

The animal-human bond in the psychotherapy relationship:

As a bridge towards enhanced relational capability

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Attestation of Authorship.....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Ethics Approval	7
Abstract.....	8
Animal-human bonds.....	9
Chapter One - Methodology	13
Search criteria	13
Inclusion and exclusion criteria	14
Chapter Two - Winnicott and our earliest negotiations with reality.....	16
Introduction.....	16
Transitional objects and phenomena.....	17
Origins of mammalian relational behaviour	18
Attachment theory and animals	19
Chapter summary and conclusions	21
Chapter Three - Animals in the lives of children.....	22
Introduction.....	22
Prevalence of animals in children's lives.....	22
Animals and real life lessons	23
Pets and grief.....	25
The field of pet orientated child psychotherapy	26
Reparative pet relationships in the lives of children.....	27
Animal, cruelty and conduct disorder.....	29
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Animal Assisted Therapy	31

Case illustration one.....	32
Conclusion	35
Chapter four - The continuing animal experience	36
Introduction.....	36
Animals as transitional phenomena	36
The velveteen rabbit.....	38
The little prince	39
Discussion	40
Chapter five - Animals in the lives of adult humans	42
Introduction.....	42
Grown-up pet relationships.....	42
Pet- lovers versus non pet-lovers	45
Animals and dialogues with self	47
Topsy: the Story of a Golden Haired Chow.....	48
Can pet relationships function as a defence against human relational experience?	50
Case illustration two	53
Summary and conclusions	55
Chapter Six - Animals as a bridge to human enhanced relational capability	57
Introduction.....	57
The Glass Menagerie	58
Sharma and the presence of an ‘if you breathe it breaks’ anxiety	60
When Nature becomes the parent	62
Bridge towards relational capacity.....	63
The transcending quality of animal relationships	65
Summary and conclusions	65

Chapter 7 - Synthesis and discussion.....	67
Theoretical synthesis.....	67
Theoretical contribution to theory development.....	68
Clinical synthesis	69
Limitations of study	72
Implications for future research	73
Summary	74
Conclusion	76
References.....	78

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date:

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Ethics Approval

Ethical approval has been given in a general approval of dissertations of this type. The approval number for Dissertation 588869 is 02/33 and was given on the 27th April, 2004 and will be valid until 27th April, 2007.

Patient confidentiality has been strictly maintained and written informed consent has been obtained from all people used in case illustrations. Pseudonyms have been used for all patients and some biographical details have been altered.

Abstract

This study reviews the use of the animal-human bond in the psychotherapy of clients who, as a result of early environmental failure have developmental deficits in their ability to form satisfying relationships, yet have been able to ‘bridge’ this gap by their attachment to an animal (or animal symbol).

The concept of animal-human relationships is explored in relation to Winnicott’s (1971) theories on object use and transitional phenomena. The role of pets as attachment figures is also examined.

Existing theoretical conceptualisations of animal-human bonds within psychoanalytic writing are explored. This has been a neglected area, to date. I discuss the resistance to and associated ‘cringe factor’ associated with this material, which I noted throughout the research for this dissertation.

Within the psychotherapy relationship, I explore the clinical implications of working directly with understanding the client-pet relationship, and the question of whether this can be used to enhance the relational capacity and general well being of the patient.

I propose that pet relationships can evoke early and regressive parts of us that are outside our full awareness. That as psychotherapy is interested in the continuing integration of different parts, as well as ways of bringing them into the psychotherapy, that working with a patient’s pet relationship can contribute significantly to the relational development and well being of the patient.

Introduction

Animal-human bonds

Although psychotherapies are concerned with human-to-human intersubjectivity, animal-human relationships are mentioned extensively (although mostly not expanded upon) throughout the psychoanalytic literature. A plethora of information celebrating the therapeutic value of animals exists within popular media, as well as on the fringes of many therapies, yet surprisingly little has been expanded upon within the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic literature (Alper, 1993; Roth, 2005; Sherick, 1981). It seems that animal-human relationships are neither entirely ignored nor taken up in any real depth. They seem to inhabit a persistent background or twilight space/role, often as the metaphorical figures behind dreams and phobias or substitutes for the real core dynamics and fears. Anecdotal accounts of beneficial relationships with pets are perhaps considered either as too mainstream (in the sense of being lightweight, cliché or sentimental), or as not mainstream enough to enter the main body of psychoanalytic theory and literature as substantial material worthy of study.

Sherick (1981), writing of the significance of pets for children, points to the disparity between the obvious prevalence of animals in the psychological world of children (as depicted by Freud in classic cases involving the symbolic significance of animals such as Wolfman and Little Hans) and the lack of psychoanalytic literature that centres on the significance of actual pet relationships. He cites Searles (1981, p.195) in emphasising the importance of the “non human environment” in the life of “man”, in which pets (especially dogs) hold value not only symbolically but, as objects in their own right. Woods,

cited in Sherick, (1981) states, “to ignore the patient’s pet may be to ignore an essential dimension of the essence and meaning of the patient’s life (p.195).”

Roth (2005), in his article on “Pets and psychoanalysis”, observes a “subtle tendency” within psychoanalysis to “diminish” the importance of human-pet relationships while accenting the pathology of pet attachment (p.1). Roth’s article is an investigation into some of the fundamentals of the pet-human relationship with a focus on its adaptive function. He observes that the quality of the shared psychic environment between animals and humans is a field that has been left out of psychoanalytic writing. Similarly, Alper (1993), argues that while the beneficial role of pet relationships in many special as well as general populations has been well established, there is a lack of theoretical conceptualisation into why these relationships (particularly child-pet relationships) are beneficial. Alper advocates that an analysis of the child-pet bond from a self-psychology perspective provides a “framework” from which to understand the past and current significance of pets in the lives of patients, revealing important aspects of the self.

Despite a strong recognition by many (including the above) authors of the significance and value of the animal-human bonds, there appears to be a strong resistance within the psychoanalytic psychotherapies to register and expand on these insights. Melson (2001), in her paper on the psychology and study of animal-human relationships, proposes that one generalization about psychology at large is that, historically, animal-human relationships have been ignored and that this topic continues to resist attention. Gold (2000), in a conference speech to the Institute for Expressive Analysis on the topic of animal-human bonds, speaks of his anxiety in presenting his ideas and experience around animals and

psychotherapy. Despite this being an area in which he has worked successfully for many years, he feared that his ideas would be dismissed as irrelevant. Gold goes on to assert the creative and potentially healing place of a psychoanalytic view of the animal-human bond, giving case examples where patients have been able to bridge a relationship with him as their therapist, by firstly being able to tolerate a relationship with his dog.

In researching this dissertation I have observed the frequency with which the topic of animals (as pets, in dreams, or as symbolic representations) is mentioned within the psychoanalytic literature, while how rarely this material moves beyond an anecdotal or abstract level. I have also observed, when it does move, how deeply personal, vulnerable and moving this can be. It seems that exploring relational feelings towards our non-human companions requires a degree of psychological nakedness exposing fragile, primitive and perhaps even transitional parts of us that may feel unsophisticatedly infantile or irrational. Perhaps this is because a relationship with an animal may necessarily contain some of the elements of regressive, anthropomorphic thinking from our early childhoods — a suspension of reality so necessary in our earliest negotiations with reality.

Chapter One of this dissertation outlines the methodology employed in the writing of this dissertation.

Chapter Two is concerned with an exploration into our earliest negotiations with reality, principally through the insights of Winnicott's theories on "the use of the object" and transitional phenomena (Winnicott, 1971). Attachment theory is then explored from both a clinical perspective — the

concept of animals acting as or filling in as attachment figures — as well as from an ethnological perspective that explores our evolutionary origins.

Chapter Three focuses on the significance of animals in the lives of children, specifically in what ways these relationships make up for early failures. To illustrate some of the above insights, I then introduce a case illustration where one of my client's had formed a close relationship in childhood with her pet dog, who she attributes as her "life saving" support, following a traumatic incident of sexual abuse in her latency years.

Chapter Four is an exploration of the continuing experience of animals in the lives of adults. I argue that the central significance of animals (taken for granted in childhood) is relinquished as we grow into adults, in an analogous way to our transitional objects.

Chapter Five is concerned with the actual experience of animal relationships in adulthood, along with implications for working with this in the therapy relationship. I illustrate this chapter with a second case example exploring a young adult patient's use of a newly acquired pet. This pet becomes a focus within the psychotherapy relationship, functioning as a transitional object as well as providing valuable self-object experiences.

Chapter Six moves on to a discussion of the use of animals as a bridge towards increased relational capability. I expand on my second case illustration, using examples from literature.

Chapter Seven discusses conclusions and clinical implications.

Chapter One - Methodology

My dissertation is guided by the research question: Can the patient's relationship with their pet, be worked with within a psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy towards enhanced relational capability? I also ask the questions:

1. to what extent can animals 'make up' for early environmental failures, and how can this be understood within the psychoanalytic literature?; 2. What are the clinical implications of working with a patient's pet relationship — can this be used as a bridge in the therapy towards enhanced relational capacity?

The aim of this research is to contribute to a psychoanalytic understanding of the dynamics of the animal-human bond so as to inform clinical understanding into how to work with patient's relationships with animals.

My methodology is in the form of a modified systematic literature review (SLR). It is a modified review because the majority of the literature included is based on qualitative research or case study observation as opposed to the quantitative, evidence based literature, which is traditionally used in disciplines associated with the medical model.

In my search for literature I have included research and insights from academic disciplines outside of psychoanalytic writings, such as writing from ethnologists and veterinary science. I have included case study material from my own practice to illustrate my themes. Although I will include other disciplines in this study, my focus will be on psychoanalytic understandings of the animal-human relational bond and how this informs psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Search criteria

Attempts have been made to minimise bias by using explicit search criteria. I have used the PEP (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing Archive 1,

Version 6) as my primary database, as it is the principal electronic source of psychoanalytic literature. Searching on the word ‘Animal’ yielded 1000 results, while the word “pet” yielded 580. However few of these articles contain subject matter on animal relationships. I then specified my search using the PEP function to search for two subjects in the same article and so searched for animals ‘and’ transitional objects, animals ‘and’ attachment etc. The table below outlines my search topics.

Table 1.1 PEP search

Search terms	Results
Animals or Pets	1000+
Pet	580
Animals and attachment	829
Pets and attachment	27
Animal-human bond	1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Although many articles were brought up under the subject heading ‘animals’ and ‘pets’, it quickly became apparent that the majority were not about animals or pets but rather mentioned the words in passing or used the word in different contexts. To help sort these articles for relevance I used the PEP ranking function and reviewed the first 200 articles for relevance. The PEP ranking function sort articles in order of the number of times the keyword appears in the text.

My inclusion, criteria was that animal or pet relationships (real or symbolic animals) were written about as part of the clinical purpose of the paper/article.

Through my PEP searches I became aware that very little psychoanalytic material exists on my topic and that what was written about commented on the lack of psychoanalytic exploration into this subject. To supplement my literature searches I also used reference lists from the most relevant articles to source further material in articles and books. In this way, I was directed towards other disciplines where psychoanalytic concepts had been applied in the exploration of the relationship between humans and animals. I found much overlap in the work of veterinarians and psychotherapists in the exploration of the significance of animal-human bonds. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is an established therapy in many countries, and has contributors from many different disciplines.

I also carried out searches in Google under ‘human-animal bonds and psychoanalytic theory’, which directed my search towards prominent theorists and practitioners in this area such as Sue Ellen Brown (2004), and Dr Joel Gold (2000).

I have included a number of literary examples to augment my argument.

