A Psychodynamic Study of the Shadow Side of Likability: What It Is, Where It Came From, and Why It Is Difficult to Let It Go

by

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Abstract

Likability is widely presumed to be a highly desirable attribute and is actively promoted and encouraged. However, this research study sought to challenge the purely positive connotations of likability by highlighting the experiences of individuals who struggled with the negative side of likability. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was adopted to interview seven self-confessed “likability sufferers” to elicit their perspectives of their experiences with the “shadow side” of likability in order to identify unconscious factors and root causes of their attachment to likability traits and behaviors, despite the adverse impact on their lives. The analysis through the psychodynamic lens revealed that the interviewees’ dysfunctional attachment to likability went beyond their fears of the worst case scenarios. In fact, the driving force of their hidden competing commitments are rooted in their unfulfilled sense of belonging, insecure attachment, and conditional parental love during their childhood years. The awareness and understanding of these unconscious needs could pave the way for the interviewees to initiate a change in their behavior to alleviate their struggle with the shadow side of likability.

Keywords - Likability, Attachment, Need to Belong, Conditional Love, Hidden Competing Commitment, Transference, Repetition Compulsion.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background: The Two Sides of Likability

Likability is widely considered to be a highly desirable trait with overwhelmingly positive connotations. Being likable is largely considered to be an attribute that one should aspire to, whether it is in our upbringing, popular culture, or the business world, with the plethora of how-to books and articles on this subject-matter, (Sanders, 2006; Lovas & Hollway, 2009; Brady, 2006; Clemmer, 2014; Shellenbarger, 2014; Zenger 2013). So what is likability? Adjectives commonly associated with likability include: “pleasant”, “nice”, “sympathetic”, “good-natured”, “cooperative”, and “warm” (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994, p. 504) (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). Apart from “being nice”, likability has been linked with the ability to communicate, connect, and empathize with others in an honest, appreciative, and authentic manner (Sanders, 2006).

It is thus little wonder that likable people tend to enjoy professional success, personal happiness, and longer, healthier lives. For instance, research has shown that likable people tend to excel in their work: they close more sales and make more money than their less likable counterparts (Sanders, 2006; Lovas & Hollway, 2009). They are also recognized and rewarded for their strong performances at work (Sanders, 2006; Lovas & Hollway, 2009). Furthermore, they are more likely to enjoy the support of family and friends, thus bolstering their overall physical and emotional well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

As the attribute of likability is widely perceived in an overwhelmingly positive light, its dark side tends to be hidden away in the shadows, often camouflaged by the use of other terms. For instance, the term, “Rescuer Syndrome”, is used to describe excessive helping behavior that is commonly displayed by those who have a hard time saying “no” and setting appropriate boundaries with others (Kets de Vries, 2010). The underlying factor that often drives this behavior is the dysfunctional need to be liked. Similarly, another widely-known term, “people pleaser”, also encapsulates the shadow side of likability. Such individuals fail to stand up to others in order to avoid conflict. They also tend to please others at their own expense by doing too much for them, essentially putting others’ needs above their own (Braiker, 2001).

This topic has captured my interest at a personal level due to my frequent encounters with likable people in my personal and professional lives, which have made me question the assumption that likability is purely a positive attribute. I have observed how likability "gets in the way" of likable people, as they prioritize their wish to be liked over their own needs. They fail to be assertive, avoid conflict, compromise their authenticity and are often taken for granted both at work and at home, aspects which negatively affect their emotional wellbeing. This has made me wonder why they continue to engage in likable behavior even though it is obvious that they are suffering from it. Their strong attachment to this tendency even at their own detriment suggests that there may be deep-seated, underlying factors possibly related to their childhoods. To me, likability is not something that can be learned from a book; rather, it is likely to have been cultivated throughout the individuals' lives, originating in childhood relationships and experiences. The surfacing of the links between childhood experiences and the shadow side of likability to conscious awareness could thus hold the key to the initiation of change — a shift towards "unlikability" that could alleviate the negative effects of the shadow side of likability.

Research Aim and Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, the research aim of this thesis is to conduct an in-depth study of the phenomenon of the shadow side of likability by:

1. examining its impact on professionals; and
2. using psychodynamic lenses to identify and examine the underlying factors (e.g., childhood experiences) that drive their compulsive need to engage in likable behavior despite their struggle with its shadow side with a view to initiating change.

Therefore, the research questions that this research study sought to address are as follows:

1. What is the impact of the shadow side of likability on professionals?
2. What are the psychodynamic factors (e.g., childhood experiences) driving professionals to engage in likable behavior despite their struggles with its shadow side?

Description of the Research Study

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was adopted to investigate the phenomenon of the shadow side of likability by integrating the

perspectives of individuals struggling with its shadow side. These perspectives were obtained through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with seven professionals (3 men and 4 women, aged between 35-60), via Skype, who had struggled with the shadow of likability and expressed an interest in exploring this issue. The IPA approach, with its focus on drawing forth the unique voices of participants in their descriptions of their lived experiences and their endeavors to make sense of them (Creswell, 2007), was thus ideal for capturing a rich and vivid picture of this hidden aspect of the likability phenomenon. Additionally, specific interview approaches that sought to encourage unconscious thoughts and associations to surface by giving the participants the freedom to allow their narratives to take an unimpeded direction were also adopted. This was also compatible with the research study's focus on the exploration of underlying motivators of the engage in likable behavior.

Significance of Research Study

The findings of this research study would be significant not only for those who suffer from the shadow side of likability, but also for those who live and work with them. In the case of sufferers, this exploration of the topic thrusts their challenges from the shadow into the light, thus making them aware of: 1) the adverse effects of their likability behavior; and 2) the underlying unconscious drivers of their tendency to engage in likable behavior, which stem from childhood experiences. Their conscious awareness of these issues can thus open up an opportunity for them to change their behavior. Sufferers of the shadow side of likability can thus improve the quality of their lives and enjoy genuinely healthy and respectful relationships with their family members, friends, and co-workers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Concept of Likability and Real-World Implications

Likability has been defined as the extent to which one is considered to be friendly, cooperative, and non-aggressive (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). The aforementioned terms are further expanded in Tim Sanders' (2006) book, *The Likeability Factor*. According to Sanders (2006), likability is characterized by these four core elements:

1. **Friendliness**: the ability to communicate one's appreciation of others;
2. **Relevance**: the capacity to connect with others' needs and desires;
3. **Empathy**: the ability to identify and experience the feelings of others; and
4. **Realness**: the capacity to appear authentic and honest to others.

In general, there would seem to be a widespread consensus that being likable is a highly desirable attribute that is accompanied by significant professional and personal advantages. According to Sanders (2006), along with Lovas and Hollway (2009), likable people tend to excel in their work: they close more sales and make more money than their less likable counterparts. In addition, they are often recognized and rewarded for their strong performances at work. A Columbia University study conducted by Melinda Tamkins revealed that likable colleagues were seen to be more "trustworthy, motivated, serious, decisive and hardworking" than their less liked colleagues. They were promoted faster and given higher pay increases than those lacking in likability (as cited in Lovas & Holloway, 2009). Similarly, Casciaro and Sousa Lobo (2005) found that professionals chose likability over competence when choosing colleagues to work with on a particular project.

Furthermore, likable people are more likely to have a network of family and friends to support them, which in turn leads to better psychological and physical health (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Conversely, as Heatherton and Voks (2000) captured concisely, "those who feel ostracized or rejected experience negative reactions, including physical illness, emotional problems, and negative affective states" (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000 p. 725).

