

Transformation through Service: Trans-species Psychology and Its Implications for Ecotherapy

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We know now that psychology and psychotherapy apply not only to the human psyche but equally and seamlessly to the psyches of our animal relatives. So what does this imply for ecotherapy? Internationally known animal trauma expert Gay Bradshaw challenges therapists to overcome the inherent anthropocentrism of their field, and suggests that only by striving for the well-being of other animals can we ensure our own well-being.

Angelo is a fifteen-year-old male. His overall physique and health are excellent, and most days he is engaging, outgoing, and highly sociable. However, he has been hospitalized numerous times because of his self-injurious behavior. During these events, he suddenly begins tearing at his chest, repeatedly gouging into the muscle, even to the bone, and on two occasions exposing organ tissue. Medical treatment is administered and a psychopharmaceutical regimen imposed until he stabilizes and desists from self-mutilation.

At first, the attending psychiatrist is puzzled. Angelo has lived with his adoptive family for nine years and to all appearances he is loved, well cared for, and happy. The family seems secure and comfortable with no hint of any deeper issues. But, as the psychiatrist soon learns, Angelo's outbursts stem from another lifetime, the dark period before his adoption into a caring family.

As a two year old, Angelo witnessed and was subjected to horrific events. He was physically restrained, rendered powerless while both his mother and father were brutally killed. He was taken far away from his home and made to live in a steel enclosure with only popcorn, candy, and other sweets provided for sustenance. Sometimes he was locked up in a dark garage for weeks with little human contact. He was occasionally brought out at parties and tortured to amuse the guests. To this day, he will pace and scream frantically whenever he hears loud music.

In his new adoptive family, Angelo eats well and plays outdoors in the sunshine, enjoying a sense of autonomy and agency. Then, seemingly out of the blue, he will start to methodically pick at himself, plucking first the exquisite rose pink feathers for which Moluccan cockatoos are famous, and eventually the skin down to the muscles of his chest and bone. Yes, though Angelo's profile resembles that of a troubled child or young adult, he is, in fact, a bird. Science has demonstrated what we sense intuitively—that animals are vulnerable to psychological trauma much as humans are. Sadly, it is humans who are causing this suffering.

Part of the multibillion-dollar trade in wildlife, parrots are among the most affected species. Angelo's self-mutilation is not an uncommon symptom of wild-caught and hand-reared parrots, and what we see in his behavior is not limited to birds. Elephants, chimpanzees, polar bears, cougars, turkeys, and other animals living in the wild and in captivity have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of human impacts.¹ These disturbing revelations have resulted in the emergence of a new field, trans-species psychology.²

Of Common Mind and Common Rights

Trans-species psychology is the formal study of how animals think, feel, and behave. In contrast to conventional psychology, the prefix *trans-* signifies that a common model of psyche applies for all animal species, including humans. Psychology's interest in nonhuman animals is not particularly new. Even before the last century, animals have played a central role in the search to unravel mysteries of the mind. Animal "models"—the experimental use of animals as surrogates for humans—have become such a research mainstay that the ubiquitous "lab rat" is psychology's unofficial mascot.

However, despite their role, animals have never garnered the same respect as humans. On one hand, animals are recognized as our close psychological and neuroethological siblings. Rats, cats, dogs, pigeons, chimpanzees, monkeys, planarians (flatworms), and squid are routinely used to probe the structures, mechanisms, and motives that underlie human cognition, emotion, and behavior. On the other hand, despite known similarities, animals are routinely used in experiments in ways that would be unthinkable for human subjects.

New science has catalyzed new ethics. Today's trans-species models of brain and psyche compel trans-species ethical standards. Study upon study have gradually erased the psychological differences that seemed to separate humans from other animals. Attributes once considered uniquely human—including culture, mourning rituals, empathy, self-awareness, suffering, tool use, distinct personalities, ethics, complex linguistic abilities, and a sense of aesthetics—are now identified in myriad species.