Chapter Two - Winnicott and our earliest negotiations with reality

Introduction

An essence of Winnicott's (1971) developmental theory concerns our earliest negotiations between our perception of internal and external realities and how we navigate the transitional space between the two. Winnicott conceptualises this "world of difference that there is between relating and usage" (p.88) as the progression from object relating (which is taken for granted) to when the object can be used, and so must become real in the sense of belonging to a shared reality (as opposed to being a "bundle of projections") (ibid). Winnicott argues that this change "does not come about automatically, by maturational process alone" (p.88) and cannot be taken for granted. His central thesis is that for a subject to use an object they must first have "developed a *capacity* to use objects" (ibid) and that this process is dependent on the "facilitating environment" (p.89) .

According to Winnicott, the movement from "object relation" to "object use" involves the repeated destruction (in fantasy) of the object along with the survival of this destruction by the object. The child can destroy their primary caregiver(s) in their imagination and have her/him survive this destruction.

Winnicott (1971) stresses the perilous nature of this journey between "object relating" to "object use", in which the "most irksome of all problems that come for mending" occur (p.89). He asserts that there must be 'favourable conditions' for facilitating this process (in external object relations as well as in the analytic relationship), which is primarily the capacity of the object to survive the destructive attacks without retaliation and for a mutual capacity for creative 'play' within the transitional space. The "good-enough mother" (p.10)

(caregiver) is in tune enough with her infant to provide the illusion of the infant's omnipotence, while at the same time providing the holding environment necessary to contain the disillusionment that accompanies her inevitable failures — and in doing so, marking the reality of her separateness.

Transitional objects and phenomena

For Winnicott (1971), an important developmental progression within this transitional space is the acquisition and use of a 'transitional object' — traditionally a segment of blanket, a doll or a soft toy animal. For the child, this first 'not me' possession enables an intermediate space where the child is first able to hold on to the presence and comfort of the other (usually mother) in her physical absence. The transitional object has distinct qualities that qualify it for this hugely valuable usage — most essentially it is a 'possession' of the child's that unlike the internal object is not under the omnipotent control of the infant, yet is also not an external object (outside control) either.

It has been observed by many authors (Katcher, 2000; Noonan, 1998) that animals, either as toys or alive pets, often function as transitional objects or phenomena — inhabiting an in-between space between projected and actual experience or between 'me' and 'not me' perceptions.

Pet animals have important commonalities with transitional objects, as they are in a sense a 'possession' of their owners while at the same time holding their own reality as separate beings. A relationship with a pet requires a degree of anthropomorphising and invention. As we cannot hear fully from animals

how they experience us, we bridge this gap with our projections. This is potentially an important play or intermediate space¹.

Origins of mammalian relational behaviour

In the 1872 foundational work titled “The Emotions in Man and Animals”, Charles Darwin (2006), describes the origins and complexities of the emotional bonding in higher mammals. This richly detailed book describes the evolution of the emotions that underlay our attachment behaviour, along with the inherited ‘remnants’ from our mammalian ancestors that both mark this progression as well as highlight the commonality of our passage. Although outdated and perhaps ethnocentric by contemporary standards, his book contains astute observations of the innately common language of our human emotions that are experienced cross-culturally, and are universally understood. With scientific rigor as well as poetic eloquence, Darwin captures what it is to be a human-animal in a style that I believe is pre-emptive of psychoanalytic theory and attachment theory. For example, in his moving observation of a father and son meeting after a long separation, he captures both the physiological manifestation of the emotional response and the underlying attachment yearnings and separation fears – containing a balance of joy as well as an anticipatory grief:

Many a father and son have wept on meeting after a long separation, especially if the meeting has been unexpected. No doubt extreme joy by itself tends to act on the lacrymal glands: but on such occasions as the foregoing vague thoughts of the grief which would have been felt had the

¹Anna Freud (1949) highlights the importance of this play space for children in her paper on the development of normal aggression, where she observes that, “loved toys are, normally, maltreated toys” and of the need for small animals to be “rescued from the aggression which invariably accompanies the love showered on them by their childish owners” (p.40).

father and son never met, will probably have passed through their minds: and grief naturally leads to the secretion of tears. (Darwin, 2006, p.1386)

I believe that Darwin's insights into the evolution of the complex emotional experiences that underlie our primary attachments, as well as our drive towards larger society and cultural development, are important reminders of the interplay between the biological and social forces that govern our experience of being human.

Attachment theory and animals

Holmes (2001), views attachment theory as holding the potential to synthesise ideas from classical psychoanalytic theory, cognitive science and neurobiology. Having its roots in Lorenz's ethological theory of imprinting behaviour in mammals (i.e. the instinctual attachment seeking behaviours of mammals to elicit care and protection from their parents), attachment theory is inclusive of our evolutionary origins. Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, (2001) elaborates on the evolution of mammalian relational capacity, describing the limbic brain as responsible for detecting and analysing the "internal state of other mammals" so that our emotionality is "the social sense organ of limbic creatures" (p.62). Lewis et al, contrast the primitive reptilian brain in which the young fend for themselves with the intensely protective and emotionally driven attachment behaviour of mammals. He states "The lack of an attuned mother is a non event for a reptile and a shattering injury to the complex and fragile limbic brain of a mammal" (p.89).

Attachment Theory maintains that our early bonding experiences with our primary caregiver (usually mother) provide a 'blueprint' for later relationship bonds that follow us throughout our lifespan — providing us with a

psychological ‘immunity’ necessary for survival (Bowlby, 1979; Holmes, 2001).

Holmes (2001) draws the analogy of the immune system to illustrate the psychological protection that is born out of secure attachment experiences and which is drawn on throughout life when our attachments are threatened.

Similarly, Bowlby (1979) maintains that although our attachment needs are most essential and prominent in infancy, our attachment needs remain with us for life — activated at times of psychological stress or fears of abandonment. Lewis et al (2001) illustrates the universal intensity of the mammalian separation protest by comparing the “plaintive chorus” of ultrasonic cries emitted by baby rats when their mother is absent, with the adult human when “jilted in an infatuation”. He observes that “human beings manifest searching and calling in lengthy letters, frantic phone calls, repeated e-mails, and telephoning an answering machine just to hear another’s voice” (p.77).

Lewis et al (2001) argue that the physiology of relatedness is of far greater centrality for mammals than even Bowlby imagined. The acute protest response elicited by short separations, physiologically elevate alertness to aid young mammals to find their mothers, while prolonged separations elicit a state of despair. In mammals as social as us, attachment behaviour “penetrates to the neural core of what it means to be a human being” (p.76). Lewis et al liken the “tormented letter” composed by the rejected lover to the baby rat’s “constant peep”, suggesting that it’s “the same song, in a slightly lower pitch (p.77)”.

Winnicott’s (1965) famous statement, “there is no such thing as an infant, only mother and infant together” (p.39) (by which he means a baby cannot survive without a mother / caregiver), further articulates the helpless premature state in which we as human infants arrive — that unlike our distant reptilian

ancestors, without relationship there is no life (Lewis et al., 2001). The extended duration of our infancy, significantly longer than even our closest mammalian relatives, means that our emotional journey towards maturation holds unique challenges specific to our species.

Chapter summary and conclusions

Winnicott's (1971) formulations on the "use of the object" and transitional phenomena examine our earliest negotiations with reality. He viewed the developmental attainment of 'object use' as part of the change towards the reality principle (p.89). He stresses the essential function of the facilitating environment in our continuing negotiations with reality.

Psychotherapies are concerned with the forces (internal and external) that steer our psychological development towards maturity — what aids our developing beings and what hinders or distorts this growth. The complex, delicate and continuous progression in the development of our relational selves, is the substance of developmental psychotherapy, practice and research.

Darwin (2006), Lorenz (1953, 2002) and Lewis et al (2001) suggest that we have much in common with our non-human relatives especially higher mammals, with whom we share a common "limbic inheritance" (Lewis et al., 2001, p.97) that adapts us towards life-preserving attachment behaviours. As Lewis et al observe, the mammalian brain does not come "pre-programmed", and that the maturing mammal needs limbic regulation to give coherence to neurodevelopment. The fact that our attachment architecture is general enough to allow a degree of cross-species attachment is indicative of the valid part that animals potentially play in our continuing relational environments.

Chapter Three - Animals in the lives of children

Introduction

Although the prominence of animals in the lives of children is widely acknowledged, many authors note a lack of investigation into this area of potentially significant influence in child development (Becker, 2002; Katcher, 2000; Levinson, 1997; Melson, 2001, 2002). This chapter explores the prevalence and importance of animals in the lives of children as real pets, toys, and as symbolic figures in stories, dreams and fantasy. I argue that exposure to animal relationships in childhood provide rich learning experiences that contribute to the child's ongoing sense of self and connectedness with their environment.

The role of animals as self-objects and attachment figures in childhood is explored; especially where the child's relational world is impoverished or traumatic. The role of animals in the assessment and treatment of children suffering from emotional disturbances as well as in the treatment and prevention of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder is discussed.

A case example is used to illustrate how an adult patient's close relationship with her childhood pet was shown to have provided essential support and solace following a traumatic incident of sexual abuse in her latency years.

Prevalence of animals in children's lives

Sigmund Freud is acknowledged by many authors as being the first in the psychological field to attribute significance to the animal-human bond (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Gold, 2000). Freud acknowledged an affinity between pre-verbal children and animals, which he attributed to a readiness to empathically identify

with their pet animal companions in a manner that is lost in adult years (Roth, 2005).

Children show no trace of the arrogance which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard-and-fast line between the relations of children and of primitive men towards animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals. Uninhibited as they are in the avowal of their bodily needs, they no doubt feel themselves more akin to animals than to their elders, who may well be a puzzle to them (Freud, 1950/1913, p.127).

Ginsburg and Ginsburg (1987) highlight Freud's appreciation of the significance of childhood memories as "crucial starting points" (p.469) in the reconstruction of childhood pathology. They cite Freud as stating that:

What someone thinks he remembers from his childhood is not a matter of indifference; as a rule the residual memories which he himself does not understand — cloak priceless pieces of evidence about the most important features in his mental development (Ginsburg & Ginsburg, 1987, p.469)

Ginsburg & Ginsburg (1987), highlight the prominence of animals for children in these recollections, using as examples, templates of animal prints that had fascinated Freud in his childhood, and were later prominent in his dreams and self-analysis. They illustrate the centrality of animal figures as remembered childhood artefacts that contain valuable links and symbolism into the child's early developmental environment.

Animals and real life lessons

Although often playing important symbolic roles in the lives of children, animals are also real beings that, like us, are born, live, die and are responsive to their environment. Melson (2001) highlights the role a pet can play in allowing

children to directly confront real life lessons — especially in industrialised societies where human birth and death are mostly kept out of view of children:

Seeing a litter of pups come into the world or finding a goldfish floating belly-up on the water's surface brings children up against the momentousness of the beginning and end of life (Melson, 2001, p.46).

It seems that animals across cultures and time provide an initiation for children into foundational life realities. Freud (1949/1909) acknowledges how animals (often in contrast to the adults in a child's world) offer direct and unabashed lessons on the biological mechanisms of eliminatory and reproductive functioning, for which children have a natural curiosity.

Animals owe a good deal of their importance in myths and fairy tales to the openness with which they display their genitals and their sexual functions to the inquisitive little human child (S. Freud, 1949/1909, pp.152-153).

Lorenz (1953) describes his own early initiation into the natural world, where with simple hand made fishing nets and a jar he put together his first aquarium in which he was able to witness small microcosms demonstrating the intricate balance of nature — a balance in which we are all participants.

