

ANIMAL ALTERS: CASE REPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Five cases of multiple personality disorder (MPD) are presented which include one or more animal alters of differing complexity. In some cases, the development of the animal alter could be traced to childhood traumata involving (1) being forced to act or live like an animal, (2) witnessing animal mutilation, (3) being forced to engage in or witness bestiality, or (4) experiencing the traumatic loss of or killing of an animal. Clinical clues to the animal alter phenomenon that emerge during therapy are (1) over-identification with an animal, (2) hearing animal calls, (3) excessive fears of animals, (4) excessive involvement with a pet, and (5) cruelty to animals. Therapeutic work with animal alters may be a helpful or necessary preliminary to retrieval of underlying memories about the torture or killing of animals or human beings, and can be essential to the integration of such memories and to self-forgiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Surveys of patients with multiple personality disorder (MPD) typically note the numbers of alternate personalities, the presence of child and opposite-gender personalities, and the different affects and behaviors segregated to specific alters (Putnam, Guroff, Silberman, Barban, & Post, 1986). Clinical reports of animal alters are limited (Carlson, 1986; Smith, 1989).

Five cases are presented in which psychotherapy progressed through animal metaphors or disclosure of animal alters. The formation of these alters was associated with (1) being forced to live like an animal; (2) witnessing animal mutilation, especially in context of threats the child will be hurt as the animal is hurt; (3) bestiality; and (4) the death or

deliberate killing of the child's pet. The therapist should be alert for clinical clues to the presence of animal alters including: (1) over-identification with an animal; (2) hearing animal calls; (3) excessive fears of animals; (4) excessive involvement with a pet; (5) cruelty to animals; (6) conversations with pets; (7) perceiving animals as protectors, guides or guards; or (8) animal-like demeanor or dress. Recognition of animal alters can lead to exploration of the "inhuman" abuse the patient has experienced and may be a way for the patient to disclose and process the unspeakable.

CASES OF ANIMAL REPRESENTATION AND ANIMAL ALTERS

Case 1

A 38-year-old woman made many references to animals over the course of therapy. During childhood family members fed her with leftovers scraped into a dog bowl from which she was made to eat on hands and knees. When no one acknowledged her presence or speech, she wondered if she might be a dog and began to spend days in the yard because she had learned that dogs don't belong in the house. When left unfed, she would go to the garbage pail in the middle of the night to scavenge food. This also fit with her identification as a dog and she began to call upon the dog part of herself, later structured as the dog alter, when she had to eat this way. Later her father deliberately killed her pet dog as punishment.

The patient described how her father caught birds and placed them in the closet when she was sent there for punishment. She was frightened when the birds beat her about the head with their wings. Sometimes there were dead rabbits and birds under her bed which she believed her father had killed and could bring back to life. When she got out of bed, "you could never be sure if they would get your feet or not." She was told she could be strangled just as these animals were if she didn't do what she was told and keep her mouth shut. These are the anlage of her present defense against anxiety: "When I'm too scared, I turn into a bird and fly into the closet."

The patient recalled holding neighborhood cats while her father chopped off the legs before strangling them. When the family cat became pregnant the father showed his daughter what he would do if she became pregnant by cutting the kittens from the abdomen. As before, the limbs were amputated in pieces and the kittens strangled. The patient's father told her that the dead cat and all other cats would know the terrible things that had been done.

When her father began having intercourse with her at age eight, she became terrified both of pregnancy and of eating. When recalling these fears in therapy, she described hearing "weird babies crying inside." The voices were inconsolable and she was terrified of leaving the therapist's office because "everyone would know." She feared others could hear the cats crying and would know about her participation in animal mutilation. As treatment progressed she described trying to help the mother cat by taking her and the kittens inside herself so her father couldn't hurt them anymore. However, she was terrified of an alter based on the vengeful internalized mother cat and the internalized mother cat alter, in turn, was frightened of the patient's father.

After describing how the kittens had been internalized, it became possible for her to talk about her own incest pregnancies at ages fourteen and sixteen. The infants had multiple defects and weak cries; but the real horror came with their deaths at the hands of her father shortly after the births. One child was dismembered much like the cat and the kittens. After the patient talked about the internalized kittens, she was able to recall the dissociated memory of the incest pregnancies. In the early stages she could only talk about these memories while in her cat-like state. The cat could "tell" these stories when the patient could not.

Significantly, whenever the patient's guilt was triggered about not saving her children or the kittens, she would self-mutilate with a razor blade held lengthwise between hyperextended fingers, her fingers resembling claws. She described similar behavior when she ambivalently submitted to sex with men. The cat alter would make numerous superficial "scratches" on the faces and chests of the men.