As the attribute of likability is widely perceived in an overwhelmingly positive light, its dark side tends to be hidden away in the shadows. In fact, the term, "likability", is seldom used in conjunction with the diverse outward manifestations of

the disadvantages of likability. For instance, when portraying the problem of excessive helping behavior known as the “Rescuer Syndrome”, Kets de Vries (2010) describes how those who have an excessive wish to be liked have a hard time saying “no” and setting appropriate boundaries/limits with others. “Saying no is associated with ending a relationship, “others” will become angry or reject them” (p. 8).

Similarly, the widely-known term, “people pleaser”, also captures the disadvantages of likability. In her work, *The Disease to Please: Curing the People-Pleasing Syndrome*, Harriet B. Braiker (2001) explains how people who are driven by the need to be liked are negatively affected by the following behaviors. In their desire for others’ approval, such individuals often fail to stand up to others in order to avoid conflict. Moreover, they tend to do too much for others by putting the latter’s needs above their own, causing resentment and frustration.

Therefore, while likability has its advantages, it is also evident that its shadow side can seriously undermine individual well-being. However, to date, the discourse on the disadvantages of likability has been largely confined to popular publications that tend to offer quick behavioral fixes without addressing psychological issues beneath the surface. As such, it is the objective of this research study to explore the shadow side of likability by delving into the root causes of individuals’ need to be liked even as they struggle with its detrimental effects. Thus, the remainder of this discussion will cover relevant child development theories and concepts that could play a role in shaping the adult need to be liked. It will provide a foundational structure for investigating how unmet childhood needs can lead individuals to become adults who may compromise their well being for the sake of being liked by others:

- **“Need to Belong”** (Adler, 1930): Human beings are driven to adapt behavior in order to belong.
- **“Attachment Theory”** (Bowlby, 1969): Children are programmed to seek safety through a secure attachment and may need to learn to behave in a certain (likable) way to attain it.
- **“The Drama of the Gifted Child”** (Miller, 1981): This phenomenon describes children who are attuned to the expectations of others and learn to behave in a certain way.

- **Hidden Competing Commitments** (Kegan & Lahey, 2001): They refer to the unconscious elements that support continued potentially harmful behavior and may explain why likable behavior continues.

Alfred Adler's "Need to Belong" and Likability

The issue with the shadow side of likability is that it is camouflaged by the fact that wanting to be liked stems from a fundamental human need. Alfred Adler (1930) is the first theorist to propose that all human beings have a basic "need to belong": "Social feeling is the crucial and deciding factor in normal development" (p. 11). Children are thus motivated to behave in a way that will help them to find their place of belonging within the family. Similarly, Maslow (1943) highlighted the need for "belongingness and love" in his "hierarchy of needs" framework. According to Maslow (1943), deficits in this area during childhood could have a detrimental effect on a person's ability to form and maintain relationships throughout his/her life. More recently, Baumeister and Leary (1995) presented convincing evidence that people have a fundamental need to belong. Those who experience social exclusion suffer serious psychological consequences. Therefore, the motivation to behave in a likable way is great so as to ensure positive social interactions to lead the way to belonging. So great is the need to belong that research has suggested that the experience of being ostracized can trigger pain that is similar to extreme physical pain (Eisenberger, 2012).

The significance of the need to belong and its impact on an individual's desire to be liked are captured brilliantly in Heatherton and Vohs' (2000) statement:

> Because the need to belong is a fundamental human motive, we propose that people who feel they are in imminent danger of being rejected engage in amiable, reparative, or prosocial behaviors to gain approval from others and affirm social bonds (p. 726).

In other words, one could say, they become likable individuals.

Essentially, it is probable that adults whose needs for belonging are not met during childhood develop an excessive need to be likable in order to satisfy these unmet needs. For instance, Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles (2004) found that the need to belong is associated with increased sensitivity to socially significant cues. Their research study thus suggests that those who have experienced threats to their

feelings of belonging pay more attention to the interpersonal skills that promote connections with others.

Attachment Theory

Given that our sense of belonging is developed during our childhood, it would seem natural that it is inextricably interwoven with early attachment systems as children typically seek out feelings of safety and security within the family. Therefore, a highly relevant theory that is related to one's perceptions of one's sense of belonging (and adult tendency to be likable) is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969).

Bowlby (1969) defines attachment as a profound and sustained emotional relationship, specifically between caregiver and child, and describes how infants are naturally motivated to develop attachments to primary caregivers for protection and emotional support. A key component of the attachment theory is that the child needs to forge a strong relationship with a minimum of one caregiver for the children to develop socially and emotionally (Holmes, 2014, p. 69). As Ainsworth (1978) explained, when infants feel close to their primary caregivers and consider their attachment figure as a secure base from which they feel safe enough to explore the world, they are demonstrating secure attachment. A growing feeling of independent security enables the child to begin to develop appropriate social skills (Ainsworth, 1978).

However, when there is a lack of a reliable nurturing relationship with at least one sensitive caregiver (Bowlby, 1969), insecure attachment occurs, which "conveys the message to children that caregivers are unreliable, unavailable, untrustworthy, and largely uncommunicative" (Ollendick & Benoit, 2012, p. 84). As a consequence they may "develop a maladaptive approach to future interpersonal situations" (Ollendick & Benoit, 2012, p. 84). In fact, the disruption of a child's tie to the mother through separation, deprivation, or bereavement could, for example, lead to psychopathology (Bowlby, 1969).

A history of inconsistent care giving can thus lead the child to develop attachment anxiety and trigger the need to look elsewhere for a feeling of security, "because of an inborn need to seek safety" (Crowell & Waters, 1994, p. 32). They will "adapt in whatever ways are necessary to achieve and maintain… proximity" to their primary caregivers or others (Slade, 2014, p. 255). One possible adaptation strategy is to cultivate likable traits. If they are successful in attaining secure

attachment, this would lead to their fulfillment of their need for belonging either within the family or elsewhere.

However, if taken to the extreme, an excessive wish to be liked could develop and the negative aspects of likability could emerge. In fact, Bowlby's attachment theory also highlighted the need to form and maintain lasting positive and significant relationships and saw the adult's need for attachment as an attempt to recreate the close early relationship with the mother. The significant impact of childhood attachments with primary caregivers is also highlighted by Hazan and Shaver (1987), who suggested that elements of the child/parent attachment relationship are integrated into subsequent adult relationships. They are manifested in the "proximity-seeking", "comfort-seeking" and "support-seeking" behaviors in these adults as they endeavor to establish a secure base in others (pp. 511-524).

If individuals have experienced insecure attachment in childhood, they are more likely to replicate the dynamics of unpredictability or unreliability in their adult relationships. This is a manifestation of the psychological phenomenon of repetition compulsion described by Freud (1922) — the unconscious tendency of people to continue to place themselves in similar situations or relationships from their past in order to have the chance to rectify them or change the outcome. There is also an element of transference (Freud, 1949) as individuals are transferring their emotions originally experienced in their relationships with their primary caregivers to their current relationships with others.

Alice Miller's (1981) "Drama of the Gifted Child"

If the feeling of belonging is weak or the attachment insecure, certain children learn to make themselves more likable by becoming aware of expectations and seeking to fulfill them in an endeavor to experience a sense of belonging and gain secure attachment. This response is captured in Psychoanalyst Alice Miller's book "The Drama of the Gifted Child" (1981) described in greater detail below.