The aquarium is a world; for, as in a natural pond or lake, indeed as all over our whole planet, animal and vegetable beings live together in biological equilibrium (Lorenz, 1953, p.37).

I believe Lorenz's (1953) passionate description of his childhood fishing net, to which he attributes "much of the charm of childhood" (p.31), contains universal relevance to important childhood experience. I recall my own children's excitement over their developing tadpoles, along with their gruesome

delight at watching their frogs devour the flies we caught for them — and of their devastation when their enthusiastic handling of snails broke shells irreparably or their attempts to assist butterflies out of chrysalis's resulted in permanent arrest in development. These experiences, Lorenz reminds us, are not taught from books yet contain "essential truths about the macrocosm and the microcosm" (p.37) in which all life is contained.

Pets and grief

The death of a pet in childhood, although often a devastating occurrence, can also, when the child's feelings are supported by his/ her caregivers, help the child in developing a capacity for the work of adult mourning. Mahon (1977), in a beautiful study on the reactions of three-year-old nursery school children to the death of school pet guinea pig 'Guinny', investigates the developmental steps a child needs to take in developing the capacity to mourn. Mahon observes that although a child's reaction to loss is not usually comparable to an adults (as children do not have the ego maturity to sustain the task of mourning), the loss of a pet (when not a primary object) provides a less overwhelming experience in which a process very similar to mourning can be observed. He suggests that the "secondary world of pets, toys and imagination", offers "the child's ego a playground for Greenacre's 'love affair with the world', Mahler's 'practicing' subphase of individuation, or Winnicott's 'potential space' between the baby and the mother where 'cultural experience or creative playing' can take place" (Mahon, 1977, p.296). As in adult mourning, these children were not able to accept a 'substitute' guinea pig until the work of mourning 'Guinny' had been done.

The field of pet orientated child psychotherapy

Despite the recognition of the prevalence and importance of animals in the landscapes of childhood, there remains a dearth of direct theoretical exploration. Theorists and clinicians who work directly with animal-human bonds, with the exception of veterinarians, appear to have stumbled into this field by way of chance meetings, between their patients and an animal, which proved to be undeniably therapeutic. For example, Levinson (1997), a pioneer in the field of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and author of a founding text in this field “Pet Orientated Child Psychotherapy”, discovered his field accidentally in the 1950’s, after his dog, Jingles, ran into his consulting room and was able to form a warm connection to a highly withdrawn patient. Although Levinson’s insights and findings were initially ridiculed by his colleagues, he persisted in his work which has contributed to the growing field of AAT, and has gained limited yet increasing acceptance (Bady, 2004; Beck & Katcher, 1996).

Similarly, Melson (2001), the author of a prominent psychological work exploring the relationships between animals and children, ponders her previous lack of attention to her topic. Melson had worked as a psychologist and educator for decades and had greatly enjoyed the company of animals in her own childhood and in the lives of her children. That she, along with others in her field, could have missed this hugely significant area of child development is both a concern and curiosity to her.

Her recent book “Why the wild things are” (2001), provides a thorough history and analysis of the place of the animal-child bond in the lives of children. She begins her book with a scene that had captured her attention and imagination at her local vet clinic: her observation of the tender and mutual emotional

exchange between a boy and his dog as the boy comforts his frightened pet in the waiting room. She compares this with the observations made by a colleague, of new mothers' attachments with their infants.

What I am seeing now in the vet clinic seems to be striking evidence of an attachment bond between boy and dog, a bond that resonates with emotion as deeply as the videotaped mother-baby sessions (Melson, 2001, pp.1-2)

Melson's book stresses the importance and uniqueness of this bond in a child's life, where no matter how "small and helpless" a child may be, they "could reassure someone more vulnerable than they" (p.2). She argues that relationships with pets allow for public displays of tender care, and for feelings of proud devotion, that are enriching as well as potentially reparative in a child's life. Melson also highlights the importance of pets for children during times of difficult transitions in their lives — such as moving school or neighbourhood, the birth of a sibling, prolonged separations from parents, or older siblings leaving home. She cites research in which 75% of a group of Michigan youngsters indicated that they turned to their pets when upset². She stresses the importance of further exploration into children's experiences of solace and support from their pets at times of crisis in their lives such as divorce or when a parent or sibling dies.

Reparative pet relationships in the lives of children

In cases where the facilitating environment is impoverished, many authors (Alper, 1993; Becker, 2002; Gold, 2000; Levinson, 1997; Melson, 2001, 2002) believe that relationships with pets provide an essential refuge for the child

² Original study unable to be sourced.

in which they can feel relationally safe, needed, desired and cared for, and in which these feelings are to some extent reciprocated. Alper (1993), exploring the child-pet bond in relation to self-psychology, emphasises the “crucial importance of empathic responsiveness from the child’s self-object environment” — healthy personality development having as its “bedrock” social stimulation and affective connection with others (p.258). He proposes that in families where the range of allowable affect expression is constricted, children may find in their pets a safer way to explore “the vicissitudes of emotionality and affect, as animals don’t judge, criticize, or humiliate the child’s embryonic rehearsal of new behaviours and emotions” (p.259). He writes:

My clinical experience, however, has led me to understand that for many patients animals have provided a primary attachment in which they feel comforted, esteemed, and unabashedly loved. It is a relationship in which they receive the longed-for gleam of love and delight that the dull eyes of their primary caretakers do not reflect (Alper, 1993, p.259).

That pets provide important empathy enhancing and reparative experiences in childhood is explored in sensitive and personal depth by Becker in his book “The healing power of pets” (Becker, 2002). Becker’s status as an American ‘celebrity vet’, along with his readable and witty self-help style, perhaps belies the psychological significance of his observations and research in the area of family and trauma therapy. Becker writes of his own childhood, growing up in a farming community, where he relied on his dogs for a much needed emotional anchoring amongst the unpredictability and turmoil of his father’s manic-depressive illness. In making the point that a child is unable to understand a clinical diagnosis of manic depression, or adult drunkard behaviour, but rather experiences that their “smallest action, even an ill-timed glance might

set off a frightening rage” (pp.35-36), he highlights beautifully the value of a pet’s consistent companionship when parental reassurance and support is deficient.

Becker (2002) asserts that a child’s attachment to his/her pet can be as powerful as to a parent. In moving descriptions of his own childhood difficulties, he describes the importance of feeling recognised, loved, admired and accepted by his dog who, “in an unrestricted time frame...will always listen ...and always has time to play (p.29)”. Reflecting back as an adult, he recognises the essential emotional regulating and self-preserving role his childhood dog played amongst the trauma of his father’s explosive rages:

At night when we would nestle together in the bed, I’d stroke my little pal, my very best friend, and tell him I knew he was the smartest, fastest, and most handsome dog of all, and everything was going to be all right. Everything was going to be just fine. It’s only now that I realize that my telling it to Skeeter was a way of telling it to myself (Becker, 2002, p.37).

Animal, cruelty and conduct disorder

In cases of childhood abuse and trauma the question of what conditions contribute to a child’s love of animals is complex. Why some children will be able to use animals and nature productively as a refuge from the trauma in their lives, while others remain indifferent or displace rage and aggression onto animals, I believe are important areas for further research. As physical cruelty to animals is one of the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder, and conduct disorder is a criterion for antisocial personality disorder (APA, 2000), programmes that work with animals and children towards a differentiated sense of empathic understanding of themselves and others are important and exciting. Levinson (1997), by recording the responses to his dog, Jingles to a group of emotionally disturbed children in a residential setting, illustrates the healing

potential of dogs in cases of emotional injury. It seems that Jingles was able to promote an empathic understanding in many of these children that contributed to their increasing capacity to make links towards their own experiences:

Suddenly they began to attribute to the dog insights about themselves and other people. It was safe to give up the hardened defence and the “I-don’t care” attitudes; and it became safe to admit to love, to concern, to consideration....Much safer than in relation to adults. ‘He snarled because he is angry, but he is really angry because he is lonely and that hurts him. Loneliness hurts something awful to Levinson³,’ Simon would say. ‘Here we go off and have us a good time and leave this poor little Levinson alone, just like my parents do to me!’, Jerry would yell out” (Levinson, 1997, p.93).

Levinson (1997, p.98) attributes Jingle’s talent in meeting the needs of these emotionally disturbed children to both his innate sensitivity as well as the informal ‘training’ he received working alongside him and his patients in his psychologist’s office. He contemplates the scope of rehabilitation possible with dogs specifically trained as “seeing heart” dogs, as “seeing eye” dogs are trained to assist the blind.

Ascione, Kaufmann and Brooks (2000), in their paper on animal abuse and developmental psychopathology, examine the role of animals in children’s lives in treating and preventing psychological dysfunction in children and adolescents. In noting the correlation of violence towards animals as a precursor to human mental health problems, they explore the relationship between animal abuse and interpersonal violence. They illustrated by use of clinical case study material, the role animals can play in the assessment and treatment of children who are psychologically at risk.

³ Levinson was one child’s nick-name for Levinson’s dog ‘Jingles’

Brooks' (Ascione et al., 2000) case illustration of her treatment of Calvin, a nine year old boy with a history of severe early deprivation and neglect, who exhibited intense rage and acts of remorseless violence against animals, shows how working with animals in therapy could help connect patients to displaced parts of the self. Brooks chose to use a two-week-old abandoned rooster in her work with Calvin, which allowed many parallels to be drawn with his experiences with his own family. Calvin developed a strong attachment to this rooster, which supplied an empathic base from which to work. Brooks explains how "I told the rooster things I wanted Calvin to hear and found out about Calvin through his interactions with the rooster" (Ascione et al., 2000, p.347).

Over time Calvin came to the realization that he felt better when he hurt an animal, which marked a turning point where he was able to experience a more differentiated sense of himself — evoking in him a nascent capacity to internalise some of his painful feelings as opposed to acting them out (Ascione et al., 2000, p.39). Calvin had previously felt justified in hurting animals, as animals had functioned as a means of externalising (via projection) painful feelings, so that he experienced animals as angry and attacking towards him.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Animal Assisted Therapy

It seems that in the right environment, a relationship with a pet is able to provide a measure of emotional protection against the more serious consequences of trauma, such as dissociation and PTSD, in the lives of children (Becker, 2002; Melson, 2002). Becker (2000) reports a study of children in a war-torn region of Croatia where it was found that pet-owning children had the lowest levels of post- traumatic-stress disorder.

The following case of a woman, whom I will call Erin, is illustrative of how attachment to a pet dog provided invaluable support during a traumatic incident of sexual abuse in her latency years. For the purposes of this study, I will summarise the content of this case with emphasis on the animal-human bond.

Case illustration one

Erin, a professional woman in her late thirties, sought treatment for her depression, which manifested in overwhelming performance anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. Her manner was crisp, efficient and strikingly without affect as she described in minute detail what felt to be her every daily movement. However, her manner changed dramatically when speaking of animals — of her present day pets, but particularly her deceased beloved childhood dog.

Erin held no ambivalence in her conviction that it was her dog that was there for her during a traumatic experience of sexual abuse in her latency years. In terror of her own and her parents' safety, she dared not tell any human member of her family. She believed it was her dog that knew how she felt and comforted her — sleeping in her bed and keeping her safe at night, and most importantly, knowing her distress when humans didn't.

Her dependence on animals has continued to serve as a retreat in her life during periods of stress — where she 'knows' she will be both recognised and loved and where for limited periods she rejects things that are human. In a sense, she was able to seal this traumatised part of herself off from the need for human support. An important part of our therapy has been in understanding her connection to animals and being able to bridge towards the possibility of human understanding of her trauma.

