

The Coaching of Anticipation I: Polystasis and the Dynamics of Anticipation

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As sentient beings, we humans are always dwelling slightly in the future. In our relationships with other people, we have to anticipate what they are about to say or do. We predict their feelings and their attitude about us from moment to moment. When driving a car, we must anticipate what the car in front of us, beside us, and behind us are about to do. Without this glimpse or prediction into the near future we are dangerous drivers and not very skillful or graceful in our interpersonal relations. It is with some justification that we could label ourselves as *homo futurus*.

More generally, we human beings, as *homo sapiens*, are complex in our thoughts and our actions. We dwell in a three-tiered world of past, present, and future. I might be steering right now through the present-day world; however, “ghosts” of the past are influencing (even “haunting”) by perceptions and interpretations of the current world in which I am operating. Most importantly, there is anticipation of what will come in my immediate future, as well as in my longer-term future. I will defer gratification in anticipation of some future reward and will be fearful of what is just around the corner.

As professional coaches, we are in the business of helping our clients gain a clear and valid sense of what exists in their current world. This requires that our clients gain a sense of and appreciation for the way their past experiences influence their perception and interpretation of the world they now confront. There is also the matter of identifying and appreciating the ways anticipated future influences their current perceptions, interpretations, and actions.

In this essay, I examine ways the past and future shape our current reality. I focus, in particular, on the future and what might be titled the *psychology of anticipation*. This psychology, in turn, is founded on an important newly identified biopsychosocial function that I have called *Polystasis*. I propose that this function plays a central role in the decisions our clients make and the actions they take.

Polystasis and Anticipation

Given the important function served by Polystasis, it is important to gain some understanding of and appreciation for the polystatic function and explore some of the ways this function influences diverse human behaviors and connects to both the past and present. I have prepared this essay as a preliminary attempt to provide this understanding and appreciation for the role played by Polystasis in our life, and the way we might address Polystasis and the psychology of anticipation during our coaching engagement.

Elsewhere, I (Bergquist, 2025) introduced the concept of Polystasis, building on the neurobiological concept of Allostasis proposed by Peter Sterling (2020). I (Bergquist, 2025, pp. 76-77) offered a summary of Sterling’s radical perspective on neurobiological functioning:

We live in a world of allostasis rather than homeostasis. Introduced by Peter Sterling (2020) about the physiological regulation of our body, Allostasis refers to an organism’s capacity to anticipate upcoming environmental changes and demands. This anticipation leads to adjustment of the body’s energy use based on these changes and these demands. Allostasis shifts one’s attention

away from a homeostatic maintaining a rigid internal set-point to the brain's ability and role in interpreting environment meaning and anticipating environmental stress.

Peter Sterling (2024) puts it this way:

Nearly all physiological and biochemical regulation is continuously and primarily managed by prediction, even the smallest changes when a thought flashes through the mind and predicts something that needs either raising or lowering various systems to adjust to the predicted demand. Corrective feedback is used secondarily when predictions fail. To me, this is the origin and purpose of the brain, to manage these predictions. When our body returns to "normal" from a deviation, normal is not due to a set point but to the brain's prediction that this is the most likely level of demand. How the brain does this across time scales from milliseconds to decades and spatial scales from nanometers to meters, is a huge mystery.

The interactions that occur between the brain and body are quick and fully integrated, making it difficult to distinguish between these two functions. The brain predicts and the body responds in a highly adaptive and constantly changing manner.

I (Bergquist, 2025, p. 77) then introduced my own expansion on Sterling's Allostatic model:

While Peter Sterling, as a neurobiologist, has focused on the body's use of neurotransmitters, hormones, and other signaling mechanisms, we can expand his analysis by looking at the function of stasis in all human systems. Not to distort Sterling's important description and analysis of the allostatic processes operating in the human body, I am introducing a new term: *Polystasis*. I have created this word to designate the multiple functions engaged by complex human systems in addressing the issue of stasis. As Peter Sterling has noted, it is not simply a matter of returning to an established baseline of functioning (stasis) when considering how actions get planned and taken in a human system. . . .