Case 2

A 40-year-old woman presented for treatment because she would "lose" her skin and "fall apart" unpredictably. She felt her body was divided in parts — the only time it was really whole was when she was typing — then arms, although they belonged to different people, had to work together. Everything she wrote about a subject "comes out five ways," each with an identifiable script, unique orientation, and unique information about the topic. The fifth type of script was printed, the style straightforward and insightful. It was always signed, "the dog." These versions were seldom longer than a sentence or two, but cut right to the heart of the matter. The patient was fond of the cartoon character Snoopy, whom she felt communicated things succinctly and made them more bearable with humor.

As a child she had been given a dog named Jenny that she wanted with her all the time. Jenny slept in her room each night. After her parents divorced, the dog was relegated to a doghouse in the backyard and the patient felt pushed out of the house by her new stepfather. She and the dog spent many hours together before the animal was killed accidentally. She felt she had lost her only close, kind and devoted friend. She was ridiculed by her parents when she wanted to have a funeral for the dog. Any expression of her feelings resulted in verbal abuse by her mother.

Twenty-five years later she started in therapy and simultaneously found a dog severely disfigured by large patch-

es of hairless and damaged skin. The dog followed her home and she kept it outside for months while she nursed it back to health. She worked hard to earn the dog's affection and calm its fear of people. She feels she may have mistreated the dog initially, but as her functioning improved, she treated the dog better. He now lives in the house and is the patient's constant friend, companion, and playmate. The neighbors say the dog is vicious, but she denies this.

When her childhood ally died, the only commemoration that seemed possible was incorporation of the dog into her developing self, a self that was already using dissociation as a response to violent family disintegration which she was not allowed to discuss. The dog alter functioned as an external observing ego with synthetic insight. It also allowed her to preserve some warmth and humor. In therapy the dog appears as an alter, as a real companion who is a substitute for human interaction, as a creature to be both nurtured and abused, and as the Snoopy metaphor.

Case 3

A 35-year-old health care professional disclosed in group therapy that when she became scared, she would turn into a dog. Her parents were German immigrants who punished the patient by making her eat from a dog bowl and act like a dog. In individual therapy, multiple personality disorder was diagnosed; and she revealed that she had been molested by her father who involved the family dog in various acts of bestiality. Any reference to sex, being bad, or feeling shamed made her feel as if she "turned into" a dog. When these issues were discussed in therapy, the patient began acting like a dog and spoke in German (which the therapist did not understand).

Talking about being treated like an animal, feeling and acting like an animal preceded telling about the abuse. Some of the telling was communicated in the language that was used in the original abuse, but was also in a language and style of communication that was likely to be noticed but not understood — a way of communicating without actually "telling."

Case 4

A woman with dissociative disorder was tried and convicted for a murder done by evisceration. The only witness at the crime scene reported seeing her first kneeling beside the reclining victim and then crawling toward the witness on all fours. Only when she drew near did she stand up to walk. Forensic evidence suggested that the woman had used her teeth at one point in the crime, and she believed this also, but only because of the taste that was left in her mouth.

Because of her amnesia, she was hypnotized. Asked in trance to imagine herself in a peaceful place, she described a jungle waterhole and herself as a panther in the branches of a tree. At the end of a largely fruitless attempt to reconstruct the crime under hypnosis, she was asked what had been happening in her peaceful place. She said that a warthog had been attacked and split open by the panther.

Forensic reports indicated fingernails had been used during the crime, however there was no trace of blood under the convicted woman's nails. The reconstructed crime time-

table left no time for her to wash her hands except possibly in a roadside stream. One explanation was that she had licked her hands and nails clean.

This woman's amnesia also covered much of her childhood. Therefore, any history of her earlier violence could not be elicited and/or documented.

Case 5

A middle-aged woman remembered only a wholesome childhood, but had never felt happy or at ease in the world. She experimented with many beliefs and forms of healing. While participating in New Age religious practices she acquired the following "power animals": snake, dolphin, owl, hawk, several different big cats, dogs, and domestic cats. She came for a psychiatric evaluation after she began to remember incest and other abuse in her past. She also began to worry that the circle dances and moon ceremonies she had devised for herself were actually recreations of rituals she had experienced in the past. The animals she had selected as spirit guides (who also appeared in her art) included many species she recalled from childhood ceremonies.

Psychological treatment started when she first remembered her incest experiences. She continues to work on her dissociative disorder and memories of multi-generational sadistic abuse. The animals are clearly important metaphors; whether they signal the presence of internalized animal alters or personality fragments is not yet clear.