Miller depicts the way in which specially "gifted" children learn very quickly how to adapt their behavior to the wishes of their caregivers. In such cases, the children perceive that their caregivers' love for them is conditioned on their being "well-behaved, reliable, empathetic, understanding and convenient" (p. 14), adjectives which essentially describe a likable child. In order to be perceived as good children and thus avoid the threat of abandonment, they develop a highly sensitive

antenna for what these expectations might be (Miller, 1981). Thus, their endeavors to gain acceptance and belonging by striving to be likable can be seen as a defense mechanism against parental rejection and abandonment.

Unfortunately, as a consequence, such children lose track of their own needs and sense of self because they behave only according to fulfilling the narcissistic needs or expectations of their parents. In their adulthood, they remain dependent on the affirmation of others for their own well-being (Miller, 1981), which is captured in the circle of repetition compulsion: “This person will later live in the past without realizing it and will continue to react to past dangers as if they were present” (p. 30).

Kegan and Lahey’s (2001) Concept of “Hidden Competing Commitments”

Apart from the deep-seated influence of childhood experiences on the development of the shadow side of likability in adulthood, it is important to point out that this adult tendency is also reinforced by an unconscious component known as the “hidden competing commitment”, a concept coined by Kegan and Lahey (2001) based on the psychodynamic notion of “secondary gain” (Freud, 1949). They describe how individuals are reluctant to change, even when the behavior is exerting a negative impact on their lives, because they are unwilling to experience the risks of the outcomes of changing their behavior. More specifically, their resistance to change is based on the “big assumption” (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 67), essentially that something terrible would happen to them if they were to change. Therefore, this tendency to persist in their negative behavior is driven by an unconscious self-protective mechanism to prevent the occurrence of the “big assumption” or “worst case scenario”, (the term that has been used in this thesis). They go on to depict how once the big assumption has been identified, examined and challenged, it often becomes clear that the destructive behavioral patterns that individuals engage in are no longer necessary. Bringing the unconscious to the surface frees individuals to consider trying out new behavior by implementing “small experiments for change” (Kegan & Lahey, 2001).

Rationale for this Research Study

This research study aimed to contribute to the limited academic discourse on the shadow side of likability by examining the underlying causes of why people have the tendency to continue to behave in a likable way even when it is affecting them in a negative fashion. Moreover, this examination involved the use of psychodynamic

perspectives that explored how unconscious factors rooted in childhood experiences affected the adult wish to be liked. Finally, by establishing the linkage between the past and the present, as well as surfacing the hidden competing commitment, it was sought to initiate the participants' move towards engaging in small experiments to counter their tendency to be liked. Alice Miller's (1981) words provide an apt summation of what this research study strived to do in deep-diving into the phenomenon of the shadow side of likability: "We become free by transforming ourselves from unaware victims of the past into responsible individuals in the present, who are aware of our past and are thus able to live with it" (p. 2). Essentially, when living with the past becomes understanding it, then there is the possibility of changing the way the present can be approached and the future can be experienced.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Research Approach

The primary research approach used in this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As this approach is focused on eliciting "the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 76), it was highly appropriate for this research study that sought to investigate the phenomenon of likability from the perspectives of individuals struggling with its shadow side.

The IPA approach is ideal for capturing a rich and vivid picture of a phenomenon by drawing forth the unique voices of the participants in their descriptions of and attempt to make sense of their lived experiences (Cresswell, 2007). What further enriches the findings in an IPA study is its dual interpretation aspect: both the participants *and* the researcher are involved in the interpretations of the participants' narratives. While the participants offer their interpretations of their narratives, the researcher is able to contribute to the process by interpreting the participants' narratives and the latter's interpretations through specific lenses and/or concepts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Finally, a thorough and systematic process of analyzing the data to identify common and compelling themes from the individual narratives is conducted to derive the big picture of the phenomenon.

Selection of Interviewees

In identifying appropriate interviewees for this study, the following selection criteria were used: a) those for whom the subject matter resonated; and b) those who struggled with the shadow side of likability. My preliminary explorations of likability among friends and acquaintances in my personal and professional network generated significant interest. Some of them immediately expressed an interest in being interviewed and exploring the subject further with me due to their struggles with likability and experiences of its negative effects on their daily lives.

Turpin et al. (1997) indicate that British clinical psychology doctoral programs deem 6-8 participants appropriate for an IPA study. Following this guideline, seven individuals were selected for the interview. While I was prepared to interview additional people if needed, the rich and abundant data gathered from the seven interviewees proved to be more than sufficient in enabling me to capture the

phenomenon of the shadow side of likability. The final interviewee group thus comprised four females and three males between the ages of 35 and 60, from Europe or South America.

Data Collection

Prior to the individual interviews, emails were sent to the interviewees to: 1) confirm the time; 2) outline the purpose and structure of the interview; and 3) request permission to audiotape and transcribe the interview, as well as to incorporate segments of the transcribed interviews in the final thesis. They were assured that the thesis would not contain any identifying information to ensure that their identity would be protected.

Interview Questions

The objective of these interview questions was to elicit rich and compelling narratives that could help to explain how the interviewees developed their need to be likable by taking into account their childhood experiences. Thus, the interview questions began by exploring the interviewees' positive and negative experiences with regards to their likability experience, followed by an exploration of what they thought may happen if they did not behave in a likable manner, then the discussion of their childhood experiences, with the intent of drawing out possible linkages between their childhood experiences and adult behavior. The final part of the interview would thus prepare the way for interviewees to engage in behavioral changes in order to alleviate their tendency to be likable, even when it is detrimental to their well-being.

Part 1: The likability experience. To begin the interview, the first set of questions focused on the interviewees' experiences with their traits of likability. First, the interviewees were asked about the personality traits that made them likable and the advantages they had enjoyed from being likable, to focus on the positive side of likability. Second, questions shifted to highlight the shadow side of likability and its disadvantages. Interviewees were asked to describe specific situations where likability had made life difficult for them.

Part 2: The worst case scenario. The next questions sought to unearth the "worst case scenario"; that is, the objective of this exercise was to get the participants to reflect on what could occur were they not to behave in a likable way.

These questions were intended to enable the interviewee to reflect deeply and consider possible unconscious motivating factors that drive their need to be likable.

Part 3: Childhood experience. At first, to bring to light the root causes of likability possibly originating in childhood, the style of questions changed. To encourage free association and elicit storytelling and encourage a more complete narrative, more open-ended questions were asked regarding the interviewees' childhood experience and relationships.

Part 4: The link. The objective of these questions was to challenge the interviewees to examine possible linkages between their childhood experiences and relationships to their present likability and need to be liked. The purpose of these questions was to bring the possible links to the attention of interviewees or to increase their awareness of the connection.

The questions in this section were designed to allow unconscious issues to surface so as to pave the way for possible change. The worst case scenario was revisited to enable interviewees to explore whether the situations evoking the fears originating in childhood were still relevant today.

Part 5: Experiments for change. The interviewees were asked if they could imagine behaving differently and what form that new behavior could take. Small experimental steps towards engaging in "unlikable" behavior were discussed. The questions in this section were thus intended to initiate a new perspective on behavior and possibly provide an incentive for change.

Part 6: Conclusion. The interview was concluded with an invitation to provide any further reflections and associations on the interview content or experience. Before the interview ended, the interviewees were queried about their perceptions and feelings to ensure that they were not adversely affected by the materials that had surfaced, since some of the themes were emotional and sometimes painful.

Implementation of the Interview

Due to temporal and geographical constraints, all interviews were conducted via Skype. Although the interviews were not conducted face to face, the richness of the data indicated that the Skype option did not adversely affect the data gathering process or the quality of the data collected. The interviews ranged in duration from 75 to 105 minutes.