Erin's parents had both suffered significant childhood trauma, involving the loss of parental care in early childhood. Both parents subsequently hid their dependency needs' turning instead to much-loved pets. It seems that it was in their relationship with their pets that they felt their unbearable feelings of dependency to be held and tolerated. The memory and personality of these beloved pets hold a sacred position within the family's shared oral history, holding equal, and in some cases greater, status than human relatives.

For Erin, her pets were objects that allowed for Winnicott's paradoxical capacity to be alone in the presence of someone (Winnicott, 1971, p.96). Her family's shared trust, expectation and experience of the emotional capacity of their dogs to 'be there when humans are not', has assured the 'space' for comfort, support and individuality in an otherwise enmeshed and narcissistic family system, which in turn was intolerant of individual differences or open expressions of dependency.

Through her respect, and gratitude towards her animals, Erin in turn is dedicated to her pet as well as actively involved in animal protection organizations. Although highly critical and suspicious of humans who do not live up to or share her family's values and expectations, Erin increasingly became able to 'imagine' and speculate with acute empathic insight upon the psychological stress that an animal may be experiencing at times of external stress (such as moving house or going to the vet).

I increasingly noticed in my work with Erin how an empathic insight in relation to an animal would consistently preview a significant shift in insight within herself, as if allowing a safe place to process her internal dynamics, which did not threaten her internal objects. Being able to link her empathic concerns to

her own dependency needs has been facilitative of Erin's beginning tolerance towards her more introverted feelings of fear, uncertainty and shyness, as well as towards a tolerance and acknowledgement of her own and others innately human ruthlessness, hate and aggression.

For example, in one session Erin spoke of her cat's fury at her following a trip to the vet, where she uncharacteristically hissed at Erin and refused affection or any cajoling. Erin understood that she needed the space to have her feelings of anger and intuitively relaxed her own efforts to comfort her while staying unobtrusively present to her pet. Erin went on to describe her cat's gradual forgiveness, as she placed first one and then a second paw on her chest (while her back legs remained on the table), allowing her self to be patted and comforted while retaining her ambivalence by not giving herself completely over to forgiveness. Erin speculated that her cat needed the time to come to terms with the trauma of the day and with the anger she felt towards her owner. Erin felt proud that she was able to give her cat permission to be 'cross'.

When relating this experience with her cat to herself, Erin was able to contrast her own experiences of being angry with another, where there was little 'space' afforded for ambivalence. Although anger was and is readily expressed within her family, it was seldom expressed directly and carried the fear of retaliation. Through Erin's recognition of this space (where anger is survived), Erin was able to express some anger and frustration at me within the transference and was able to articulate both a new feeling of confidence in expressing from her 'own voice,' as well as openly addressing her fears of others' (including my own) retaliation towards her and of her own destructive potential; that I may not want to see her any more along with her pre-planned silent revenge.

Conclusion

Animals whether real, toy or fictional, are central in the lives of children, as is indicated by their prevalence in dreams, phobias and children's literature — as well as their common presence as toys and transitional objects. Pets in the lives of children can provide valuable self-object mirroring and idealising functions that potentially enhance relational experience, especially when the child's relational environment has been impoverished and/or traumatic. Animals used in the therapy of children at risk of later psychopathology, have proved useful and successful in both assessing and treating early trauma and allowing children to locate their own experiences in their relationship with the animal.

Relationships with animals functioned within Erin's enmeshed family system as a unifying bond where individual experience and difference can be tolerated. Erin's relationship with animals as an adult was informed by her childhood experiences of pet ownership, as well as a culture of animal loving in her family — where it was expected that animals would continue to play a central role. In this way, animals continue to function, for Erin, as an intergenerational secure base from which our work together could actively and safely be explored.

Chapter four - The continuing animal experience

Introduction

The universal importance of animals in the landscape of childhood is a cross-cultural phenomenon — so widely assumed that its implications go unnoticed and perhaps therefore under-examined. This chapter is concerned with what happens to animal relationships as we mature into adults. I argue that the central significance of animals (taken for granted in childhood) is to a certain extent relinquished as we mature into adults, in a manner comparable to our transitional objects. The fate of a transitional object, according to Winnicott (1971), is that “it is not forgotten and it is not mourned” but instead “loses meaning”, becoming “gradually deattached” and so diffused into the wider cultural field. However, Winnicott stresses that “the task of reality acceptance is never completed” (Winnicott, 1971, p.13) so that transitional objects and phenomena continue into adulthood; remaining an important creative play space in our continuing negotiations with reality.

Animals as transitional phenomena

Animals’ function as transitional objects or phenomena in the lives of adults is less visible or assumed than in childhood, where ‘teddies’, pets and fairy tales are part of the natural territory. The subject of our diminishing connection to animals and the natural world as we mature is discussed in detail by Beck and Katcher (1996), who observe that human maturation is accompanied by a diminishing of our animal nature — a “separation from the animal part of ourselves” (p.72). They speculate that “the price of learning a culture is imprisonment within that society, away from nature” (p.71). They maintain that

pets throughout our lives can continue to serve as a representative of our selves as infants — a self still suspended between nature and culture, so that “in loving our pets we love and keep alive our own childhood” (ibid).

Other authors, writing on the use of animals as transitional objects or phenomena, highlight the importance of childhood memories of pets, along with other ‘remembered’ childhood phenomena, in providing associative material that can be as important as dreams (Ginsburg & Ginsburg, 1987; Noonan, 1998). Reiser (1994, p.254) writes of the importance of “remembered childhood artefacts” (such as songs, pictures, poems or stories) in a patient’s analysis in providing rich associative material connecting affect laden childhood conflicts with current conflicts. He argues that in similar ways to dreams and screen memories, themes from early childhood can contain condensed memories that can be represented within the text of stories as well as in what has been left out or forgotten.

Reiser (1994), drawing on Winnicott’s ideas, describes the important function of this transitional phenomenon in “helping the child to rework the fears of separation over and over in this protected holding situation” (Reiser, 1994, p.258). He describes how transitional phenomena are most often employed as the child is preparing for sleep or facing a separation from their primary object. He suggests that contained in the sharing of such childhood artefacts in the analytic session, there is a quality of re-experiencing in the “lap” of the “analytic office” something of the original holding between the patient and their parent (Reiser, 1994, p.258). In the same way, I believe that a patient’s pet (as a childhood artefact) potentially contains valuable associative material into his/her childhood relational past.

The loss of childish passions in the transition to adulthood is the theme of many classic works featuring animals as central symbols— such as “The velveteen rabbit, or How toys become real” by Williams (1922) and “The little prince” written in 1943 by Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1982). Both of these classic tales involve a too sudden loss of the transitional object followed by an unobserved and so silent protest. I shall now discuss these works as I believe both stories illustrate via metaphor, the tendency of transitional phenomena to be repressed and split-off from conscious awareness.

The velveteen rabbit

“The velveteen rabbit” is the story of the love a boy has for his toy rabbit who accompanies him through an episode of scarlet fever and whose destruction is ordered by the boy’s nurse and doctor after he recovers, due to the infection risk that the rabbit poses. Daniels’ (1990) writing on his own ‘confrontation’ with the story, cites the commentary on his edition’s jacket as reading, “how toys — and people — become real through the wisdom and experience of love” (p.297). Daniels’ paper features a psychoanalytic interpretation of “The velveteen rabbit”, as unfolded through his experience as an analysand. Contained in Daniels’ unique approach is a deep exploration of his own unexpressed protests in relation to the loss of his early transitional objects and the lonely pain suffered in silence at having to go along with the ‘lie’ or adult logic that initiated their demise.

I remember being told by my mother and my grandfather that the bottle I had clung to was lost and that I would have to do without one. I did not believe them. It had not been lost, I knew, but intentionally broken and discarded, hidden in trash already collected, disposed of in this manner so that protests of mine about the deprivation would be to no avail. But the

worst of it, worse even than the absence of any opportunity to protest against their intentions, was my inability to protest against what I know was their deed. For their conspiracy to be successful I had to comply and, despite what I knew and could not prove, and because I knew their demand would be relentless, I silenced myself and acceded to the lie. Here, in silence, is the locus of my rage and, as I now see, my anger in reading the story (Daniels, 1990, p.302).

Daniels' (1990) rage is directed both at the boy for failing to protest his loss and at the story for falsifying the ease of his compliance, obscuring the boy's pain and powerlessness. The "impossible ending" (p. 303) involving a fairy who intervenes by turning the rabbit real so he can live in "rabbit land ...for ever and ever!" (p.304), and the absence of a break in the text at this point of the story is indicative, according to Daniels, of the haste with which the issues are to be evaded, "as if in regret that they were raised at all" (ibid).

I believe animal-human relationships contain transitional elements that are similarly at risk of being evaded due to unspoken societal expectations that privilege human-to-human relational bonds as 'mature', while viewing strong pet attachments as irrational, sentimental, or childish. What I argue is that although (and because) animals become less central in the lives of adults, it is important to allow space for what can be important aspects of the patient's past and present relational world. As suggested above, it seems that a person's attachment to his/her pet contains transitional elements that become split- off or repressed from conscious awareness with maturity.

The little prince

The lack of space for such experiences to be aired is a theme in the classic parable "The little prince" (Saint-Exupery, 1982). The tale begins with the narrator's memory of a drawing he composed in his childhood and his disillusionment with the adults in his world for failing to recognize or understand

his art — a pivotal event that put paid to the young artist's, artistic aspirations. The drawing, inspired by nature, was of an elephant swallowed whole by a boa constrictor, yet was continually mistaken by 'grown-ups' for its outward appearance that starkly resembled a hat.

The story explores the diminishing (or changing) use of transitional phenomena and creative play, as adult "matters of consequence" (p.6) take precedence. The narrator keeps his drawing, showing it to other 'grown-ups' in his life as an experiment, testing for "true understanding" (p.7), and is repeatedly met with the response that his drawing is of a hat. With this, the narrator states that he "would never talk to that person about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars. I would bring myself down to his level. I would talk to him about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties. And the grown-up would be greatly pleased to have met such a sensible man" (p.7).

Discussion

It could be said that both of the above children's classics have as their central theme the fate of transitional phenomena. In "The little prince", the narrator keeps his childhood passions alive, yet protectively hidden as he enters the domain of the 'grown ups', and is able to revisit them in his relationship with the little prince. In "The velveteen rabbit", although the loss is sad, the fairy that whisks the rabbit away to "rabbit land to live for ever and ever" (Daniels, 1990, p.304) quickly mitigates this. In both tales, the central characters cannot openly display their affection or grief for, what in the adult world could be considered not really real.

I believe that our relationships with pets can contain aspects that are also considered not quite 'real'. This can contribute to a reluctance to openly display

these regressive and small parts of ourselves. Yet just as the narrator and the little prince found relief in having their imaginative drawings recognised by each other, patients also benefit from having their transitional experience visited in therapy.

The relationship adults have with their pet perhaps exists in part within this protectively hidden space, containing an essence of our early transitional relationships and our original management of these. Perhaps we accept a diminishing interest and centrality of animals in our lives as readily as we do our gradual relinquishing of our 'teddies' or the sucking of our thumbs. And perhaps also (as with all transitional objects), the quality of our passion is neither forgotten nor mourned, but rather diffused into our adult cultural lives, containing our feeling for art, religion, our relationships, as well as in our obsessions and pathologies. Contained in a patient's relationship with his/her pet are potentially valuable insights and understanding into the unconscious processes underlying relational development.