The model of Polystasis blends the concept of Statics (stabilizing structures) with that of Dynamics (adaptive processes). Operating in human systems, we are guided by certain core outcomes that do not readily change (statics); however, we must be adaptively open to modifying these guiding outcomes as our environment changes. As Peter Sterling has proposed, the static notion of Homeostasis is inaccurate. A dynamic model of Allostasis (at the bodily level) and Polystasis (at the psychosocial level) is required, especially in our mid-21st-century world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist, 2025).

Polystatic Appraisal

The Polystasis model incorporates three processes. First, there is Appraisal. As Peter Sterling has noted, there is an ongoing need to monitor the environment in which we operate to determine if a new baseline (desired outcomes) is required. We informally or formally predict the probability that our current desired baseline of functioning can be achieved. This is where anticipation first appears in the Polystatic process. Is our current baseline viable, given what we anticipate? Is our current baseline even desirable?

At this point, I introduce a concept offered by another neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio (2005). Damasio proposes that specific *Somatic Markers* are attached to specific images we generate. A certain somatic reaction is elicited when we are considering an idea or past experience. Our “Gut” clinches up when we think about an embarrassing experience from our past. Our heart accelerates when reflecting on the elaborate dinner we are planning for our loved one. Damasio also introduces the concept of *Background Feelings*. At any one point in time, we feel “a certain way” that is created by not only our emotions and clusters of somatic markers related to ideas and experiences that are swirling around our mind, but also by our physiological state (levels of energy and fatigue, lingering illnesses or injuries, stage of one’s biological cycle, etc.)

I propose that these various ingredients come together in what I call the *Somatic Template*. This template is more than a set of Damasio’s somatic markers. It is a general monitoring device that keeps us abreast of our overall physiological state. This template may play a central role in Sterling’s Allostastic process. Similarly, there might be a set of psychosocial templates that we frequently reference when making polystatic predictions and adjustments.

Perhaps, this template plays a central role in Sterling’s Allostastic process. Similarly, there might be a set of psychosocial templates that we frequently reference when making polystatic predictions and adjustments. These templates offer a view of our psychological status and the status of our external world.

A psychosocial template might trigger our attention when something is threatening us. Elsewhere, I have suggested that we establish three threat categories in our Amygdala (Bergquist, 2011). I derived these categories from the semantic differential of Charles Osgood (1957). Is this threatening entity not aligned with our welfare (bad)? Is it strong (rather than weak and ineffective)? Is this threatening operating in an immediate active manner (rather than inactive or threatening at a temporal or spatial distance)? Our Amygdala is triggered, leading to an immediate change in our somatic template.

This Amygdala triggering soon leads to a change in our psychosocial template as we better understand (correctly or incorrectly) the nature and scope of the threat. Our anticipation is “charged” by this appraisal of threat. Alternatively, the psychosocial template is triggered when something slightly “different” occurs in our psyche or in the world we inhabit. The “new” template doesn’t match the template that existed a few minutes before, or with some relatively stable baseline template we have built during our lifetime. It is a “deviant” template that draws our attention and impacts our polystatic process.

While the somatic template concerns how our body is operating and “feeling”, the psychosocial template associated with Polystasis concerns how we are seeing and “feeling about” the world in which we are operating. The psychosocial template is a component of or at least is closely associated with something called a *Schema* (Piaget, 1923/2001). While the psychosocial template, like the somatic template, is constantly shifting, the schema remains stable and changes only slowly over time. The schema is founded on our sense of self and a set of assumptions we make about our relationships with other people and circumstances in our world. Our anticipations are strongly influenced by the schema we have formed early in life. Put simply, we are inclined to “see” our world through the lens of our

schema—especially when we are viewing other people and their relationship with us (Young, Klosko, and Weishaar, 2006).

It is also important to note that we have only tacit (rather than explicit/conscious) knowledge of templates (Polanyi, 2009). We lack full awareness of either our somatic template or our psychosocial templates, even though they both strongly influence the decisions we make and actions we take. Schemas are equally inaccessible to immediate awareness. Another connection is important to mention. Our psychosocial templates and our psychological schema may be closely tied to the somatic template. We inevitably “feel” what we are seeing and what we anticipate.