During the interview process, the general principles derived from two types of inter-related interview approaches were applied — the Socioanalytic Interview approach (Long & Harding, 2013) and the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) Method (Holloway and Jefferson, 2008). The Socioanalytic Interview approach is fitting for this research study because it seeks to explore both the conscious and unconscious dynamics of an individual's experience and to truly understand the phenomenon of likability, it was crucial to be able to look below the surface to examine underlying and possibly unconscious issues.

The diverse and most pertinent strategies adopted under the Socioanalytic Interview approach were as follows:

- "Active listening": focusing on and verifying the information;
- "Prompting for extended detail": seeking depth and clarification;
- "Gaining specific examples": looking for explicit illustrations;
- "Clarifying": searching for a deeper understanding;
- Observing the interactions with the interviewees: monitoring the interpersonal dynamics between interviewee and interviewer;
- "Showing empathy": attempting to gain a more profound understanding of the situation from the interviewee's perspective.

(Long & Harding, 2013, pp. 101–102).

This approach is "designed not only for the interviewer to "collect" data, but also to create a "potential space for the interviewee to explore their own thoughts and feelings…" (Long & Harding, 2013, p.93). Long and Harding highlight the importance of providing a "contained" space — an environment that provides safety and trust for the interviewee (Bion, 1961). They point out that the notion of a safe "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1960) is akin to that of the "safe physical and emotional holding of an infant by a caring parent" (p. 95) where reflections can emerge in an atmosphere of security.

In addition, to trigger a free-flowing narrative of associations and reflections to gain a complete picture of the phenomenon of likability, its causes and implications, additional interview techniques derived from the four principles of Holloway and Jefferson's (2008) FANI method were applied during the interview. The FANI method, based on the psychoanalytic principle of free association, encourages unconscious thoughts and associations to surface by giving the subjects freedom to

allow their narratives to take an unimpeded direction, without being restricted by direct questions. The four principles were as follows:

1. **Using open-ended questions:** Open-ended questions were utilized as far as possible for the investigation of the participants' childhood experiences so as not to restrict the flow of stories by focused or limiting questions. Thus, questions were framed in the following way: "Can you tell me about …." or "Tell me some more about ….." while paying attention to possible unconscious defensive behavior
2. **Eliciting stories**: To gain a complete picture of the individual's important relationships, it was sought to expand breadth of the story telling by encouraging associations and giving space and time for reflections to develop and emerge.
3. **Avoiding "why" questions**: This strategy was adopted to avert the rationalizations that could lead to the obstruction of the flow of emotions when a person tries to explain and justify.
4. **Following up with questions by using the subjects' own turn of phrase**: This approach was used to make it easier to revisit and gain deeper introspection in areas of specific interest.

According to Gadd (2004), the FANI method enables unconscious thoughts and connotations to reveal themselves. Free associations offer a way for moving past defenses against anxiety and provide a possibility for the interviewers to look out for "contradictions, inconsistencies, hesitancies, absences, avoidances and changes of emotional tone in narrative accounts" (p. 386).

In the latter half of the interview, a more structured interview approach, with the use of direct questions, was used to draw out the linkages between the interviewees' childhood experiences and their adult tendencies to behave in a likable way. The worst-case scenario question was revisited in a deliberate attempt to help interviewees recognize that their worst fears of the risks of behaving in a less likable way may not indeed hold true. This discussion thus set the stage for an exploration of diverse behavioral changes designed to shift the interviewees towards "unlikability" and alleviate the emotional constraints of their need to be liked.

Subsequently, initial follow-up emails were sent to all interviewees. They were thanked for their participation in the research study and encouraged to contact the

researcher should further associations or reflections emerge. In addition, several weeks later, to find out about the outcomes of the small experiments in moving the interviewees towards “unlikability”, update emails were sent out. They were helpful in determining whether making the linkages between present behavior and childhood experiences were effective in bringing about changes in behavior.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the audiotapes of the interviews were listened to and transcribed at the beginning, but were returned to numerous times to verify to specific sections as necessary. This process enabled the researcher to reconnect with the interviewees and immerse herself fully in their narratives. Next, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis were applied in order to identify themes that would offer insights into the phenomenon of likability. Revealing points from the narratives were identified and grouped into themes and color-coded in the text. The data were then further analyzed through theoretical concepts highlighted in the literature review and psychodynamic concepts (from the clinical lens) to explore the influences of early childhood experiences on the unconscious motivation of the interviewees to persist in their tendency to be likable, even when it undermined their well-being.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Description of Interviewees

Ranging in age from 35-60, the interviewees had been struggling with the shadow side of likability for several decades, thus highlighting the entrenched nature of the problem. As the sample was mixed fairly evenly between men and women, it would appear that the shadow side of likability affected both genders. Interestingly, all the interviewees worked in the helping professions. This observation thus suggests the possibility that people struggling with likability issues tend to opt for helping professions in their career choices.

Table 1

Background Information about Interviewees

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Gender**	**Profession**
Adela	50	Female	Physician and Coach
Brian	60	Male	Body Psychotherapist
Caren	59	Female	Dance Movement Psychotherapist
Finn	37	Male	Organizational Coach
Lydia	35	Female	Coach and Consultant
Naomi	50	Female	Change Manager
Zach	49	Male	Leadership Consultant

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Four major themes emerged from an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of likability:

1. Struggling with the Shadow Side of Likability
2. Unconscious Drivers of the Need to be Likable
3. Root Causes of Likability
4. Awareness as Impetus for Change

Theme 1: Struggling with the Shadow Side of Likability

All the interviewees suffered significantly from the shadow side of likability that severely affected their functioning in both the personal and professional spheres of their lives. Specifically, the adverse effects of their continuous engagement in likable behaviors were as follows: 1) difficulties in dealing with conflicts; 2) suppression of needs and wants; 3) fear of disappointing others; 4) forgoing of key friendships; and 5) loss of authenticity. Each of these effects will be discussed in greater detail below.

Difficulties in dealing with conflicts. All interviewees highlighted their inability to stand up for themselves and assert their stance for fear that the other party would not like them. For instance, **Lydia**, the mother of a one-year-old, struggled to reprimand her nanny for her tardiness. Even though Lydia's expectation of punctuality was perfectly reasonable, she was held back by her concern that her protest could make her "unlikable" to her nanny, thus jeopardizing the quality of care for her child: "I still want to be likable to her. I want her to be comfortable because she takes care of my child." On the surface, it would seem that Lydia had voiced a valid concern to justify her need to be likable. However, it could possibly mask a more deep-seated reason that was articulated by **Finn**: "How can you learn to have an argument when there is the shadow of the need to want to be liked?" Finn's description of this shadow is also manifested in **Caren**'s description of an altercation with a new colleague who had clearly let her down at work. Not only was Caren unable to hold her position when her colleague did not apologize, she even backed down in order to defuse the situation because of her extreme wish to be liked by her new colleague: "The word, "desperate", is worrying, but I was desperate for her to like me."

These interviewees' avoidance of conflicts at all costs due to their need to be liked could even undermine the quality of their work. For instance, **Brian**, a body psychotherapist, wondered whether the quality of his work as a therapist was undermined by his tendency to avoid confrontations with his patients due to his need to be liked: "…I avoid things that are too edgy or confrontational which might actually go interesting places. I find it very hard to hold the tension or the anxiety of not being liked. I equate that with confrontation and discomfort."