Chapter five - Animals in the lives of adult humans

Introduction

Although less prominent than in children, for many people, adult human-pet relationships occupy a significant and valuable part of their lives. It seems that in adulthood, rather than a magical panacea of animal culture, that the world of animals necessarily follows closer to the reality principle (i.e. we mostly recognise that animals do not talk our language and that there is no such thing as a friendly crocodile). Nevertheless, as observed in the previous chapter, human-pet relationships continue to inhabit a transitional realm of experience that can be considered an important play space.

This chapter is concerned with the phenomena of adult relationships with animals; with an emphasis on the significance that pet keeping takes in a patient's life. I discuss the question of the potential therapeutic value that animal relationships hold, as well as the possibility of animals acting as a defence against human-to-human relational development. A case illustration is included to demonstrate how a patient's relationship with a pet as an adult became a central focus in our work together.

Grown-up pet relationships

Although Freud didn't directly address the subject of the human-pet bond, there are many anecdotes depicting Freud's fondness for his dogs, who became his much loved companions that accompanied him in this therapeutic work from his sixth decade onwards (Gay, 1998). Freud admired dogs for their loyalty, devotion and absence of ambivalence; qualities that he observed gave dogs an "advantage over men" (Jacobs, 1994, p.851). Anna Freud cites her

father as saying that dogs “love their friends and bite their enemies, in contrast to men who are incapable of pure love and must at times mix love and hate in their object relations” (Jacobs, 1994, p.851; Molnar, 1996).

The quality of relationship between adult humans and their pets is beautifully explored in Noonan’s paper titled “People and pets” (1998), in which she gives a thorough account, of her own sixteen year relationship with her cat Pekoe. In order to make sense of her experience of grief on the death of her pet (which lingered longer than she had anticipated), Noonan explores pet relationships in the contexts of transitional experience, attachment theory and mourning. Drawing on the stories of others, as well as psychoanalytic, ethnology and veterinarian writings, she gives a deeply personal as well as theoretical and philosophical exploration into the relationship dynamics between people and their pets.

Noonan (1998) argues that pets and humans can be attachment figures for each other, although this relationship is complex and permeable. She quotes Montaigne (1603) as capturing this: “When I am playing with my cat, who knows whether she is playing with me or whether I am playing with her” (p.23).

Sable (2000), in her book on attachment and adult psychotherapy, reviews evidence indicating that family pets are seen as family members and attachment figures by a significant proportion of pet owners. She highlights the continuing importance of attachment bonds in adult relationships, including committed partnerships, therapy relationships and certain friends. She proposes that family pets (in particular dogs and cats) have the potential to provide an emotional bond of attachment that promotes “a sense of well-being and security for adults of any age” (p.310).

Noonan (1998) goes on to discuss the less obvious function of pets as transitional objects, using Winnicott's idea of the infant's very own "not-me-me". With this concept he refers to the concept of transitional phenomena inhabiting an intermediate area of experience, that although not part of the infant's body, are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality (Winnicott, 1971, p.2).

In her relationship with her cat, Pekoe, Noonan, without discounting the possibility of real emotion sharing, captures and defines something of the essence of transitional relationships and the quality of the early projections that they contain.

Sometimes I would watch her closely in order to discover how I was feeling. Although animals are responsive to mood, I think I was not reading her response to me: I was reading myself in her since in some sense she was me. This is what I imagine transitional phenomena to be about: *a focus of intense concentration seeking something which it is too disturbing to see inside oneself but which it is essential to find. A kind of wholeness is achieved this way*" (my italics) (Noonan, 1998, p.27).

Although animals are not able to be transitional objects in the strict classical sense, (as they are alive, can run away, or 'talk back'), this very fact, Noonan (1998) believes, is facilitative of a "rich source of relating" (p.24), where they occupy a place between the inanimate and the animate. She cites Bridger in suggesting that the pet relationship is one maturational step beyond the transitional object and can be a revealing source of stories about the family that otherwise could not be mentioned. She suggests also that holding conversations with our pets can be a safe way to talk about sensitive family matters:

Sometimes this is a safe way to try out unsafe thoughts and feelings privately, but often these conversations are meant to be overheard, when it is too difficult to say the things directly to another. This may give the other a chance to think, to change and thus avoid confrontation or disappointment (Noonan, 1998, p.24).

Similarly Molnar (1996), in his paper “Of dogs and doggerel,” uses translations of the birthday poems sent from Anna Freud to her father on behalf of his dogs⁴, to illustrate how emotions of a sensitive nature are able to be somewhat diffused by using an animal as a medium. Molnar makes a case for the importance of the play of “doggerel” in our communications:

They delivered coded messages from Anna to Sigmund Freud, and they delivered them both from the frustration of impeded speech and action. For this reason, at least, these tale-bearers have blazed their trail. They have marked one of the boundaries of biography — where significance and triviality overlap in play, mockery, unsocialized activity. For this at least they deserve some sort of serio-comic memorial (Molnar, 1996, pp.279-278).

Pet- lovers versus non pet-lovers

Perhaps an important differentiation between the culture of animals in the lives of children and adults is the adult recognition of the categories ‘pet-lovers’ and ‘non pet-lovers’. It seems that psychoanalytic theory belongs mostly to the latter category, although pockets of interest in animal-human relationship do exist.

I find it is interesting that Noonan (1998) states so clearly in her introduction that her paper is “mainly about cats”. She states that the world indeed “does divide into cat people and dog people”, as well as into “pet lovers

⁴ Anna Freud started a family tradition of writing alias birthday poems to her father as if they were from their dogs.

and those who are indifferent to, or dismissive of pet keeping”, and she maintains (as if by way of warning) that her paper would “hold little interest to the latter” (Noonan, 1998, p.18). I would have liked to have this differentiation explored further and in greater depth, as her concrete assertions contrast with the depth and subtlety that characterize the body of her explorations.

Lorenz (2002/ 1948) describes cats and dogs in their association with man as “as different as night and day” (p.ix) – the charm of dogs lying in the “depth of friendship and the strength of the spiritual ties with which he has bound himself to man,” while the appeal of cats lies in the very fact that she has formed no close bond with him, “maintaining the uncompromising independence of a tiger or a leopard.....she remains mysterious and remote...”. Although observing stark differences in dog and cat lovers, that dog lovers frequently dislike cats and cat lovers often abhor dogs, Lorenz advocates with an integrating integrity a place in our human affections for both animals (ibid).

I consider it the finest test of genuine love and understanding of animals if a person has sympathies for both these creatures, and can appreciate in each its own special virtues (Lorenz, 2002/ 1948, p.x).

Holmes (1996) writes that “secure attachment provides a foundation for both intimacy and autonomy” and that “autonomy and intimacy are reciprocally related” (p.19). Lorenz’s plea for humans to have sympathy for both the depth of friendship (intimacy) possible with a dog, and the contented and confident independence (autonomy) characterized by cats, speaks of this security. It suggests that we may gain from our relationships with both cats and dogs a potential strengthening of valuable capacities that connect us to ourselves and

others. I disagree with Noonan's assertion that her article is of interest only to lovers of pets.

Animals and dialogues with self

Many authors affirm the capacity of animal relationships to allow the expression of sensitive, wordless or unacknowledged emotions or parts of ourselves (Brown, 2004; Gold, 2000; Noonan, 1998). Gold (2000) observes that patients, having formed a relationship with one of his dogs that accompany him in his therapy hours, are frequently triggered by the death of a dog into being able to access feelings of grief that they have been unable to work with from their past. The role of animal relationships in connecting us to deeper parts within ourselves is further appreciated by Lorenz (2002/ 1948), who credits animal relationships with possessing the capacity to bridge us towards what he describes as "the thoughtless return to pre-human paradise". This is a state, he claims, that is "most often achieved in the company of an animal which is still a rightful participant of it" (p.140).

The process, in which we come to know or love and be known and loved by an animal, must, I believe, be situated at the border that divides our human and animal selves. Such experience is difficult to articulate or even think about. In contemplating this divide it seems necessary to suspend our thought and knowing. A beautiful example of such a suspension is made by the analyst Princess Marie Bonaparte (a former student and close friend of Freud's) in her small book written in 1936, detailing her relationship with her chow dog, Topsy during her dog's diagnosis, radiation treatment and eventual recovery from cancer.

Topsy: the Story of a Golden Haired Chow

Bonaparte's (1994/ 1940) account of her dog's illness, titled "Topsy the story of a golden-haired chow", portrays with deceptive simplicity her own confrontation with mortality, and in so doing captures a deep sense of her attachment to life, which is enhanced by the loving presence of another.

Although containing obvious parallels of her fears, affection and concern for Freud (at the time suffering from a similar cancer), her book also grapples with the point of connection and divergence between species. This is reflected through her passionate examination of the everyday communications between her human self and the much-loved dog self, Topsy.

The world in which the thoughts of humans dwell is impenetrable to dogs. But the bond which joins my woman's heart to Topsy's doggy one is none the weaker for that. That is why I love to have her at my feet, in the house or in the garden, and why the garden, without me is not enough for her" (p.80).

Bonaparte (1994/ 1940) begins her account by explaining her previous resistance to keeping dogs, whose short life span can't help but invite death with its inevitable grief. Topsy's diagnosis of cancer, firstly described as a death sentence, is then infused with an agonising hope when Bonaparte approached the radiographers who had previously failed to cure her father of the same devastating disease. Somehow Bonaparte's attachment and investment in Topsy continuing to live is made more poignant by the latter's ignorance of her condition, and her innocent devotion to her mistress and to the art of living. The almost magical richness of living under the gaze of the other is explored in an account of their daily routines, interspersed with sober reflections on Topsy's

probable death— where she and everything so familiar to her would cease, yet life would carry on in her absence.

Sleeping Topsy, ignorant of death, listen! listen! We are not alone in the big garden: birds are singing, the nests are full of eggs...insects are humming, ants are hurrying along the earth, plants are breathing...It is all living, Topsy, like you, like me, and will go on living after us.
(Bonaparte, 1994/ 1940, p.59)

Bonaparte concludes her small work with the triumphant recovery of Topsy, who has come to represent for Bonaparte a protective “talisman” that is able to ward away danger and death. Bonaparte attributes this to Topsy’s capacity for an unquestioned and unmoving devotion that is reminiscent of the protective care that she once experienced as a child from her beloved nurse ‘Mimau’.

A simple dog, lying there by me, just like Mimau by the child that I was, she guards me, and by her presence alone must bar the entrance of my room to a worse ill, and even to death (Bonaparte, 1994/ 1940, p.164).

Bonaparte thus highlights an important quality of devotion that the animal-human bond continues to offer in adulthood -- a consistency of presence that although not a feature of adult relational life, remains a source of enduring solace and support.

Freud (1960), on first reading Bonaparte’s manuscript, captured the depth and simplicity to her work in a letter of appreciation to Bonaparte. In identifying compassionately with her affection for her dog, he recognised the value in such relationships:

My Dear Marie

Just received your card from Athens and your manuscript of the Topsy book. I love it: it is so movingly genuine and true. It is not an analytical work, of course, but the analyst's thirst for truth and knowledge can be perceived behind this production, too. It really explains why one can love an animal like Topsy (or Jo-fi) with such extraordinary intensity; affection without ambivalence, the simplicity of a life free from the almost unbearable conflicts of civilization, the beauty of an existence complete in itself; and yet despite all divergence in the organic development, that feeling of an intimate affinity, of an undisputed solidarity. Often when stroking Jo-fi⁵ I have caught myself humming a melody which, unmusical as I am, I can't help recognizing as the aria from Don Giovanni⁶" (Freud, 1960, pp.434-435)

Can pet relationships function as a defence against human relational experience?