Polystatic Adjustment

Having completed our appraisal and formulated our anticipations, based on the application of unconscious templates and schemas, we are ready to make some psychosocial changes. We *Adjust* if the current baseline of desired functioning is no longer appropriate. As Sterling proposes, we identify a new level of functioning. An alternative (“allo”) stasis is based on predictions regarding the probability of success in achieving this baseline (stasis). At the psychosocial level, we adjust our planned actions based on predictions and anticipations regarding the probable success of these actions. Baselines are likely to be adjusted along with the plans.

It should be noted that polystatic adjustments are often needed. While a homeostatic perspective on human operations is based on an assumption that these operations are being conducted in a closed system, the polystatic perspective is founded on the quite different assumption that human operations are being conducted in an open system. When operating in a closed system, one can anticipate that all of the relevant variables are locked in place. These variables include such important matters as the intentions, strength, and activity level of specific living entities (Osgood’s semantic differential), the strength and consistency of nonliving but dynamic entities (such as weather and temperature), and the presence of permanent objects (such as chairs and buildings). We know what the variables are and can usually make an accurate assumption about the magnitude of each variable and its relationship to the other relevant variables.

By contrast, an open system is one in which new variables enter the picture and change their magnitude and relationship to other variables. When operating in an open system, one will frequently experience a shift in their somatic template. Baselines often must be readjusted and anticipations modified. The space in which we operate is thrown even more open given the frequent appearance of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradictions (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist, 2025) in our contemporary society. Thus, given the inevitable presence of open systems in our mid-21st-century environment, we must acknowledge and embrace the indispensability of polystatic adjustments.

Polystatic Action

We act on behalf of the new baseline of desired outcomes as well as our new predictions regarding the relative effectiveness of potential actions to be taken. Our anticipations produce our new actions. In essence, Polystasis represents a dynamic, highly interactive interweaving of appraisal, adjustment, and action. Clear and accurate feedback is needed to determine appropriate levels of adjustment. Open channels for the flow of information between these three phases are critical.

Like Peter Sterling's Allostasis, Polystasis contrasts dramatically with the traditional and long-dominant model of Homeostasis. Under homeostasis, daily adjustments are made via what I would identify as first-order change (Argyris, 2001). These adjustments require first-order learning, which is usually based on habitual ways of thinking. Such a model of stasis might effectively operate in a highly stable world. However, our mid-21st century psychosocial world is operating in a rugged and perhaps even moving (dancing) landscape that looks nothing like a flat, stable plain (Miller and Page, 2007).

There is no return to a previous state. Rather, as Sterling proposes, adjustments are made based on what we predict will be the next setting of this dancing environment. We depend on anticipations rather than assumptions of continuity. These anticipations and adjustments require shifts in our interpretation of environmental meaning and specific environmental challenges. These shifts, in turn, require second-order learning and second-order change (Argyris, 2001).

All of this may seem mechanistic and abstract; however, Polystasis comes alive when we recognize that this recursive process moves quickly. Polystasis is often not amenable to the slow thinking described by Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman, 2013) nor to the reflective practice of Don Schön (1983). Polystasis also comes alive when we apply it to real-life situations. For example, while my anticipation of losing money might be assuaged by a bank loan I have just received, my heart rate and level of anxiety might not return to "normal" if I am anticipating unpredictability in the stock market. A new "normal" is quite fluid--for I continue to appraise, anticipate, adjust, and act (moving through a dancing, monetary landscape).

Polystasis and Survival

Polystatic processes and dynamic feedback systems are essential to my survival in our often "hostile" and anxiety-producing environment. The key point is that the baseline itself is likely to repeatedly change when Polystasis is operating in a shifting (dancing) environment with changing somatic and psychosocial templates constantly at play. This change might involve quantity (raising or lowering the baseline) or quality (shifting to a different baseline). We remain vigilant regarding real and imagined challenges.

At the same time, we must be cautious about becoming "trigger-happy." Each major change in the baseline brings about a challenging and often disruptive change curve (Bergquist, 2014) of which we must be aware. There is also the matter of self-fulfilling prophecies (Argyris and Schön, 1974). We must be sure that our anticipations do not lead to actions that do nothing more than justify the anticipation. For example, our decision not to trust a colleague can lead our colleague to become less trustworthy (or at least forthcoming) precisely because they sense our hesitation and our failure to trust their intentions or competence.