Even when he confronted his clients, Brian pointed out that he did so "in a likable way and end[ed] up apologizing for [his] behavior", which reflected the extent

that he “still wanted to be liked”. From Brian’s perspective, his avoidance of challenging issues could mean that he missed out on the possibilities for helping his patients learn and grow.

The avoidance of conflicts due to the likability issue also exerted an adverse effect on the interviewees’ emotional well-being. According to **Finn**, his failure to address areas of possible conflict early enough often led to the repression of negative feelings: “So you cover it up until finally the volcano erupts and that is something no one wants and no one asks for.” More than just a one-off event, Finn’s tendency to repressed emotions had become an “unhealthy” part of his life:

> Without the need to be liked, I would have developed healthier ways to vent negativity, (instead of “eating and drinking emotions”), to rid myself of it, rather than conserve it within the boundaries of my body, both psychological and physical.

Suppression of needs and wants. An accompanying effect of conflict avoidance in order to be likable is the suppression of needs and wants. **Brian** found it hard to be assertive. For instance, when informed that his flight had been cancelled, he would simply say, “Oh, ok”, instead of demanding an alternative option from the airline. This failure to assert his wishes also made it difficult for him to speak up to workmen he engaged. Wanting to come across as being likable and grateful for their work, Brian tended to defer to their suggestions, instead of firmly asking for what he wanted. And even then when the work was incomplete, substandard, or over-priced, he felt unable to challenge them.

In **Finn**’s case, his desire to be liked was manifested in his inability to say “no”: he tended to put other people’s needs and wants above his own. For instance, Finn assisted his classmates with completing their work, while making little progress on his own. “So how does this get in my way? I cannot say no, I do not want to say no, because I want to be likable.” His frustration with this behavior was captured in the statement, “Over and over, this gets in my way.”

Naomi also pointed out that that she “would even forget to satisfy [her] own needs and would try and work out what the others wanted [her] to be or do.” Moreover, her suppression of her needs and wants also made her feel as though she were held hostage by others’ needs and wants: “You are very dependent on the

mood of other people. If the other person was in a bad mood, I would immediately think it was my fault."

Fear of disappointing others. Another recurrent factor, cited by two interviewees, which fuelled their sacrifice of their own needs, was their fear of disappointing people. In the case of **Zach**, his concern with disappointing people meant that he was perpetually anxious that his choices would not be satisfactory to others. For example, when visitors were in town, Zach would find it impossible to choose the "right restaurant" for dinner, fearing that his selection would disappoint them. Even simple, daily decisions about whether he should have tea or coffee, when offered to him, could constitute a huge dilemma for him, since he did not want any extra effort to be exerted on his behalf. So he would typically respond with "I don't mind", even though he probably did. Due to the pervasive and recurrent nature of this behavior, it was not hard to see how exhausting these daily struggles with decision-making could be for Zach. To top it off, he pointed out that others did not appreciate his "considerateness"; rather, they felt irritated or confused by his "I don't mind", "it is up to you", or "whatever you want" responses.

For **Adela**, a physician, disappointing people or being criticized for not being there for others was difficult for her: "It upsets me deeply. It goes to my bones. I feel like people do not like me if I am not available enough for them and let them down." However, her fear of disappointing her patients came at a "huge price" for her: she over-extended herself as a young doctor, which not only left her exhausted, but also resulted in her failure to connect with her family and friends. Adela remained racked with guilt to this day about her prioritization of her patients over her son back when he was still a child: during the interview, she became tearful as she acknowledged that she had missed out on being a good mother to her son.

Forgoing of key friendships. Three interviewees also pondered about how their struggle with likability led them to miss out on having key friendships in their life. As **Naomi** explained it, she might have lost out on potentially significant friendships due to her need to feed a sense of comfort and security: "You surround yourself with people who give you the feeling that they like you, and you feel comfortable around them, even though they might not actually add value otherwise and may even take advantage of you." Therefore, Naomi acknowledged that she might have dismissed friendships with people who might have "really brought something to the relationship"

beyond “just security.” Naomi’s investment of her energy in fulfilling the basic needs for security meant that she was unable to meet higher-level needs. By clinging to her basic need for safety — the next to the lowest level of Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs that sets out a five-tiered model of human needs, Naomi was unable to seek out the higher needs of love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

Similarly, **Lydia** noticed that she had superficial friendships, compared to those of her husband: “I am much more likable, sociable, but do not have the enjoyment of such genuine friendships (stemming from his revelation of his true self to others): He says everything to everyone… he is not so likable, but has really close and deep friends.” This made Lydia question whether her friends would still love her if she were just as authentic as her husband.

Loss of authenticity. The loss of authenticity was an important issue for the interviewees, as their tendency to engage in likable behaviors was accompanied by a suppression of their true needs and wants. For **Caren**, maintaining her likable self entailed putting on an act that alienated her from her inner self: “I lose my congruence and sense of self and who I am and what I stand for because I have to think of how my behavior is going to be received by the other”. **Brian** also lamented that his attachment to being likable had eroded his connection with his authentic self:

> Because of likability being part of my sense of self, it can feel a bit like an artificial construct. So I am not sure whether it is the authentic me that is responding or some kind of false self or persona.

For Brian, the price of “placating, going along with things, following someone else’s agenda” meant losing “a very clear sense” of who he was.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that people around the interviewees also played a part in enabling their likability behaviors, which involved concealing their authentic selves. For instance, in **Finn**’s case, he felt that habitual concealment of his authentic self had made it easier for him to interact with others: “I know how to make people like me. I know the trick…” At the same time, Finn acknowledged that it was hard for people to know who he truly was due to the “mask” he donned in playing the role of a “likable person”: “I have always felt like an imposter”. Accustomed to his “likable” façade, he wondered whether the authentic Finn would still meet others’ standards: “But what if they see behind the scenes. What if I am not good enough?”

Even more explicitly, **Lydia** pointed out that she felt directly pressured by people to behave in a likable fashion, regardless of how she truly felt inside. For instance, when she acted in a cranky fashion, her father-in-law who typically adored her would respond: “Wow! We have a problem here!” This example thus showed that likable people are not “wrong” in thinking that they needed to behave in a likable fashion in order to be liked. Others around them are playing a strong contributing role in keeping them likable and preventing them from expressing their true feelings.

It is evident from this discussion that the shadow side of likability does exist: likable people suffer greatly because they do not state what they want or how they feel in order to be likable to others. As a result, their failure to project a true image of themselves also leads to the loss of their authentic self. Moreover, their attachment to being likable had also come at a heavy price of missing out on forging key relationships with family and friends. Yet despite their suffering, the interviewees were still clinging to the behaviors of likability. This suggests that there is a need to dig deeper to examine the unconscious motivation below the surface.

Theme 2: Unconscious Drivers of Likability

In this research study, the underlying drivers of the need to be likable were identified through the interviewees’ conceptions of the *worst case scenario*, or what Kegan and Lahey (2001) call “The Big Assumption” (p. 67) — *what* was the *worst thing* that could happen if they were to behave in an unlikable way? This is one of the unconscious factors that fall under Kegan and Lahey’s (2001) broader concept of the hidden competing commitment. Apart from the worst case scenario, another unconscious factor that drove the interviewees’ engagement in likable behaviors is related to their fulfillment of fundamental needs, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Worst case scenario — what are your deepest fears of being unlikable?

The recurrent worst case scenario for all the interviewees revolved around the fears of: 1) isolation and loneliness, and 2) loss of identity and self.