The possibility of pet relationships serving as a retreat away from the potential pain and complications of human relationship is a common critique of pet keeping (Gold, 2000). Serpell (1986), observes a societal prejudice that labels strong attachment to a companion animal, as a sign of "weakness, intellectual flabbiness or mental disturbance"(p.211). Pets are often viewed as substitutes for human relationships in patients who have limited relational capacity or deficits in their object relations. The question I wish to explore is whether a patient's passion for animals works towards a defensive avoidance or dismissing of mature attachment relationships, or whether a relationship with an animal is an achievement and preferable to no relationship at all?

Bergmann (1997), in his paper "Passions in the therapeutic relationship", expands upon Freud's theories of transference love as an "intermediary form of love" that enables the analysand (whose ego has remained fixated) to build a

⁵ Bonaparte had gifted the chow dog Jofi (the same breed as Topsy) to Freud in 1930. Freud and Bonaparte frequently exchanged correspondence on their dogs.

⁶ Mozart's famous aria from Don Giovanni contains the intimate lyrics "Your hand in mine my dearest".

capacity to love in the real world. Bergmann's focus in this paper is an exploration of the phenomenon of countertransference love, in which therapists 'fall in love' with their patients as a kind of protected substitute for "real world" (p.91) love. He uses the notion of "Pygmalion love" (ibid) to depict this quality of self love in which there is a need to change the beloved in one's own image. As do the sculptor in the classical myth and Henry Higgins in Shaw's play, the analyst falls in love with his own creation. Bergmann goes on to argue that this need to change the beloved is indicative of an "inability to love" (ibid) and that, in his observation, some therapists who have fallen in love with their patients have previously "transferred all their love from human beings to a highly valued pet" (ibid). It seems that the notion of an easier form of "intermediary love", where one does not have to, in Bergmann's words, risk finding "love within the storms of real life (p.92)" could function as a retreat from moving into the reality of mature relationships. Could a highly valued pet relationship function as a Pygmalion love that retards mature relating as it keeps one sheltered from such storms?

Knapp (1998), in her book about the human-dog bond "Pack of two", gives a loving tribute to the depth of intimacy, solace and relief she experiences in her relationship with her dog, Lucille. Although she wonders if the comfort of her bond contributes to a reluctance to emerge from periods of reclusive retreat in her life, she comments also on the benefits of having company in such places.

Lucille is this one beautiful, hugely important thing to me, and although I sometimes worry that she's part of the wall I've constructed — my excuse to stay *in here* and keep the world *out there* — I also know that her presence is what makes life behind that wall feel meaningful and rich. (Knapp, 1998, p.204)

For many patients, their relationships with their pets are the most important relationships in their lives. For some they are only relationship. Gold (2000) makes the point that for many individuals, who as a consequence of severe physical or psychological abuse have “withered the desire for any meaningful human contact” (p.245), pets do become a substitute for human relationships (sometimes a pet is the only relationship that a patient has been able to tolerate). Intimate relationships carry the risk of criticism, ridicule and rejection, as well as “total devastation” when they are not accepted and reciprocated (p.246). For some patients, particularly those who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to tolerate or bridge the gap towards human relationship, a relationship with a pet, I suggest, is an achievement that can provide real benefit and meaning to their lives.

Dinunno (2000), in her article on long-term psychotherapy for women survivors of childhood abuse, observes a positive correlation between pet ownership and an advanced stage of recovery. Commenting on the recovery of patients in a long term psychotherapy trauma group, she notes that when members take on pets or volunteer at animal hospitals, this coincides with an increasing focus on better ways to take care of themselves and others (p.345).

In many cases, being able to form a trusting relationship with an animal precedes or provides a catalyst for the capacity for intimacy. This is illustrated in my next case example, which focuses on a young woman patient who, during the course of her therapy, bought a pet kitten. This kitten has been able to function as a good self-object and transitional object that has had a positive impact on this patient’s life.

Case illustration two

In contrast to Erin, Sharma's childhood would not accommodate the mess and disorder of pets. However, she nursed a strong desire for her own pet kitten, keeping a treasured toy cat (that she would fantasise was an alive friend and confidant) well into her teenage years. Near the beginning of her treatment, on her way home from therapy, Sharma bought her longed for pet kitten. Her now grown cat, Beatrix, has been a central figure in our work together over a two and a half year therapy.

Sharma is a strikingly attractive woman in her late twenties who sought treatment for debilitating anxiety. This anxiety manifested in an inability to ever feel safe, as well as fatiguing somatic symptoms that seriously impacted on her quality of life. She recalls little of her childhood. From what she can remember it seems that her early world was one of emotional impoverishment and criticism. With a severely depressed and narcissistically injured mother, Sharma learned to suppress her emotional world for fear of 'breaking' her fragile mother who would "take to her bed" with the "stress" of her daughter's emotional expressions or needs. Sharma's father left her family when she was an infant.

Although recognised as highly skilled at her job in interior design, and popular with colleagues, Sharma was continually plagued with the fear that her creative initiatives would be attacked and that she would be publicly shamed. Sharma suffered a dread of travelling, fearing that she would not arrive at her destination, while at the same time fearing that if she were to arrive, she would be trapped and prevented from ever returning. Consequently, she would feel unable to stay in a job for any length of time, taking contract work to ensure her ease of escape.

Her personal and previous therapy relationships followed a similar course. Although they would start off well, they would quickly deteriorate, with Sharma feeling alternately attacked and then abandoned (for initiating her needs), or trapped with no way out. She would then sever the relationship and in doing so provide herself with a temporary relief of having escaped something terrifying.

I believe the thing that stopped our relationship from meeting a similar fate (or at least what allowed it to survive long enough for her transference dynamics to be worked with) was the purchase of her pet kitten –bought in an act of courageous rebellion—which quickly became a key symbol in our work together.

Sharma was proud of her kitten's assertiveness and freedom; that she could jump on the furniture and demand to be 'petted' and played with when she was feeling affectionate and protest when she wasn't. This contrasted with the restrictions of Sharma's own childhood, where her mother's illness had dominated and Sharma had needed to develop the hyper-vigilance necessary to navigate a sense of safety. Sharma was able to tolerate and be proud of her kitten's growing confidence and assertive entitlement in a way that she couldn't bear in a human companion, where a consuming envy and resentment would envelop her.

Although not able to articulate her experience directly to me, Sharma would give me an account of Beatrix's, feelings that invariably corresponded to her own. For example, she might tell me how Beatrix (a nervous although playful cat) would 'freeze' when startled by a loud noise, and panic when she felt

trapped with no way out, or at other times bolt out the door when startled by a stranger or ‘hiss’ in anger and fear when confronted by the neighbour’s cat.

Through her attempts to understand Beatrix, Sharma has, in turn, been able to put words to her own overwhelming anxiety, both in our relationship and in her external life. She was able to gain a tolerance and ‘felt understanding’ of the ‘fight, flight, freeze’ response and locate how frightened she felt as a child “walking on egg shells” around a volatile and unpredictable mother. She was also able to understand how trapped she would feel in her upset state when her tears were interpreted as injurious to her mother’s health. Sharma was then able to recognise how her past experiences of terror are transported to her present experiences, including in her relationship with me.

Sharma’s devotion to Beatrix has increasingly strengthened her ability to navigate and assert herself in relationship. This contrasts to previous experiences of needing to ‘flee’ from relationships in a state of frightened confusion. In one session, Sharma reported her swift decision to end a dating relationship (with an unaccustomed lack of anxiety) with a man who “didn’t like Beatrix”, and seemed to assume that she would get rid of her.

A short time after this, Sharma started dating a “very different” type of man who liked animals (and Beatrix), and who she felt an ability to relax with. A move she hid for many months from both her parents, fearing their disappointment in the ordinariness of her choice of partner. She reported that for the first time ever in a relationship she felt as relaxed as if she was by herself.

Summary and conclusions

Although the culture of pet keeping in adulthood differs from in childhood, in that pets play a less central or visible role, many adults experience

an intimacy with their pets that they value highly, and which in many cases is emotionally reparative. Pets continue to function as transitional objects in the lives of many adults, allowing an important play space in which sensitive material can be articulated and explored.

The role of animals as attachment figures in adulthood is illustrated in both Bonaparte's description of her relationship with her dog Topsy, and Noonan's exploration of her 16-year relationship with her cat Pekoe, where a devotion or consistency of presence, reminiscent of early primary relational experience, is apparent.

Although pet relationships function at times as a retreat from the "storms of real life" (Bergmann, 1997, p.92), I believe that rather than pathological, this retreat can provide a rich and valuable resting place, and can contribute to an ability to connect with important parts of the self. Where retreat from humanity has been a consequence of trauma, then an attachment to an animal could be viewed as a defensive move towards what is, (or was), an 'alive' part of the patient's world in amongst the trauma of abuse and neglect.

By remaining open to and inclusive of a patient's pet relationships in the psychotherapy, the therapist can recognise an essential aliveness in the patient. This can provide fertile ground in which relational capacity can grow.

Chapter Six - Animals as a bridge to human enhanced relational capability

Introduction

Winnicott (1971) states that the “most irksome of all problems that come for mending” (p.89) occur in the space between object relating and object use. This chapter is concerned with the navigation of this space, which often includes relationships with animals or nature. Freud (1911), describes in his “Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning”, the “momentous step” (p.219) that is negotiated in our continuing movement from the magical omnipotence of our primary processes to the reality incorporating secondary processes.

Winnicott stresses the need for “favourable conditions” (p.91) in allowing this passage. Such conditions include the individual being afforded the space in fantasy to test and destroy the object and have it survive. For many individuals who do not live in favourable conditions, where neglect and trauma have meant that this essential and creative play space cannot be afforded, the consequences are indeed debilitating. It is excruciatingly painful, I believe, to contemplate the absence of ‘favourable conditions’ in relation to our most early, pre-verbal selves — as these are vulnerable parts of us, which retain the fragility of our earliest dependency.

Winnicott captures an essence of this early vulnerability when he writes of a patient, who having suffered early maternal abandonment, is in her adult life traumatised after hearing that her cat that she had left alone, had cried for an entire day in her absence. Winnicott describes the link to this early and wordless vulnerability by observing that, “we were dealing with the fact that animals and

small children cannot be told what is happening. The cat could not understand” (p.21).

A literary symbol that repeatedly came to mind for me when contemplating the nature of Winnicott’s (1971) “most irksome of all the early failures”, (p.89) is of the illusive fragility of Laura’s glass animal collection in Tennessee Williams famous play “The glass menagerie” (T. Williams, 1945). It seems that these tiny, breakable, transparent pets are symbolic of transitional objects that have lost their way — and in doing so, lose their life and momentum. Remaining somehow frozen in time and space.

The Glass Menagerie

As with many of Tennessee Williams’ plays, “The Glass Menagerie” (1945) is inhabited by characters who through a combination of their acute sensitivity and rigid 1930’s southern American gender ideals, have taken refuge in illusion. Laura is a hypersensitive young woman suffering from debilitating shyness, living with her aging, narcissistic and disillusioned mother Amanda and sensitive poet brother Tom, who supports the family by working in a hated factory job. Amanda is locked into an idealisation of her youth as a southern belle, entertaining ‘gentleman callers’, and cannot accept the reality of her children’s sensitive natures or unhappy prospects. Laura is unable to work, as she cannot manage external relationships without overwhelming anxiety. She lives in a reclusive internal world of fantasy, inhabited by her collection of glass animals. When Tom, on the insistence of Amanda, brings home a fellow factory worker to meet Laura, Laura is sick with nerves, recognising the ‘gentleman caller’ as a boy she was in love with at school. However, in her candle-lit room,

after dinner Jim gains Laura's trust and she tells him of her glass animal collection.