Costs of and Remedies for Polystasis

Before leaving this focus on Polystasis, I wish to reiterate that this rapidly moving process often is expensive. As I mentioned when introducing Polystasis, the quick engagement of appraisal, anticipation, adjustment, and action is not amenable to slow thinking--not to reflective practice. Our somatic and psychosocial templates are frequently adjusted in ways that might not align with reality. Imaginary lions are a specialty of modern humankind. Polystasis is aligned with noncritical, knee-jerk reactions.

Don Schön (1983) has cautioned us about these reactions. We are in demand as a physician, psychologist, or urban planner. Under these professional demand conditions, the dynamics of Polystasis might leave us breathless. We have little time to reflect on our professional practices. Daniel Kahneman (2013) would join Schön in urging restraint. Fast thinking should be avoided when operating in a dynamic polystatic manner. Kahneman may suggest that Polystasis and the formulation of psychosocial templates are vulnerable to the inappropriate uses of heuristics.

We often use simplistic and outmoded heuristics when shifting our template, changing our baseline, and making predictions in a dynamic environment. We might, for instance, apply a Recency heuristic. Adjustments are the same as the last time we faced this environmental shift. Polystatic adjustments can also become habitual. A heuristic of Habit is applied. Then there is the matter of Primacy. The first action taken when facing a challenge remains with us. We messed up the first time and learned to avoid this situation at all costs.

Given this potential vulnerability of recency, habit, and primacy, we must ask: How do we adjust to a new or changing baseline? Adjustments will operate differently when we face a critical challenge and when motivations (and anxiety) are high. We are inclined to think very fast and be especially noncritical when the stakes are high. Emotions are intense. Furthermore, we might always imagine a threat when we are tired or distracted—we indeed become “trigger-happy.” Anxiety becomes a common experience. Retreat and isolation become common polystatic actions.

All of this means that we need to be careful about the assumptions we make and the heuristics we apply under specific conditions of anticipation. Many conditions in mid-21st-century life hold the potential of threat. It is in these conditions and at these moments that we must be particularly vigilant and reflective. We must ask ourselves: Is this situation really like the last one? Can I do a better job this time in coping with this challenging situation? If this is truly important, then perhaps I should get some assistance. I might have to consider differing points of view. Is this genuinely threatening, or am I imagining that it is threatening? In short, Polystasis might be an essential adaptation given the aforementioned conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist, 2025). However, this process can also lead us astray. We must indeed be vigilant and reflective.

The Dynamics of Anticipation

The Polystatic process involves intricate and intimate relationships between perception and behavior. Anticipation is the primary bridge that brings these two fundamental elements of human performance into close alliance. Given this close alliance, performance can be viewed from both ends of the Polystatic process.

Perception

From the perception end, one can take an *Intrascopic Perspective* on performance. Polystasis can be viewed as operating from the inside out. Anticipation produces behavior. Our assumptions regarding what is about to occur if we perform in a certain manner will influence subsequent behavior. We can push even further.

The Intrascopic Perspective can focus on the even deeper state we experience as a feeling. This feeling may be rooted in an emotion that lingers in our psyche. We change our anticipations based on the emotions we are feeling. A state of fear provides anticipations that are quite different from what we anticipate if we are enthusiastic or suffering from a state of shame. At an even deeper level, our psychosocial template (and eventually our somatic template) might not seem “right.” We can “feel it in our bones.”

Our anticipation will look quite different depending on the “intuitive” feelings in “our bones.” Tony, the protagonist in the musical (and movie) *West Side Story*, sings about a strong feeling associated with his anticipation that “Something great is coming!” (a song written by Leonard Bernstein with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim) Conversely, Queenie, the very wise cook on a showboat, senses that something bad is coming. “Mis'ry's Comin' Aroun” is sung by Quennie to a haunting, very dark tune written by Jerome Kern (with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein) for the musical *Show Boat*.

A famous study was conducted many years ago by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (Schachter and Singer, 1962), in which they injected an arousing chemical into their subjects and then noted how they reacted to and interpreted their external environment. As compared with subjects injected with a non-arousing chemical, the “aroused” subjects found themselves feeling very angry when placed in a setting where they were frustrated. Anger or a desire to leave this “hostile” environment soon followed. The “cold feelings” that these subjects initially experienced were soon translated into an anticipation of an emotion-evoking setting—and they soon “found” (or produced) this setting. Appropriate behavior would soon follow in a “natural” world. Emotions (as produced by a specific neurochemical) were influencing anticipations. Schachter proposed a two-factor theory of emotion, indicating that there is both a physiological and cognitive side to any emotion.