Fear of isolation and loneliness. This fear was a powerful driver for five interviewees to engage in likable behavior. **Naomi** offered a pragmatic justification for her fear: “if I were to act in an unlikable fashion, there would be no safety net. There would be no one there to help.”

However, by probing a little deeper, it was apparent that these fears were not just pragmatic; rather, they hit them in the depths of their being. According to **Zach,** being unlikable meant that he would be "ignored" and "lonely." For **Adela**, this level of being "disconnected" and "left alone" was tantamount to "losing herself". **Finn** also highlighted the deep-seated nature of his fear of loneliness that had stayed with him throughout his life: "As a child, as an adult,… I still have this very strong despair, this fear of being alone… If I am not likable, then I am doomed to despair and loneliness. A big existential fear of death alone."

Fear of loss of identity and self. For five interviewees, likability had been such an integral part of their identity and being that if they were to behave in an unlikable fashion, they would cease to exist:

> I don't know who I am. I lose my identity. I lose who I am. (**Lydia**)
>
> If you are not likable, you do not exist and maybe that is the unbearable part. (**Zach**)

The worst case scenario of "unlikability" was impossible for Zach to describe: "I cannot put a name to what will happen, but I feel like it is something dark, painful, something unimaginable".

The level of the interviewees' fear of the worst case scenario was vividly captured by **Brian** and **Caren**:

> If I were to assert myself, I would not be able to sustain it; I would collapse. I would be overwhelmed and either go into a panicky fight or aggressive mode, or more likely would freeze. Either way, there would be a loss of sense of self. (**Brian**)
>
> I would not be quite human, not able to function. My sense of self, my functions and capacities, my capabilities would wither somehow. I would be less of a person. I wouldn't function any longer as a person. (**Caren**)

Fulfillment of fundamental human needs. Another hidden competing commitment that appeared to be driving the likability behavior of the interviewees was their active pursuit of psychological safety and self-image.

For all the interviewees, likability provided their lives with a sense of security and stability: "… to be liked means to belong and to belong for me is a question of security" (**Naomi**). **Finn** offered a slight variation of this explanation by stating that he engaged in likable behavior to promote harmony with others, which gave him a

sense of security: “It just feels better, being liked. I don’t like disharmony in relationships: they stress me...” Finn’s preference for harmony and security also accounts for why likable people are unable to manage conflicts. Their need for security is so entrenched that its potential loss is terrifying for them, because they would not feel anchored to a reality that was familiar to them: “Likability keeps me safe: Beyond it is the unknown, it is unsafe. I fear I would be out of control. I would disassociate, lose sense of self. It is terrifying” (**Brian**).

The second unconscious driving force for five interviewees is their perception that being a likable person was an ideal self-image that they should strive for. Being liked by others fed their self-esteem and made them like themselves. **Zach** explicitly pointed out that “being likable helps me with the feeling of not being good enough.” Similarly, **Adela**’s self-image and self-esteem were boosted by the positive feedback from her patients: “If people say thank you, thank you for taking care of me, of course that can be like a drug. It is like, yes, you are important.”

For these interviewees, being perceived as likable helped them to like themselves:

> You feel like you are the worst person if you say something that the other person does not want to hear. (**Lydia**)

> I suppose it is a way of helping me feel relaxed around myself if I have a sense of myself as being likable. It confirms my self-image… I see myself as being likable and if I get that feedback from others, it is reassuring. (**Brian**)

In fact, both **Zach** and **Finn** were explicit in introducing a moral dimension to explain the deep-seated nature of their attachment to likability:

> There is something inside of me, I want to be sure that people know that I am a good person. It is unbearable for me to think that someone thinks I am bad. (**Zach**)

> From a moral perspective, it is just how I think I ought to be. I ought to be likable rather than mean or a misanthrope. It is in my innate nature to want to be a good person and it nurtures my idea of self-worth. (**Finn**)

This discussion of the hidden competing commitments of the interviewees has illuminated the compelling force of unconscious motives in driving the interviewees' persistent engagement in likable behaviors despite the negative impact on their lives. But how did these hidden competing commitments gain such a foothold in the psyche of these interviewees in the first place? To address this question, it is important to dig even deeper in order to uncover the root causes of these hidden motives by looking towards the influences of childhood experiences and considering how they could be continuing to influence adult behavior.

Theme 3: Root Causes of Adult Likability through the Psychodynamic Lenses

The discussion of the previous two themes has captured the strong attachment of the interviewees to likable behaviors, despite their suffering and the awareness of its adverse effects on their lives. Probing deeper into the underlying factors revealed the following root causes that essentially revolved around dysfunctional relationships with primary caregivers:

1. No Room for the Child: Unfulfilled Need for Belonging
2. Physical and Emotional Absence or Unreliability: Frustrated Quest for Attachment
3. Conditional Love: The Price of Becoming the "Gifted" Child

No room for this child: unfulfilled need for belonging. For four interviewees, their struggles with the sense of belonging stemmed from their perception of a dearth of love and nurturing attention from either or both of their parents during their childhood. As a result, they did not feel a sense of belonging to the family unit. **Naomi** captured the closeness of the alliance between her parents, which essentially made her feel that there was no room in the relationship for her, the child:

> I don't have a father and a mother; I have a 'mono-bloc'. As a little girl, I could not 'seduce' my father, because my mother was there. I could not make an alliance with my mother, like a woman alliance, because my father was there.

The tightness of their alliance made Naomi feel that she was at fault for their exclusion of her. She was so sensitive about this exclusion that she believed that she struggled with belonging from the first day of her life:

> You don't belong. And for a newborn, that is so threatening to think that it does not belong that it prefers to think it is its fault… So then you start to try to become better in the hope to belong one day.

In the case of **Caren**, her mother's prioritization of the needs of her father above those of the children, led to her sense of not belonging to the family. Apart from receiving the minimum in care (food, clothing, and shelter) Caren did not feel nurtured. She described herself as "the cuckoo in the nest", which highlighted her uncertainty about her place in the family. This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that her parents had considered sending her away to boarding school, which terrified Caren, as she saw it as being tantamount to being "thrown out of the nest". Her endeavor to avoid this prospect added to her need to develop and enhance her likability in order to be included in the family unit.

Unlike the other interviewees, **Finn**'s unfulfilled need for belonging originated from his parents' divorce before he was one year old *and* his father's subsequent remarriage and exclusion of him from the new family. In this "undercover relationship" with his father, Finn knew of the existence of his two half-brothers, while they were unaware of his. The dysfunctional nature of this relationship is imprinted in Finn's mind by the wedding of his aunt, the younger sister of his father. On that occasion, Finn was not permitted to sit with his father's new family or interact with his younger half-brothers. He was told not to disclose to them that he was their brother; instead he was supposed to pretend that he was just another guest at the wedding. For Finn, his father's exclusion of him from the new family, along with the revelation that he had wanted Finn aborted, was the birthplace of his issues with likability:

> Am I entitled to be here, or do I have to make people like me to have a right to be present at the gathering?... I want to prove myself worthy to others that I am a good human being and there is a place for me on this planet.

The above discussion offers a powerful explanation of the roots of the interviewees' development of likability traits. Because the interviewees did not find a sense of belonging with their family of origin, they continued to engage in likability traits and behaviors into their adulthood in order to fulfill their need for belonging elsewhere. It is also an example of repetition compulsion — a defense mechanism whereby people unconsciously and repeatedly put themselves in a situation or relationship in order to have the chance to change the outcome (Freud, 1949).

Within the context of this research study, they were replicating the likability behaviors that they had developed in their relationships with their parents in attempts to meet their need for belonging through current relationships.