Jim: Now how about you? Isn't there something you take more interest in than anything else?

Laura: Well, I do—as I said—have my—glass collection... Little articles of it, they're ornaments mostly! Most of them are little animals made out of glass, the tiniest little animals in the world. Mother calls them a glass menagerie! Here's an example of one, if you'd like to see it! This one is one of the oldest. It's nearly thirteen... Oh, be careful — if you breathe, it breaks! (p.82)

It seems that the fragility of Laura's object world is encapsulated in an “if you breathe, it breaks” (p.82) anxiety that is projected onto her treasured glass animal. However, when Jim asks Laura to dance and accidentally knocks over her unicorn, breaking off his horn, Laura in her bliss isn't upset, observing that her unicorn has had an operation to make him a normal horse so he can live with her other horses and be less “freakish” (p.86). Laura's experience of being accepted by Jim, in her illusive world of glass animals, allowed her movement towards an alive reality. Jim then kisses Laura, yet quickly realises his mistake and confesses that he is engaged, leaving Laura devastated.

Pizer (1998) describes the passage from object 'relating' to object 'usage' as “a crucial developmental attainment”, formative of a capacity to “poise at the threshold between ruthlessness and ruth, to straddle the paradox of our isolation and our connectedness” (p.11). A lack of attainment of this vital capacity is injurious to our beings, leaving little room for this essential and life-giving negotiation.

Laura's emergence towards object use and reality at the coaxing of Jim, her heart-breaking disappointment when Jim reveals his engagement to Betty,

and her final withdrawal as she blows out the candles at the end of the play, feels to me to articulate the heart of a wordless vulnerability; at what is at stake in our navigations towards the other when one is not adequately resourced. It seems that Laura's glass animals sheltered her from "the storms of real life" (Bergmann, 1997, p.92) that she was not yet equipped to weather.

Sharma and the presence of an 'if you breathe it breaks' anxiety

In my beginning sessions with Sharma, I would notice the presence of an 'if you breathe it breaks' anxiety which felt physically located in my body and which Sharma readily identified as her experience. Sharma had no trust in a world that would allow her safe passage and consequently had little capacity to play, fearing that her own initiatives were dangerous or would incite violent reprimand or envious retaliation.

Following her purchase of Beatrix, a turning point for Sharma came when she was able to link the quality of her fear of transit — that something would be wrenched from her — with her anxiety as a child in relation to her soft-toy kitten. This was a treasured toy that she loved, yet feared would be taken from her or ridiculed. Sharma associated her toy kitten with a warm memory of her mother's care and attention during a brief childhood illness, yet she was unable to rest in the security that she was able to keep her toy or that it would not be re-defined as 'wrong', 'silly' or 'babyish'. It seemed that Sharma's toy cat — as a transitional object — was only able to function as a partial bridge in her journey towards object use. It never quite felt like her possession that could be kept safe from the impingement of others.

Winnicott (1971) describes how transitional objects lose their effectiveness over time, when what they represent is no longer real. In the case

of his patient who suffered from early maternal abandonment, he describes how her transitional object began to lose its effectiveness:

Gradually, or perhaps frequently for a little while, she had to doubt the reality of the thing that they were symbolizing. That is to say, if they were symbolical of her mother's devotion and reliability they remained real in themselves but what they stood for was not real. The mother's devotion and reliability were unreal (Winnicott, 1971, p.24).

Similarly, Sharma's toy kitten represented a remembered incident of nurturing acceptance from her mother. However through her mother's continued unavailability, the toy was unable to stay invested with these qualities, as what it represented was no longer real.

In choosing a real kitten — a being in its own right — Sharma was able to further bridge towards object use. Her kitten became for her more than a transitional object. I believe Beatrix became for Sharma, as Bridger suggests, one maturational step beyond the transitional object (Noonan, 1998). Being able to share her experience of her cat in therapy facilitated the strengthening of the therapeutic relationship, her relationship with her growing cat, and most essentially her relationship with her own internalised good object.

Through Beatrix's appetite for play and 'mess making' and her demands for attention, Sharma began to tolerate and make friends with a more playful and ruthless self. That I shared in the excitement of Beatrix's developmental milestones, and was able to enjoy the humour of her kittenish misdemeanours, was relieving for Sharma, whose own 'messes' and 'demands' appear not to have been tolerated as a child. This brought to the surface much grief for her and there were periods where she resented Beatrix's demands and envied her

freedom. Yet these feelings were tolerable in a way that was not yet possible in her human relationships.

That her relationship with her cat survived her periods of irritation seemed to strengthen her feelings of devotion towards her pet, as well as allow an avenue (or language) to articulate her negative and positive feelings towards me. For example, when explaining how Beatrix let her know when she didn't want to play anymore with a swift swipe of her paw, I asked if she felt that she would "sometimes like to swipe me?" Within this process, Sharma was able to connect to an inner aliveness and began to develop an imaginative play space in which to explore what she wanted from life. She is currently studying courses on animal behaviour, for which she feels much passion.

When Nature becomes the parent

For some individuals, animals, along with a connection to nature, become a life long and consuming passion. Relationship with animals and nature, when parental care is abusive or inadequate, can become for the child a life-sustaining link that in part becomes a substitute for absent parental care.

A famous example is Beatrix Potter (famous for her illustrated children's stories depicting animals), who relied on her relationship with the natural world of plants and animals as sustenance in an otherwise emotionally barren childhood. Alexander Grinstein (1995), in his psychoanalytic exploration into the life and creative works of Beatrix Potter, gives testimony to her personal strength in transcending her lonely and desolate childhood (and later depression). His work is a rich analysis of how attachment to animals and the natural world became a medium through which she was able to express herself and individuate from her early trauma.

Mahon (1998) makes the observation that although he doesn't find the work of Beatrix Potter remarkable, her personal accomplishment of 'depression', rather than the more primitive defences of schizoid or autistic withdrawal (given the extent and duration of her early deprivations) is "indeed *remarkable*" (Mahon, 1998, p.730). It seems that Potter's free access to her natural environment and its inhabitants were her soul-saving link to life.

On a similar theme, Melanie Klein, in her 1963 paper, "On the sense of loneliness", gives an account of a relatively well man who in a defensive "flight into nature" (Klein, 1975, p.308) was able to ward off a "fundamental loneliness" (ibid) that was attached to his de-idealization of his mother. Klein interpreted that to him nature represented not only beauty, but "the good object that he had taken into himself". Her patient added that because his relationship with nature included a realistic appreciation of the harshness of nature as well as his own destructive tendencies (he remembered robbing nests and damaging hedges as a child), that he had in fact "taken an integrated object" (ibid). Although this patient carried an awareness of his aggression in connection to nature, he simultaneously was convinced that damage would be survived without retaliation. Hence, in contrast to his relationship with his mother (whose frailty he felt responsible for), in his relationship to nature (that survived his destructive attacks) he was able to be relatively free from guilt.

Bridge towards relational capacity

My fascination with the relationship between human beings and different species of animals has been with me since childhood. As a child I was devoted to a large menagerie of pets and insects, all of which I spent much time trying to (and believing that I could) communicate with. In my adolescence I was drawn

to the writing of D H Lawrence, primarily because he wrote with such reverence of our natural capacity for life and connection to nature, and how this is lost (or interrupted) and then rediscovered (or alternately turned away from) throughout our lives. Of all Lawrence's works, I was most moved by his depiction of Connie (Lady Chatterly) in "Lady's Chatterly's lover" (Lawrence, 1928), as she emerges from a deep depression and miserable marriage back into life and real relationship via her connection to a chicken and her hatching eggs.

She came every day to the hens, they were the only things in the world that warmed her heart. Clifford's protestations made her go cold from head to foot. Mrs Bolton's voice made her go cold, and the sound of the business men who came... She felt she would surely die if it lasted much longer... Only the hens, fluffed so wonderfully on the eggs, were warm with their hot, brooding female bodies!...she came in the afternoon to the coops and there was one tiny, tiny perky chicken tinily prancing round in front of a coop, and the mother hen clucking in terror...Connie crouched to watch in a sort of ecstasy. Life, life! Pure, sparky, fearless new life! New life! So tiny and so utterly without fear! Even when it scampered a little scramblingly into the coop again, and disappeared under the hen's feathers in answer to the mother hen's wild alarm-cries, it was not really frightened, it took it as a game, the game of living. For in a moment a tiny sharp head was poking through the gold-brown feathers of the hen, and eyeing the Cosmos (Lawrence, 1928, p.161).

Connie was reconnected to a vital aliveness within herself through her attachment to a roosting chicken and her joy at witnessing her hatchlings' first confrontation with life. With her relational world infused with new life, Connie falls in love with the person of Mellors, with whom she goes on to enjoy a deeply satisfying relationship. As in the above examples, an animal relationship serves as a catalyst towards an awakening sense of self, which precedes and allows for a leap towards the joyful reality of mature object use.

The transcending quality of animal relationships

Lorenz maintained a love of animals since childhood when he longed to be a wild goose (Lewis et al., 2001). On recognising the impossibility of this dream, he maintained a life-long sustaining friendship with these animals, one which remained central to his very being (Lewis et al., 2001, p 67).

As I watched the geese, it appeared to me as little short of a miracle that a hard, matter-of-fact scientist should have been able to establish a real friendship with wild, free-living animals, and the realization of this fact made me strangely happy (Lorenz, 1953, p.30).

Lorenz (1953) gives testimony to the indefinable value attached to one's connection with the cycles of nature and its inhabitants when he describes his jackdaws, who during the trauma of the second world war,⁷ continued to nest on his chimney, and whose "shrill cries" (whose meaning he could decipher) could be heard echoing through the central heating of his study.

And every year they stop up the chimneys with their nests and infuriate the neighbours by eating their cherries. Can you understand that it is not only scientific results that are the recompense for all this trouble and annoyance, *but more, much, much more?* (Lorenz, 1953, p.30).

Summary and conclusions

The above examples of animal-human relationship illustrate their vast potential for bridging our connections to others as well as to deeper and transcending parts of ourselves.

⁷ Lorenz's jackdaws were the only free flying birds to remain in Altenberg during the war. His beloved geese being scattered by the effects of WW2.

Contained in our relationship with animals or animal symbols, are often regressive remnants of our earliest pre-verbal negotiations with reality. These relationships I believe can accompany us on our journey towards Winnicott's "object use".

Chapter 7 - Synthesis and discussion

Theoretical synthesis

Animals are prominent in the developmental world of the child in stories, as pets, in dreams and as symbolic representations. Our relationship with the animal world changes as we mature and in most instances loses some of its centrality, yet animals in adulthood often remain highly significant as pets, memories of pets and as transitional phenomena that contain rich associative material into a patient's early and subsequent developmental world.

In writing this dissertation I have come to recognize my own resistance, reluctance and at times 'cringe' in writing about relationships with animals and how this relates to both a self-consciousness in revealing what feels like private and wordless parts of myself, as well as a fear of somehow being 'left behind' (by adult "matters of consequence" (Saint-Exupery, p.6) or by more 'serious' psychotherapists). At times while working with this material I have experienced sensations of unexpected, and intense, isolation and sadness, in which I sense an affinity with Laura from the previously discussed "The glass menagerie"(T. Williams, 1945) — as if I too could be coaxed to reveal an inner fragility that could be met with awkward rejection.

I have proposed that Winnicott's notion of transitional objects/ phenomena provides the key into not only the experience of pet-human relationships, but also into how these relationships change developmentally over time. Winnicott asserts the presumption that:

The task of reality-acceptance is never completed ... no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from

this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion. etc) (Winnicott, 1971, p.13).

