RESENTMENT AS A COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION

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Abstract

Resentment is analyzed as a communicative situation. Its function definition is unilateral communication breach. There are two classes of resentment: open and closed resentment. The reason for resentment to arise is a feeling of injustice, whereas the reason for resentment to keep human existence is different – it is the inability of a subject of resentment not to break communication. Author analyzes the effectiveness of the repressive strategy in solving resentment problem. The aim of this research is to explicate the functional nature of resentment. The novelty of this research is in analyzing resentment not as a form of emotional experience (this aspect of resentment is well described in psychology of emotions), but as a communicative situation. The method of this research is the conceptual analysis. The research is relevant both practically (education, corrective psychology, administration and negotiation practice can benefit from its results) and theoretically: it is an attempt to give a clearer theoretical understanding of resentment.

Keywords: resentment, communication, ethics, social stigma, psychology of emotions, social philosophy

Relevance

Resentment has always been a typical form of human emotional experience traditionally recognized as something that hinders social interactions. The aim of this research is to explicate the functional nature of resentment. The novelty of this research is in analyzing resentment not as a form of emotional experience (this aspect of resentment is well described by psychology of emotions), but as a communicative situation. The method

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of this research is conceptual analysis. The research is relevant both practically (education, corrective psychology, administration and negotiation practice can benefit from its results) and theoretically: it is an attempt to give a clearer theoretical understanding of resentment.

Psychology typically defines resentment as a feeling of injustice towards the subject of this feeling that is caused by the difference between the real and the expected attitude. Most dictionaries highlight the link between resentment and human ideas of justice and injustice. Here is an example of such a definition given to resentment in I.S. Ozhegov’s dictionary: “Unfair criticism, insult or a feeling caused by this” (Ozhegov 2010). Resentment is mostly analyzed by psychologists (Pechin 2016, Sokolnikova 2015), education theoreticians (Nikabadze 2015), and philosophers (Botting 2015, Fassin 2013, Hoggett, P., Wilkinson, H., & Beedell 2013, Kasumov 2015, Minkkinen 2013, Poellner 2011) as a psychological phenomenon connected with emotional and volitional functioning of human mind. Linguists study resentment representation in languages and texts (Fenton 1884, Malakhova 2010) – this line of research focuses on how the concept of resentment is constructed and functions in the language. More seldom (but with regularity) the problem of resentment is analyzed in legal studies and legal linguistics (Kurbatova 2015, Shedin 2016). In this article we are making an attempt to philosophically analyze resentment as a communicative situation.

**State of the problem**

In many modern societies (including Russian society) resentment is a stigmatized feeling. Modern attitude towards resentment is best described in Ernest Holmes’ remark that it is impossible to offend persons if they do not take offence (Holmes 1998). Implicitly this contains the following premise: it is a person feeling resentment who is responsible for resentment, moreover, this is not a random form of responsibility, but a particular one – responsibility of the guilty.

In this connection we would like to point out that acceptance or stigmatization of any typical feelings are regulated by ethical trends of the time. There are times when it is acceptable and prestigious to experience, for instance, melancholy, and there are times when people are encouraged to be cheerful and discouraged to be melancholic. Resentment is a stigmatized feeling in Russian society nowadays. It is important that the feeling is stigmatized
as such – even if it does not cause anything socially unacceptable or even noticeable. This is reflected in the Russian language in colloquialisms like “dut’sa” (“to sulk”), “na obizhennikh vodu vozyat” (“Let not the sun go down on your wrath” or literally: “people who take offence are used to carry water”).

If we consider resentment from a communicative point of view, we find it possible and relevant to give it the following definition: it is a unilateral breach of communication. It is necessary to delineate expressed (“open”, “speaking”) and repressed (“closed”, “silent”) resentment. We think that ordinary language casually mixes these two distinct types of resentment as in phrases “On zatai obidu” (“He held grudges”) and “On vyskazal mne svoi obidy” (“He expressed his resentment”).

We are mostly interested in the first type of resentment (“silent” or “closed” resentment) for it is most wide-spread form in which it exists in contemporary social reality and in which it clearly manifests itself. It is peculiar that this “silent” resentment is only silent on the actual matter of the problem, but at the same time, it may often be very “talkative” and emotional on some side-topics. Ethology describes this type of behavior as reoriented aggression (Lorenz, 2002). The subject of resentment of this type is trying to unilaterally break communication or at least expresses that they are ready to do this in order to give the following message: “I am breaking communication because I do not like how it goes anymore”.