Dolphins, for example, pass on cultural habits, such as their use of sponges as fishing tools.³ Cats form lifelong bonds with their human family members. Elephants mourn the passing of loved ones. Empathetic mice go to huge lengths to prevent the suffering of a companion. Octopi show nuanced variations in personality. Even invertebrates mirror human traits and brains. Commenting on his research with cockroaches, Dr. Makoto Mizunami of Japan's Tohoku University recently noted that "understanding the brain mechanisms of learning in insects can help us to understand the functionings in the human brain."⁴ Suddenly, Archie and Mehitabel (the cockroach and alley cat protagonists of 1920s columnist Don Marquis) seem closer to Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara than to insect and feline. In the end, though we look very different on the outside—luxuriant fur, brilliant plumage, iridescent scales, or bare skin—inside we are very much the same and respond to the world around us and to each other in strikingly similar ways.

Not all human cultures have kept our animal kin at such a distance. Many Native American cultures recognize and respect other animals as fellow tribes—the Wolf People, the Buffalo People, and the Eagle People—each with their own language, custom, law, and land. Certain members of the Sioux tribe were renowned for their ability to speak with bison and deer. Closer to science's epistemic home, Charles Darwin asserted a similar notion

150 years ago, maintaining that all animals possess emotions and a sense of morals because of shared ancestry.⁵ In essence, trans-species psychology recalls an old idea but involves more than a change of name. The new psychology represents a profound paradigm shift. By recognizing a shared psychobiology, science catalyzed a move from anthropocentrism to *ecocentrism*, a term suggesting that humans are not the center of the universe or any more gifted than the rest of the Earth's rich faunal family.

The qualifier *profound* is apropos. As philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn noted, paradigm shifts are revolutions as political as they are conceptual, and the present one may be the most radical restructuring of modern culture to date.⁶ Along with new ethics, trans-species science implies new cultural norms and standards. For instance, most research in science, psychology, and medicine is designed to optimize human welfare based on the beliefs that humans are superior and that human lives are more valuable than others' lives. These schemas are rarely questioned. Now that the very same criteria underlying the values, ethics, morals, and laws that exempt humans from institutionalized abuse are recognized in other animals, we must find alternative means and ends in the quest for knowledge. The use of monkeys, cats, rabbits, chickens, frogs, and other animals to teach anatomy, research drugs, test cosmetics, or find cures for human diseases is no longer justifiable. This implies a complete change in how medicine is practiced, what we eat, how we behave, and even a reassessment of what is entailed in living on the planet. Further, with a change in how we view our own health comes a change in how we view animal well-being.

As one example, attention to the mental and emotional health of animals raises serious questions about the methods and assumptions of conservation. A compelling line of research demonstrates that many methods of conservation conventionally used to "manage" wildlife, such as culls, sustainable harvests, captive breeding, translocations, and commercial animal trade, undermine the very goals conservation seeks to achieve.

When we acknowledge that animals feel emotions, retain lifelong bonds with family members, and have cultures of their own, what once seemed unpleasant but necessary becomes disturbingly abhorrent. Psychobiological unity across species also erases past linguistic separations—the need for a separate set of euphemisms for nonhuman suffering.⁷ In human populations, such practices would be called genocide, deportation,

eugenics, prison camps, and slavery, each unethical and devastating to the lives and souls of the victims.

Trans-species Psychologists and Psychotherapy

Leaving Kuhn's theoretical world of scientific revolution and returning to the practical issue of psychology, we might ask, can a single theory of psychobiology serve the psychotherapeutic needs of many species? The answer is easier than it might first appear. A great deal is already known about animal psychology from the field of animal behavior, and more significantly, much of what is understood about human psyche applies to other species. What has been learned about humans through the use of animals as experimental surrogates extends to elephants, birds, whales, and snakes. For example, the understanding of attachment as a key process in shaping human neuropsychology came as much from John Bowlby's studies on children as it did from maternal deprivation experiments on nonhuman primates conducted by Harry Harlow. There are also well-established parallels in other areas of psychology.