Pet relationships can provide an “intermediate area of experience which is not challenged” in the lives of humans of any age, yet as observed above, this relationship changes in quality as we mature into adults. Cultural norms that view the lives of animals as dispensable and secondary to human lives, as well as maturational changes that distance the world of animals from its earlier centrality, result in a tendency for the animal-human bond to be ignored or dismissed.

Perhaps also the notion of pet-human relationship — existing in this continuing and essential play space, is in a sense difficult to conceive of as ‘adult’. The word ‘pet’ is often used affectionately towards children and ‘petting’ and ‘puppy love’ are terms denoting adolescent immature love or practice lovemaking. I surmise that an aspect of the ‘cringe’ I and other authors feel, along with a hesitancy in presenting material about animals, relates to the perception of pet keeping as belonging to younger parts of us that are to be grown out of, or parts that are less developed than what could be considered higher artistic or intellectual achievement. A socially inhibited woman who depends on a number of cats for companionship may be considered less mentally well (or desirable to be with) than an equally isolated yet brilliant pianist or artist — despite the fact that both may suffer similar problems in their object relations.

Theoretical contribution to theory development

I have argued that relationships with pets do continue to inhabit a transitional space, and that although the quality of these relationships changes as we mature (and in themselves mature); they remain a valuable link to our earliest

negotiations with reality. It seems that part of the importance of animal relationships is that they evoke very early parts of us, which are regressive and often split-off from our full awareness. These are the parts of us that Winnicott (1971) describes as being unable to be told what is happening—i.e. “we were dealing with the fact that animals and small children cannot be told what is happening. The cat could not understand” (p. 21).

As psychotherapy is interested in the continuing integration of different parts of the self, then an awareness of these early parts and how they can be brought into the psychotherapy, would contribute significantly to the healthy development and quality of life of the individual. An important part of pet keeping could be that it satisfies some of this early need, even though it may remain quite unintegrated. Therefore working with the patient’s pet relationship within the psychotherapy can provide a bridge towards important integrative insight, which in turn can facilitate improved relational capability.

Clinical synthesis

Winnicott (1971) asserts that, “success in infant care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment” (p.10). Throughout this dissertation many authors have made reference to the simple yet profound sense of intimacy and unconditional love that they experience in relationship with their pets — particularly with dogs.

Attachment theory highlights the magnitude of the psychological and physiological necessity of having early and subsequent attachment needs met. However, intimacy with another human can carry the impassable risks of emotional pain and rejection, particularly for the many patients who suffer the consequences of early trauma or neglect (Gold, 2000).

I argue that when a relationship with a pet functions as a substitute for human relationship; rather than being viewed as a defence against human relating, that these relationships be viewed as an achievement. I propose also that when a patient has a strong attachment to a pet, that this relationship can be worked with in the psychotherapy as a catalyst towards improving relational capacity.

In the case of Erin (first introduced in Chapter Two) it was her dog that supported her through the trauma of sexual abuse when she was too frightened to tell another human. Her dog acted as an emotional confidant to whom she could confide her otherwise untold story. Although she knew her words were not comprehended, she felt emotionally heard and solaced. This, I believe protected Erin against dissociation, a more severe consequence.

In Erin's adult life, an aliveness could be reached through her relationship with her rescued animals. She could feel safe in her connection to dogs who would 'magically' know her thoughts, feelings and distress. With dogs, Erin would often feel 'recognised' by a 'special' puppy who would 'lick her fingers' with what she experienced as a gesture of empathic understanding and support. In this sense animals in Erin's life have continued to tend to early parts of her that have 'missed' much needed care and attention from her human world. Our mutual understanding of the importance of her relationships with animals, allowed these experiences to come more fully into conscious awareness. This in turn has contributed to Erin making substantial gains in the enhancement of her human relationships.

Similarly Sharma has been able to bridge towards a stronger sense of self and other through her attachment to her pet cat, Beatrix. In turn, her growing

relationship with her pet has contributed significantly in her psychotherapy to a developing sense of object constancy and internal safety. Her growing attachment to Beatrix has enabled her to trust and feel trusted by another, facilitating a positive shift in her human relationships. An important aspect of Beatrix's presence in her psychotherapy has been that it has enabled painful material to be worked with at a tolerable distance.

Using pets in therapy is not confined only to healing or positive feelings towards animals. Many patients describe feeling burdened, irritated and sometimes jealous of the animals in their own (or other's) care. These feelings can be important indicators of deeper underlying dynamics that, although unable to be consciously recognized, are displaced onto pet relationships, which feel safer and less immediate than relationships with humans. Ambivalent feelings towards a pet that demands the sacrifice of care, attention, time and financial expenditure, and are dependent on us for their survival, commonly invoke important feelings around a patient's own early dependency.

As pet relationships often function as self-objects and attachment figures as well as inhabiting an important transitional play space, ignoring or missing this bond is essentially missing a valuable part of the patient. I propose that working alongside a patient's pet relationship is essentially joining them in what can be a rich yet often isolated realm of experience. I further suggest that joining a patient in this realm is both relieving and empowering, inviting early (often pre-verbal) experience to the surface to be met with and explored. In this way a patient's pet can be a support in the therapeutic process.

Limitations of study

The subject of human-animal relationships is widely referenced in the general media yet there seems to be a poverty of in-depth material — particularly psychoanalytic insight. This places this study at risk of being both too broad and too shallow, as the wide body of mainly anecdotal material has little research to back its assertions.

In researching this study I have had to cast a wide net in my gathering of clinical data and insight. Although I have kept to a psychoanalytic frame, I have used clinical material from veterinarians, ethnologists, counsellors and zoologists. This has both added to my study (adding valuable perspective) and limited it — as a degree of ‘diluting’ has felt inevitable.

The wide scope of animal relationships has meant that I have had to (in keeping within the bounds of my word limitations) omit areas of relevance that would have lent further insight into my topic. For example, I have not included much material on negative reactions / transferences to pets, animals or nature, or material on animal abuse or perversions.

One of the difficulties in gathering material for this study has been what appears to me reluctance by many of the authors to locate their findings within a psychoanalytic frame. Many of the rich clinical insights that I came across in my search for psychoanalytic understanding I have found in, what felt to be, the least likely of places. For example in his book “When pets come between partners,” Gold (2000) insists in his introduction that he has not written a book about psychology. However, his book then gives a series of in-depth case studies, depicting his work over many years with a wide variety of patients who benefited substantially from working, psychoanalytically, with Gold in the context of their

pet relationships. Similarly, Fogle's book titled "Pets and their people" (1984) features an almost comic cover featuring his beaming self surrounded by a cat, a dog and parrots — belying again the depth of insight contained within his beautifully observed, well researched and moving account of the animal-human relationship that characterises a large percentage of this work.

Finally, I am aware also that my interest in this subject arises from both my clinical observations and my own experience and love of animals. As animals have been valuable sources of support and comfort in my own history, it is possible my bias from the start of this study has been a privileging of this bond. However, I recognise that a degree of immersion (and so privileging) has been a necessary element in grappling with the regressive themes I wished to portray in this study.

Implications for future research

As Brown (2004) points out the "benefits of companion animals to human health have attracted a lot of scientific interest and research", yet "theoretical conceptualisations of why the human-pet bond is beneficial are lacking" (p.67). Contributing to this lack, I believe is reluctance within the main body of psychoanalytic writing to engage in this material. Serpell (1986), attributes some of this reluctance to the fact that pet keeping is often charged with an over sentimentality, yet is quick to assert that "a degree of sentimentality" is not sufficient reason why the subject should be "ignored or ridiculed" (p.42). He points out that sentiment is a prominent part of what is derived from most close relationships and that "there does not appear to be any obvious justification for repressing or belittling such feelings when they are applied to animals" (p.42). I advocate for further integrative exploration between

the main body of psychoanalytic writing and human-animal understandings, as well as further investigation into what is contained within the existing culture of reluctance to engage in this material.

Another main area of relevance is in the treatment and understanding of trauma in the patient's life. Melson (2002) indicates a need for further research into the beneficial effects of pets in the lives of children during periods of stress and trauma. In the treatment and prevention of PTSD, Becker outlines the importance of animals in assisting therapists in working with children whose sense of trust in the world has been shattered.

Contemporary neurobiological findings in infant development and trauma emphasise the vital role the facilitating environment plays in the immersing and regulating self-structures of infants. Attachment trauma and faulty or traumatic self-object experiences are linked with structural changes in the developing brain that are associated with psychopathology. Schore (2002) is clear in asserting that the developmental attainment of a self system that

Can adaptively regulate various forms of arousal and psychobiological states and thereby affect, cognition and behaviour only evolves in a growth facilitating emotional environment. (p.448)

The role of animals in the vital role of affect regulation has exciting clinical implications.

Summary

The primary concern of this dissertation has been to explore the use of the patient's relationship with an animal(s) in the psychotherapy towards increased relational capability and quality of life. The above material explores the contexts

in which animals function throughout our lifespan — in our continuing negotiations with reality, as transference objects and attachment figures.

It is clear that in the lives of children, animals play a prominent role both as symbolic representations in story and fantasy and often also as significant and even protective beings in the child's external object world. The use of animals in therapy has proven successful in allowing children as well as adults the projective play space to experiment with new ways of being as well as providing the benefit of an accepting non-judgmental presence (Glucksman, 2005).

Animal-human relationships continue into adulthood, remaining important sources of solace and support in the lives of many adults. In adulthood, the quality of the animal-human bond contrasts with other adult relationships in that they often carry an exclusivity of attachment, reminiscent of early relational bonds with the maternal figure. A pet-relationship can provide a consistency of presence not possible in the limited time frame of the psychotherapy relationship. Thus a client's relationship with a pet when joined by the therapist, I believe can function as a valuable support in the therapy.

The value of human-pet relationships is well advocated within the healing professions yet they are frequently ignored within psychoanalytic theory, as well as in the psychotherapy relationship (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Within psychoanalytic psychotherapy many authors have observed not only a lack of research around human-animal bonds, but also a reluctance to engage in this material (Brown, 2004; Gold, 2000; Melson, 2001, 2002; Roth, 2005). I have proposed that this is due in part to pet-human relationships inhabiting a transitional space that is innately regressive, often pre-verbal and so inhibiting of

exploration. I believe that further insight into, and integration of the animal-human relationship has much to offer psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion I argue that Winnicott's ideas on 'object use' and 'transitional phenomena', when applied to the concept of animal-human relationship, expands our understanding of the healing potential that these relationships hold. I propose that these insights are valuable for working with patients who struggle in their human relationships, yet are able to manage a relationship with a valued pet.

Freud states that "A child feels inferior if he notices that he is not loved, and so does an adult (1973/1933, p.97). Animals can remain an important source of sustaining devotion, and solace throughout our life—although this aspect of pet keeping is often quite unintegrated. In the psychotherapy relationship, animal-bonds can be harvested towards the work of enhancing relational capacity, allowing repressed and painful material to be uncovered and then worked with at a distance that is tolerable for the patient.

I propose that animal-human relationships are able to facilitate access to early, transitional, and regressed parts of us that, when able to be worked with within the psychotherapy, can provide an important catalyst for meaningful change.

Finally, I wish to give tribute to the deep and at times transcending significance of animals in the lives of many humans. I believe that Lorenz (1953), captures this indefinable quality of animals in our lives, with his question: "Can you understand that it is not only scientific results that are the

recompense for all this trouble and annoyance, *but more, much, much more?*

(Lorenz, 1953, p.30).

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