Behavior

Conversely, we can take an *Exoscopic Perspective* by first looking at the behavior. Our external presentation influences our internal sense of self. In theater, a major school of acting (“method acting”) begins from the outside and then moves inward. Actors put on their costumes for a specific play and soon find the internal character that corresponds with this costume. William James once declared that our emotional state arises from our behavior rather than the other way around. We run away from a threatening bear and conclude that we must be afraid of the bear, given that we are running away from this animal.

As in the case of the Intrascopic Perspective, we can push even further regarding our Exoscopic Perspective. Our behavior is influenced by the events occurring the world and, more generally, the setting in which we find ourselves. Many behaviorally oriented psychologists believe that virtually all of our behavior is determined by these external events and settings, rather than by any internal state of mind (personality).

Schacter vs. James

For many years, a debate was waged by theoretical and research psychologists who either took the Jamesian Introsopic perspective that behavior precedes emotions or a Exoscopic perspective, bolstered

by Schacter's two-factor theory, that emotions will precede and play a key role in determining behavior. Polystasis provides an interactive, feedback-based perspective on the relationship between the internal state and external state. The internal state includes not only Schacter's physiological factor, but also the underlying psychosocial and somatic templates. The external state includes not only Schacter's cognitive factor, but also the baseline and anticipations associated with the appraisal and adjustment phases of the Polystatic process. The internal and external states are constantly shifting and interacting. Anticipations are strongly influenced by both states. The appraisals, adjustments, and actions being taken require both our feelings and our anticipated setting.

Emotions sit in the middle of this interaction—being influenced both by the shifting world outside and the underlying and constantly-shifting psychosocial template and somatic template that reside in our psyche. Furthermore, changes in our emotions will influence our psychosocial template (and eventually our somatic template). Conversely, emotional shifts will inevitably alter the way in which we see our current setting and what we anticipate regarding changes in our current setting and any accompanying events, especially as related to behavior in which we are about to engage.

Anticipating the Lion (or Horse)

Anticipation and the polystatic process are built on the foundation of imagination. Unlike any other animal, human beings can imagine things that do not exist. They can envision a future that is yet to occur or a setting (Shangri-La) or entity (unicorn) that has never existed and probably never will exist. Robert Sapolsky has focused on one source of imagination that often serves no positive purpose. He observes that we can "imagine" lions (Sapolsky, 2004). These "lions" can be an upcoming due date for an important project or absence of our teenage son after curfew. A demanding boss or a frustrated spouse can be menacing. It is not hard for us to imagine a world that is saturated with many threatening people and situations.

Actually, we don't imagine lions existing in our current setting, for there are no lions present in our life. However, we can anticipate lions. When we dwelled on the African Savannah, there were actual lions that threatened us. The Savannah was indeed quite threatening, given that we were weaker and slower than most of its other inhabitants. Furthermore, many of these animals wished to eat us or at least scare us away from their offspring. Engaging the Semantic Differential criteria, they were not interested in our welfare, were strong (relative to us), and were quite active (faster than us).

Given this situation, we were not in a place to fight the threatening beast (unless we were Tarzan). Flight was also not an option. The best we could do was Freeze, thus emulating the behavior of other weak and slow residents of Savannah. Most of our fellow freezers were rodents of many sorts. Like us, these small animals would hold very still and hope that the threatening beast would either not see us or would lose interest in us. I witnessed the value of this strategy when visiting the lions while consulting with a corporation in South Africa. Sitting on a jeep with several other human beings, I was told to remain very still when we drove up to a pack of lions. Not much has changed since we humans dwelled in large numbers on the Savannah.

While we emulated the rodents, they held one advantage over us. After several seconds, they would shake off the adrenaline that had accumulated while they were frightened yet also frozen. We humans are not inclined to shake off this energizing neurochemical; furthermore, we are likely to remain frozen for more than a few seconds. Especially when we are imagining the lion, the freeze might remain in place for many minutes, given that our imaginary lion is likely to linger with us for a long time.

