is threatened by annihilation from within by various combinations of severe anxiety, numbed guilt and uncontrollable rage. The numbing process takes the form of constricted human relationships because of the rechaneling of psychic energy away from intimacy, and of numbed guilt that requires continuous maneuvers to avoid the awareness of extremely

negative self judgement ... and negative affect." The struggle to attach meaning to experience, which serves the purpose of connecting the individual to social and historical context, involves violence and destruction, for example gang membership and involvement in criminal subcultures.

As stated before, the premise of the study is that the life conditions in inner city housing projects, namely systemic generational poverty, pervasive violence, intense frustration, free floating, diffuse rage and hopelessness are so dysfunctional as to constitute extreme life events. These conditions share all the characteristics included in the definition of stressful life events: imply loss of control and are undesirable, aversive, or hazardous to personal adjustment; are unexpected or accidental and throw off the "shared timetable for the lifecourse (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985), and are major in their implications for maintaining the present understanding of self and the meaning of life (Cohler, 1987). Furthermore, I believe, exposure to these life conditions leads to widespread numbing, which in turn has significant consequences:

The impairment of the ability to symbolize affects the complexity, flexibility and diversity of the imaging process and diminishes the defensive organization by rendering more sophisticated defenses ineffective. The numbed person is at the same time constricted and impulsive. The constriction is due to the decreased ability to modulate and integrate affect, a direct consequence of the blocking or limiting of the formative process.

As a result, the emotional reactions are experienced as diffuse and disorganizing, and evoke intense uneasiness and anxiety. Because of the loss of complexity in defensive responses, the only means for controlling the expression of emotions is by further constriction, trapping the individual in a vicious cycle. Due to the inability to bring defenses or cognitive controls to bear on affective experience, the responsiveness is toned down and the inner world remains barren, with most of the feelings split off from conscious awareness. The prevailing affect is relatively flat, dysphoric and depressed; the dominant feeling is rage linked to perceived powerlessness and loss of control. In turn, because of diminished ability to fine tune emotional reactions, inner rage contaminates the expression of other emotions as well as social interactions. Impulse control is poor, and mood tends to shift rapidly and unpredictably from apathy to anger.

The self image of the numbed subjects is poor. They tend to perceive themselves as vulnerable and inadequate, then make efforts to deny this perception by finding exterior and superficial sources of self worth: having nice clothes, being seen as tough, belonging to the "right crew". As a result their feeling of self esteem oscillates from poor to inflated, without a middle ground. Due to their efforts at denial, they experience social situations involving self actualization as highly ambivalent, and prefer ritualized exchanges. This leads to rigidity, hypersensitivity and suspiciousness in social

interactions, since even minor loss of face constitutes a frontal challenge to the entire process of maintaining self esteem, and is experienced as severe narcissistic injury. The poor awareness of one's strength and weaknesses results in unrealistic expectations and failure to fulfill them further enhances the feelings of vulnerability and loss of control.

The object relations of the chronically numbed person are fragile and superficial, and seen in an utilitarian light. Due to an inability to symbolize, their objects are only concrete ones (rather than subjective ones). This means that there is little mediation between need and action, since the emotions cannot be relationally integrated and cognitively processed. The ability for empathy is relatively poor and subject to distortion; occasionally an astute ability to perceive others' weaknesses is devoid of compassion and used to manipulate, frequently accompanied by efforts to justify unacceptable behaviors by denying the meaning of alternative forms of conduct. Relations with authority figures are relatively poor and fraught with conflict.

Moral development is arrested at an early stage; guilt and shame are not effective inhibitors of social behaviors, which are controlled mostly by fear of retaliation. Group inclusion often leads to a further diffusion of responsibility, which in conjunction with poor empathy and poor impulse control, hypervigilance to perceived challenges and toned down responsiveness, facilitate a strong propensity for violence.