Physical and emotional absence or unreliability: frustrated quest for attachment. Another root cause of the interviewees' struggles with likability is the disrupted and insecure attachment to their primary caregivers during their childhood. For four of the interviewees (**Adela, Caren, Brian**, and **Zach**), their mothers' depression, coupled with a lack of adequate substitutes, disrupted their attachment process. Only Adela and Caren's narratives will be covered as they provided insights that are mirrored in the life experiences of Brian and Zach.

Caren's mother suffered from serious postpartum depression that required hospitalization soon after her birth. Her father, whom she described as generally physically or emotionally absent, was not an adequate substitute as the primary caregiver. The fact that her mother thereafter suffered a miscarriage and struggled with grief over this event meant that she remaining emotionally unavailable for Caren for months. As for **Adela,** her mother's depression and hospitalization occurred when she was just one year old. Her mother had inadvertently caused the death of her baby boy just after he was born by having taken sleeping pills because she was unaware of her pregnancy. The losses of her tiny brother and her mother through depression cast a shadow over Adela's life. Due to her fear of losing people she loved, Adela developed likability traits to form strong attachments elsewhere and hold on to them: "If I try very hard to be liked, the person would not go away."

Insecure attachment for **Finn** and **Naomi** was caused by the absence of a mother who was physically and emotionally available. Due to space constraints, only Naomi's experience will be covered. Naomi's birth occurred around the period when her paternal grandmother (to whom her father was very close) passed away. Devastated by his loss, Naomi's father was not up to the task of raising Naomi. Naomi's mother who returned to work immediately after the birth directed most of her attention to her husband when she came home. She entrusted the care of Naomi to a series of au pairs, before placing her into day care. As both her parents were unavailable from the moment she was born, Naomi built up likability skills from a young age which were useful to appeal to the frequently changing au pairs who took care of her.

Furthermore, the emotional unreliability of Naomi was exacerbated by her mother's exhibition of a "push and pull" pattern in her interaction with Naomi throughout her life: "...when I was far, she would be nice to me so that I come back to her. But when I came too close, she was not there." Naomi likened their relationship to the ball game, Jokari, in which her mother was the one holding the racket and she was the ball on the elastic. Her mother's inconsistent, alternating patterns of closeness followed by distancing must have been deeply confusing for young Naomi who sought secure attachment with her mother. Naomi had recreated the jokari pattern with her friends, pulling them towards her with her likable behavior and then distancing herself when she felt that they were too close: "I would like to find the right distance and not to feel lonely all the time. And yet if I am too close, I feel suffocated very quickly." Repetition compulsion is shown in Naomi's behavior as she repeats the pattern of the relationship with her mother with her friends.

Based on this discussion, it was evident that the insecure attachment with their primary caregivers during their childhood led the interviewees to develop likability traits. The concept of repetition compulsion is also relevant here in explaining why these interviewees whose primary needs were not fulfilled continued to engage in likability behaviors to this day, as they sought the sense of secure attachment in current relationships.

Conditional love: the price of becoming the "gifted" child. All seven interviewees had lived in family environments in which they were expected to behave in accordance with the parents' rules of conduct — what was deemed to be likable behavior. As captured in Miller's (1981) *Drama of the Gifted Child*, the prioritization of the parental expectations over the child's needs and preferences meant that the interviewees developed from an early age effective antennae that were highly attuned to figuring out how to behave in order to be likable. **Naomi** offered a powerful description of the development of this antenna and its deep-seated nature in contributing to her continuous struggle with belonging and likability:

> As a child, I needed to understand what they wanted so I could answer their needs. So that is how the whole loop of trying to be attentive to what they want begins, because it is a question of survival. You hope to belong one day.

Their development of "giftedness" in this area — a preoccupation with the needs of others — required the active suppression of their own needs in order to

meet their need of belonging to the family unit: “So you quickly start to forget about your own needs up to the point that you don’t even know what your needs are, or even think you have them because you have been raised that way” (**Naomi).** The following discussion of the narratives will illustrate vividly *how* the imposition of norms and expectations by their parents during their childhood played an instrumental role in planting the seeds of their current struggle with likability.

Likability was encouraged, validated, and expected by **Brian**’s parents as a tool for preventing conflict: “In the background, there was the threat of uncomfortable strong feelings escalating; so the idea of being nice, pleasant, helpful, was safer.” In this family environment, the expression of strong feelings was forbidden in general. The extent to which Brian had internalized these norms was reflected in his sense of responsibility in supporting and reinforcing this status quo:

> There was a sense that my place in the family ecosystem was to keep things calm, regular, light, humorous… I am not aware of consciously having adopted that role, but because it was the family style, I just fell into that niche.

The significant validation that Brian received for acting in a likable manner and thus ensuring the absence of conflict in the family environment meant that he could never express any negative feelings. The effects of such an upbringing — the championing of likability at individual costs — had penetrated to the core of his identity by feeding his sense of safety and belonging:

> There is a link between likability and validation. It is almost a safety instinct — to be likable. It becomes an identity: if I want to get in touch with who I am, where I am, then that likability is part of a core identity, which in times of threat or difficulty, I would not want to be threatened.

The imposition of parental expectations over the children’s behavior was also excessive in the case of **Lydia**. Her mother prized the trait of likability highly: not only did she herself strive to be liked by one and all, she expected the same of her daughters. The pressure from her father was even greater. If Lydia and her sisters did not behave in a certain way, he employed “the silent treatment” and the whole family suffered greatly from the withdrawal of his full warmth, love and attention: “It sometimes took two or three months for him to speak again, even when we were little, especially when there were special occasions like Christmas.” It was clear that Lydia was “schooled” from a very young age to behave in accordance with her

parents' expectations or risk incurring the silent treatment, as well as the guilt of causing the whole family to suffer. Thus, Lydia grew up to become an adult who was terrified of disappointing people: she was ruled by the unconscious belief that her engagement in unlikable behavior could cause "bad things to happen". Transference is evidently at play: she transferred her original threat of her father's silent treatment to present-day situations and relationships.

This in-depth discussion through psychodynamic lenses has shown that the development of adult likability — its pervasiveness and deeply-entrenched nature — originates from childhood experiences with primary caregivers. Specifically, the need for belonging, the insecurity of attachment, and the cultivation of the "gifted" child were the underlying factors that fuelled the interviewees' beliefs, fears, and hidden competing commitments to drive them to behave in a likable way. It would seem that children who do not experience a sense of belonging to their family or secure attachment are unconsciously driven to meet these fundamental human needs. In the case of the interviewees, this inherently natural drive to fulfill these needs was doomed to failure because of the unavailability, unreliability, and overly controlling nature of their primary caregivers. Despite their best efforts at being likable, their child selves felt unsuccessful in attaining the sense of belonging and secure attachment they needed for normal growth and development. As a result, they grew up to become adults with finely-tuned likability skills and behaviors, who were desperately seeking to fulfill these needs in their current relationships and interactions with others.

Nonetheless, the fact that the interviewees were able to establish linkages between their childhood experiences and likable behavior suggest the possibility that they could change. Through this heightened awareness of the shadow side of likability and its unconscious drivers, these interviewees could then begin to initiate the process of change by engaging in small experiments that challenged them to move towards "unlikable" behavior.

Theme 4: Awareness as Impetus for Change

The honest exploration that brought to the surface unconscious drivers of likable behavior served as a precursor to help the interviewees consider the possibility for behavioral change in order to reduce the negative effects of likability. Taking the first step towards change, the interviewees undertook what Kegan and

Lahey (2001) described as “small experiments”— the tentative trying out of new behaviors (identified at the end of the interviews). In this section, the interviewees’ undertaking of the small experiments towards unlikability will be explored and discussed.