Perfect Storm

In this way, we produce a perfect physiological storm. The adrenaline is coursing through our veins and sustaining our sympathetic state of arousal. Yet, we do nothing about draining off this energizing system and remain in a sympathetic state. Our polystatic process is messed up in this state and with this sustained energizing of a body that remains immobile. We continue to anticipate the lion. This being the case, we continue to activate our body in preparation for fight or flight from the lion. We even reset our polystatic baseline. The dial is now set on the survival mode—as are our psychosocial and somatic templates. As Peter Sterling has noted, it isn't our body that is at fault. It is just doing, appropriately, what our imagination is telling us is the "reality" to which we must respond.

Our imagination also takes us in more positive directions. We can anticipate the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, and "gift horses." This is what is commonly found among gamblers who "know" that a long stretch of "good luck" is awaiting them at the casino or the sports betting bar near their home. These forms of "gambler's luck" can damage us as much as the real or imaginary lion. We must challenge our anticipation regarding luck and can't assume that "luck is a lady tonight" (to borrow from Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*).

There is a second important point. As the sage would suggest, "don't look the gift horse in the mouth." The horse's teeth might reveal that this horse is very old or worn out. However, an imagined horse is assumed to have a fine mouth. It is young, ready for the Kentucky Derby, or ready to be a dear companion. Just remember to never look in its mouth if you are willing to reject it as a gift. You might also wish to recognize its imaginary status. Are you just hoping that the horse is a "gift"? Is the horse really a "gift" that comes with no strings attached?

Valence, Magnitude, and Duration

Anticipations tend to change when we are confronted with shifts in three environmental characteristics. They are valence, magnitude, and duration.

Valence

The most important (and often dramatic) change involves a shift in valence from positive to negative anticipation or from negative to positive. The baseline changes abruptly, as does the level and type of physiological arousal. Positive anticipation is often accompanied by a parasympathetic state. It is as if we are awaiting a feast or a moment of quietude. A very exciting positive anticipation (especially one involving action) can produce a sympathetic state; yet, even in this sympathetic state, we are likely to obtain a squirt of dopamine when anticipating great outcomes (such as the gambler looking forward to positive results at the poker table). It is much more likely that the sympathetic system is aroused when

anticipating a negative event, situation, or outcome. Whether anticipating a real or imagine lion, our body prepares for fight, flight, or freeze.

Another important consideration regarding valence concerns the mixture of positive and negative anticipations. Human beings have the capacity to not only envision malevolent lions and benevolent tooth fairies but also envision a future benefit arising out of an immediate cost: “It will hurt, but be good for me in the long term.” We can anticipate that the Flu shot will be painful, but also anticipate that we will spend the next year flu-free. We can anticipate the struggle to make ends meet when we are setting aside money for our child’s education; however, this negative anticipation is offset by our anticipation (and envisioning) of attendance at our child’s college graduation. Thus, it would seem that we are capable of embracing shared positive and negative anticipations. *Homo Economicus* can defer immediate gratification (small negative utility) in favor of greater long-term gratification (large positive utility) .

Magnitude

Then there is the very important matter of magnitude. Is this a big ferocious lion or a kitty kat that is snarling at us? As one of the three semantic differential categories that may be triggering our amygdala and sympathetic system, the strength of a threatening (negative) anticipation is critical. A small, menacing cat is likely to produce Fight or Flight (we can kick the cat or simply move away from the cat). A large, menacing lion is more likely to produce Freeze, since we aren’t going to be able to do much about attacking or escaping the lion.

In the world of “real” lions, we are likely to fight against a small change in personnel policy or simply ignore (escape) a silly regulation about parking permits at work. On the other hand, a major change in governmental priorities that cancels our job in human services is likely to leave us frozen with a sense of Rage, coupled with feelings of being Helpless to do much about this injustice and unwise shift in priorities. In the latter case, our entire psychosocial template is likely to come crashing down. We don’t know who to trust or what to do in what has become an alien world.

The strength (size) of a positive anticipation also impacts the amount of dopamine being injected into our bloodstream: do we imagine a small jackpot or a bonanza? Are we going to get a new, challenging job assignment or a major promotion at work? Either of these could shift us to our sympathetic system; however, the major promotion might produce a bigger “high” for us. With the major promotion, there also might be a shift in our psychosocial template, though this shift is likely to be gradual as we slowly embrace an altered perspective on our organization and our role and responsibility in this organization.