From this point, the situation keeps existing for a very different reason from the one that caused it: resentment (and hence – communication breach) lingers because the subject of resentment cannot or/and does not want to initiate an open discussion of the actual problem or conflict causing this resentment. The subject of resentment does not discuss it with other parties involved. Moreover, these parties sometimes are not aware that they are parties of this conflict or even can not be real subjects of the conflict at all – as it is the case when a person is experiencing resentment towards “life”, “fate”, etc. Communication might continue in a reduced form, i.e. not touching upon the subject of the real problem, and that is why it cannot have a satisfactory outcome for any of the parties.
Results and their discussion

Now that we have outlined the outer characteristics of the situation, we would like to analyze what makes initial (potentially fleeting) resentment such a stable and easily distinguished lasting state.

Here are the possible reasons for an individual to break communication:

1) Fear. A person is afraid to claim that they are discontent with something because they fear to face the conflict of interests. It may have the following outcomes: deterioration of relations and a loss of goods in the course of conflict (possessions, health, reputation, etc.). Humility and shame also fall into this category – in this context, we view them as modifications of fear.

2) Contempt. A person finds it beneath their dignity to engage in a conflict and actively protect their interests or even openly claim them. The reasons for this may vary, but we believe there is a common ground for them: all parties of the conflict perceive the situation very differently. The person who took offence tends to think that they should be understood without words because everything is obvious and to give further explanations would mean to lose their face. The other party or other parties may not even read these signals or read and perceive them to be too weak to react. As a result there is also a “silent” resentment, but with a different basis. The subtype of this is a situation in which contemptuous resentment is a source of somber pleasure – a form of psychological comfort caused by the familiarity of such a reaction. Apart from this, such resentment may even elevate self-esteem: persons refusing to continue communication feel themselves higher than those they contemptuously reject. This self-esteem change is also perceived as a pleasant event.

3) Manipulative gains. We will not describe this point in detail, but we would like to highlight that “silent” resentment is often an overture for a manipulative scenario.

Resentment stigmatization leads to lasting “silent” stigmatization as well as repression of any expression of human nature in a particular form leads to its expression in another form. We think resentment of this type is the only true resentment compared to short-lived “open” resentment which is quickly dissolved in a dialogue – such resentment is a mere hindrance in communication, but not a breach.
What is the social motive in resentment stigmatization and what are the expected gains from this (if we forget for a minute our initial premise that there is no other motive than an esthetic one because it is a mere ethical fashion trend of the time)? We suppose this stigmatization is similar to stigmatization of blood feud, sadness as a feeling, rage as a feeling, laziness, social vices such as bribery, etc. The aim is to lower the costs of social interactions. Most probable, the motive behind this social stigma is to create the situation we would roughly describe as the situation of “trust, cooperation and friendliness” – a philosophical antipode of T. Hobbes’ “war of all against all”. Thus, stigmatizing resentment a society is trying to lower the costs of social interactions.

Conclusion

Resentment stigmatization neither eradicates it, nor leads to lower social interaction costs, but it triggers resentment to switch its form: from potentially short-term and open it becomes lasting and “silent”. On the one hand, such new resentment cannot be expressed and thus be dealt with because to express it would be socially unacceptable. On the other hand, such resentment being closed for outer influence at the same time has no intrinsic reasons to cease.

This shows that it is impossible to eliminate resentment through repression, as it is impossible to eliminate crime the same way. However, repression is effective at restraining both. This is the strategy real societies seem to follow: through resentment social stigma they lower the rate of actual conflicts at the cost of enlarging the risk of potential ones. We might cautiously suppose that this strategy is efficient basing our supposition on the following argument: it is a very wide-spread strategy and it has been a major social practice for a very long time. However, this is a purely inductive argument and it is insufficient if taken as the only ground for conclusions. This argument does not exclude a hypothetical situation in which a better strategy has not yet been discovered and implemented.

The question of whether resentment repression is a better strategy in lowering social interaction costs than alternative strategies (encouraging immediate resentment explication, for instance) is still open and worth a philosophical and a psychological research.
References