The overall outcomes of the small experiments were revelatory. The deeply entrenched nature of all the interviewees’ struggle with the likability was evidenced by their explicit statements of the difficulties of embarking on this change. Although some interviewees did not immediately change their outward behaviors, it was important to point out that all of them had been thinking about how they could incorporate change into their lives. For instance, **Naomi** had become aware of the need for her to keep in check her compulsion to make herself liked at work, as well as the “jokari” effect of her friendships. **Finn** was thinking of making himself more visible in the social media by creating his own website and Facebook page or blog and risk making and owning (potentially unlikable) comments he would post there.

Moreover, some interviewees practiced new thinking and behavior that actually shifted them towards unlikability. In the case of **Adela**, one of her concerns about being unlikable had been disappointing people: “How can you disappoint someone and not be disappointed?” She set out to practice disappointing others and experiencing the discomfort of the feeling, which entailed accepting the reality that she cannot always be everything everyone wants her to be. At the follow-up, Adela revealed that she had begun to communicate differently with her friends, with a focus on lowering their expectations of her availability (as well as her own), while still keeping in touch with them by short messages or emails. By erecting a realistic target for herself, Adela was able to take the first critical step towards unlikability. **Zach** met his aim of looking out for opportunities to try out unlikable behavior on two occasions. On one of these occasions, he stood up for himself when the parameters of a work project that was supposed to involve him conducting 40 paid interviews with clients at the headquarters, were reduced to 10 paid interviews and dispersed to different locations. Instead of acquiescing to this change as he would have done in the past to remain likable, he disagreed with the arrangement and insisted on further verification with the boss. In the end, not only were the interviews moved to the headquarters, but many more than were initially indicated were scheduled. Apart from achieving a positive outcome in the short term, Zach got to see that nothing

terrible happened as a result of his unlikable behavior, which is important in motivating him to sustain his progress in the longer term.

The significance of these seemingly small shifts in the mindset of the interviewees was described by **Caren** who had come to recognize that in her pursuit of likability, she might have sacrificed the very traits (e.g., openness, honesty, congruence) that made her genuinely likable in the first place: “I think that generally bringing a gentle awareness to this particular pattern (which your interview has definitely catalyzed) has already helped to bring about change.”

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Limitations, Suggestions for Further Research, and Real-World Applicability

Conclusion

The findings of the research study have yielded several interesting conclusions that not only confirmed the existence of the shadow side of likability, but also the adverse impact it had exerted on the quality of life of the interviewees. More specifically, this phenomenon was manifested in their avoidance of conflicts at all costs, crippling fears of disappointing others, tendency of putting the needs of others before their own, as well as the resultant losses of authenticity and core relationships with family and friends. Thus, there is no question that likability had undermined the daily functioning and quality of life of these individuals.

Despite the fact that they had suffered from the shadow side of likability for a few decades, the interviewees were understandably resistant to change, which highlighted the deep-seated nature of their attachment to the traits and behavior of likability at both the conscious and unconscious levels. The exploration of worst case scenarios illuminated their dire fears that their unlikability would result in loneliness and the subsequent loss of identity. Apart from their desire to avert the worst case scenario, the interviewees also revealed their hidden competing commitments of finding psychological safety and having a positive self-image in their pursuit of likability. The hidden competing commitments were so compelling that the interviewees found it challenging to follow through with their small experiments to change their behavior towards unlikability. It would seem that they had become so habituated to the pain of living with the shadow side of likability that it was difficult for them to change their behavior within a short period of time.

The use of the psychodynamic lenses to delve deeper into the underlying motivators of the interviewees' attachment to likable traits and behaviors showed that their childhood experiences with their parents (primary caregivers) played a critical role in planting the seeds of their adult tendencies to be likable. For the interviewees, their development of likability skills from a young age originated from:

1. the feeling of not belonging to their family of origin, due to close alliances between the parental figures, which excluded them;

2. insecure attachment to primary caregivers due to the latter's physical and/or emotional unavailability or unreliability; and
3. the perception that their parents' love was conditional on their willingness to conform to the expectations and rules of their parents, which fed their compulsion to figure out and do what others required of them.

The deeply entrenched nature of likability in the interviewees' life was clearly evidenced in the mixed outcomes of their small experiments. All the interviewees commented on how challenging it was for them to take these steps. In fact, one interviewee did not follow through with the small experiments and another did not respond to the request for updates. However, some interviewees had made a start with "unlikable" behavior and found that their worst fears did not immediately materialize.

Although the small experiments that were meant to launch the interviewees on their journey of change did not always produce an immediate outcome, it is unrealistic to expect the interviewees to change behaviors that were decades in the making with an interview and within a two-month timeframe. A "gestation period" is necessary for the awareness to turn into action: the interviewees certainly demonstrated a heightened awareness of their struggle with likability and their in-depth understanding of its root causes in both the interviews and the follow-up interview two months later. Essentially, there were indications that the interviewees were mindful of their struggle with likability and were considering how to incorporate changes into their lives. It is my belief that, with the passage of time, they would be ready to embark on further small experiments in the future.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The limitations and suggestions for further research of this research study are as follows:

1. Due to the small number of interviewees, the results could not be considered to be representative or generalizable to a wide population. Nonetheless, through an in-depth exploration of the narratives of seven interviewees, this IPA study generated insightful findings about the shadow side of likability, which could be useful for further exploration. For instance, to achieve a broader understanding of the phenomenon of the shadow side of likability, it would be interesting to compare the

experiences of likability across cultures, gender, generations, and religions to determine whether such factors influenced the effects of the root causes on the interviewees. As an example, a mixed method study, comprising a survey of a large and diverse population, coupled with an IPA study of a culturally diverse sample, could add to the discourse on the shadow side of likability.

2. The sample of this research study was skewed toward individuals who were aware of psychological concepts, which enabled them to understand and participate in the interpretation of their experiences and narratives. While this proved advantageous and enlightening for this research study, a more comprehensive understanding of the shadow side of likability could have been derived by including individuals who were not as aware of their struggle with likability and the related psychological concepts. It would be interesting to determine whether this change to the sample would produce significantly different findings and outcomes, thus further adding to our understanding of this phenomenon.
3. An unexpected finding in this research study was the possible link between the depression of the mother and likability. Therefore, a quantitative study could be conducted to investigate whether the depression of the mother could be a predictor of adult likability.

Applicability of Findings to the Real World

An important contribution of this research study is the linkage of root causes to adult likability through the psychodynamic lenses. This is relevant for the real world as it helps sufferers become more aware of the deep-seated nature of their issues. In addition, the findings of this research study would also enable people around them to understand the full extent of their problem and support them in their endeavor to move towards unlikability. Finally, the general public would become educated about the shadow side of likability, which refutes the prevalent perception that being likable is automatically a positive state of being.

Just as significantly, the findings further suggest that heightened and in-depth awareness of the root cause of likability sufferers' struggle with likability can bring about the possibility of trying out new behaviors with a view towards a more permanent change. I would like to acknowledge the interviewees for displaying

considerable courage in their willingness to expose their most vulnerable selves during these intimate interviews with me and consider taking on the challenge of the small experiments. However small and tentative these steps may be, they hold forth the promise that these interviewees can successfully embark on their journey of change, which would not only provide relief for themselves, but also improve the quality of key relationships in their lives.

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