Duration

Temporally based anticipations also influence our bodily state, our baseline, and our subsequent actions (if any). If we anticipate that the positive or negative event or setting is very short-term, then we are likely to make no adjustments. This is just a “blip” on our psychosocial “radar.” We can pretty much ignore this “flickering” of a potentially pleasant or disturbing outcome — unless we are particularly “trigger happy” having repeatedly experienced small events or settings like this or no believe that this event or setting portends something bigger in the near future. For instance, a small “slight” (such as a

raised eyebrow or quiet “grunt”) might set up off in our relationship with someone we have come to distrust over time. Similarly, we might find that the offering of minor praise by our supervisor might trigger a dopamine high because we think this “could be the start of something big!”

What if we anticipate an event that we expect to be extended over time or a setting in which we are likely to dwell for a “lifetime” (or at least a few months). Long-duration anticipations will inevitably require a major shift in our polystatic baseline or even our psychosocial template. The challenge is one of sustaining attention to this event or setting over the long term. As human beings, we are skilled in “adapting” to changing conditions and soon begin taking them for granted. For instance, numerous studies have shown that people who have won a large lottery will end up returning to the socio-economic level (or at least lifestyle) to which they had long been accustomed.

Similarly, it is hard to remain forever in a stressful condition without moving into a state of denial about what is happening, numbing ourselves with stress-reducing drugs, or moving away from this event or setting. We can only stay frozen for a limited period of time; to remain in this state over a long duration is to court physical and mental collapse. There is also the matter of “imagined lions” or “imagined gift horses.” It is hard to keep imagining what isn’t real for an extended period of time. Short-duration lions and gift horses are fine—they tend to fade away unless we fall into a psychotic state brought on by persistent stress or a persistent search for a dopamine hit.

Mind of the Beholder

As I have just suggested, the magnitude and duration of an anticipated event is often in the mind of the beholder rather than in the “real” world. It is not hard for the human imagination to produce big lions and situations that will “last forever.” Humans are even more adept at choosing between the positive and negative. There is the fabled story of the “optimistic” boy who opened the door of a room that was filled with manure. This boy became very excited because he declared that with all of the manure, there must be a pony in there somewhere.

Conversely, the “pessimistic” boy opened the door and found a pony standing there in front of him. This boy began to cry, anticipating that he would have to clean up all the manure left by this pony. The “optimistic” boy clearly is anticipating a positive event (discovering the pony) and a pleasant outcome (riding the pony). A negative anticipation resides in the head and heart of the “pessimistic” boy who imagined spending all of his hours cleaning up after that damned pony. Ultimately, valence is often in the head and heart of the person doing the anticipation.

I am acquainted with a very special woman who exemplifies the “pessimism” of our boy crying about the manure. She is always anticipating that things will go awry. She anticipates that conversations between two people will inevitably be contentious. She always assumes that a new project being engaged by leaders of her organization will fail. All of this motivates her to be very caring of other people, since she assumes they have just been engaged in a negative interaction with another person. She also works extra hard on the project to ensure that it is only a minor failure rather than a big catastrophe. This makes my acquaintance a wonderfully caring person and a diligent worker. However,

this comes at a great cost for her. I anticipate a negative outcome: her burnout. Or am I being too “pessimistic” in my own anticipation of her fate?

Conclusions

Up to this point, I have focused on the common patterns of Polystasis and Anticipation to be found in all of us, as we navigate our challenging world. There are important differences, however, in how polystatic processes operate, given that each of us is inclined toward certain anticipations (some positive and some negative). Furthermore, we not only hold tightly to specific anticipations but also act in a way that tends to affirm these anticipations. The concept of Personality (and character) in the field of psychology is built on and reaffirms this foundation of anticipation.

In the second essay in this series, I take one of the oldest and most widely used models of Personality off the shelf. Called the Enneagram theory, this model produces nine personality types that influence one’s anticipations alongside one’s psychosocial template, and polystatic baseline. In other words, the world looks and operates in a quite different manner depending on the Enneagram lens one applies to polystatic appraisals, adjustments, and actions. So, stay tuned . . .

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