DISCUSSION OF CASES

In these cases, indications of an animal alter included descriptions of child abuse involving being treated like an animal, witnessing animal mutilations (often used as threats to enforce silence), bestial sex, or descriptions of the deliberate killing of a loved pet. The internalization of the animal seems to function to produce a survivable persona in a chaotic environment and to maintain, at least, a non-verbal representation of unspeakable cruelty despite enforced silence. Internally, the animal alter may function to continue the enforcement of silence. The alter also allows preservation of loving memories of the animal companion that had been deliberately killed or traumatically lost.

In addition to childhood memories of animals, other clues for therapists are (1) feeling like an animal or identifying oneself with an animal, (2) hearing animal calls inside one's head, (3) fear of animals, (4) excessive protective involvement with a current pet or other animal, (5) cruelty to animals, (6) reports of conversations with pets, (7) animals as protectors, guides or guards, and (8) animal-like behavior, such as scratching, crawling, licking or eating like an animal.

Animal-like behaviors have been described in abused children (the Cinderella Syndrome) (Goodwin, Cauthorne, & Rada, 1989; Goodwin, 1989) as well as in adults with multiple personality disorder. "Wild children" described historically have been thought to behave like animals because of imitation of animal foster mothers, or because of developmental delays due to severe abuse and neglect (Freedman & Brown, 1968; Singh & Zingg, 1942; Itard, 1962). It is also possible that some of the animalistic behaviors seen in these

children represent re-enactments of their severe abuse.

Animal familiars of witches and shamans may be another cross-cultural constellation based on the clustering of childhood trauma, reliance on dissociative symptoms, and unusual and ambivalent attachment to animals because they were part of the original trauma (Carlson, 1986; Smith, 1989). Freud once mentioned a case involving transient assumption of an animal identity, describing a child who, when his kitten died, announced that he was now the kitten and crawled about on all fours (Freud, 1948, p. 67). Several of Freud's most famous cases are recognized by an animal component: Little Hans' fear of horses, the Wolf Man who feared, dissected, and tortured insects and animals, and the Rat Man's fear that rats would eat into his anus. Freud said of Rat Man, "He could truly be said to find 'a living likeness of himself' in the rat" (Freud, 1955, p. 216).

When patients make animal references, they can sound or look psychotic. The symptoms should be observed and examined as any dream or memory fragment might be explored. The animal alters may be a path to related but dissociated memories, or they may function to prevent access to a set of memories. Typically, they do both. As the development and function of animal states are clarified, the alters can be connected with the childhood memories or trauma that led to their formation.

The therapist should reassess the dangerousness of the patient when animal alters are discovered. Contact with the animal alter is important in providing a gateway to the victim's more violent alters, an access that is often crucial for safety reasons. These more violent alters represent identifications with the most violent acts of the perpetrators; actions usually not accessible until the animal torture is revealed. In some instances, the animal alter itself may be the patient's most violent state.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of animal alters can lead to uncovering dissociated memories of animal torture and bestiality which are often layered below memories of incest, but are recovered before memories of extreme family violence, including sadistic abuse. The animal alter may point to evidence of extreme and murderous violence. The "animal" does this non-verbally, in part because verbal disclosure would trigger the perpetrator's death threats.

The perpetrator intimidates the victim and enforces silence by torturing the animal and threatening that the child will be tortured in the same way. Perpetrators also reinforce the animal's potential for retaliatory attack and threaten that the victim will be "found out" as a co-perpetrator. The animal alter may be transformed internally into an exotic, ferocious beast which can express murderous rage. Thus, achieving contact, reconciliation, and alliance with the internal animal alter becomes a powerful tool which the victim can use in efforts to recover or to retaliate. Ultimately, the reconnecting and adaptive aspects of the animal image can be incorporated into the patient's emerging ego strength. A major component of the patient's motivation for developing assertiveness and reincorporating retaliatory capacity is

the victim's shame and guilt about having been helpless to protect these small, innocent creatures. This developing ego strength can be used to process the sadness and rage at having been a helpless, unprotected child.

Working with animal alters is helpful in addressing the extreme guilt resulting from participation in acts felt to be inhuman. Because of the victim's induction as a co-participant in animal torture, the issue of responsibility has become even more muddled than in other incest situations. The animal is often chosen for victimization because it is the child's pet. From the patient's point of view, their pet was victimized because they loved it. Therefore, the child's love itself is contaminated and potentially lethal. This, together with the victim's extreme guilt about the seriousness of the infraction, leads to self-esteem deficits at the level of not experiencing oneself as a member of the human race. Work with the animal alter can be a pathway to self-forgiveness for the victim. As therapist and patient begin to understand the animal alter and its violent propensities as a natural consequence of sadistic abuse, the patient's underlying sense of beastliness becomes accessible to treatment. ■

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