The diagnosis and treatment of trauma is unsurprisingly similar across species. Since all vertebrates share socio-affective patterns and homologous neural networks, Angelo's distress can be understood in much the same way as that of a young man with similar symptoms and personal history.⁸ Angelo and others like him have experienced a series of formative events: developmental and relational traumas through premature separation from parents, the shock trauma of witnessing loved ones die, torture, and deprivation through prolonged incarceration. Chimpanzees, cats, parrots, and elephants are among the species whose formal diagnoses already conform to criteria contained in the bible of mental health, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Angelo's traumatic experiences led to a suite of symptoms consistent with complex PTSD, a diagnosis of symptoms associated with individuals who have sustained multiple and chronic trauma. Chimpanzees removed from their mothers as infants and incarcerated exhibit developmental difficulties similar to those of severely neglected and abused children whose suffering persists into adulthood.⁹ Elephants who are captured, kept in solitary confinement, beaten, and tortured with electric prods experience depression, eating disorders, asociality, hyperaggression, stereotypes

(repeated obsessive behaviors), and other symptoms characteristic of human political prisoners who have similar experiences. A pacing zoo tiger who one day suddenly attacks and mauls his keeper is no longer a “dangerous brooding feline” but a highly stressed individual, much like a prisoner trying to escape despair and death. Much as cross-cultural psychiatrists have found in diverse human communities, symptoms and their meaning vary with culture and the individual. Nonetheless, the quality of suffering and experiences of all animals are comparable.

Therapeutic care also cuts across species. Treatment of traumatized animals overlaps with that of humans in crisis. The core philosophy and practices of sanctuaries such as Santa Barbara Bird Farm, developed by Phoebe Greene Linden, incorporate key features of trauma recovery that have been identified by trauma researchers, psychologists, and psychiatrists.¹⁰ Removing traumatizing agents, supporting physical, psychological, and emotional health, revitalizing a sense of agency, and providing opportunities to form social bonds are considered integral to trauma recovery in all species and can result in significant success in both humans and animals.

So, to answer the question at the beginning of this section: yes, trans-species psychology does extend to psychotherapeutic practice for animals. But what does trans-species psychotherapy look and sound like? Without the ability to ask questions and receive answers, how can an animal’s psychological state and experience be ascertained? And what does it mean to engage in psychotherapy with a chimpanzee or an elephant or a bear? With humans, witnessing a survivor’s narrative is considered pivotal to recovery. Through physical or psychological coercion, the trauma victim is silenced, but the ability to openly share experiences reempowers a sense of self. While psychology is beginning to discover that, in psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk’s words, “the body keeps the score,” the therapeutic process is still most commonly mediated through speech, something that appears to be uniquely human.

Historically, fear of anthropomorphism—the false attribution of human traits to animals—has stymied constructive discussions concerning interspecies communication. But what we now know about neurobiological and behavioral parallels across species has stimulated a much more creative perspective. Through the psychological rehabilitation of animals,

we are learning, or more likely, remembering, a language from long ago used by our ancestors who lived side by side with their animal kin.

Practitioners such as Vera Muller-Paisner, a psychoanalyst who works with Holocaust survivors as well as horses, are beginning to work fluidly across species lines.¹¹ Vera uses techniques with traumatized horses similar to those with which she has helped countless humans work through painful pasts. In her Listening Hands Project, body therapist Elke Riesterer works with traumatized elephants, monitor lizards, giraffes, and other species who endure the chronic hardships of captive life in zoos. Patti Ragan, director of the Center for Great Apes, has created a sanctuary where she provides lifetime therapeutic care tailored to individual chimpanzees and orangutans retired from entertainment, research, or life as a pet. Gloria Grow at the Fauna Foundation helps chimpanzees rebuild their lives in recovery from their shattering experiences as biomedical test subjects. Cathy Kinsman and Toni Frohoff of TerraMar Research work with orphaned beluga whales and orcas to create free-ranging sanctuaries that attempt to provide some of the psychological and social support the young have lost. At Serenity Park, located at the Los Angeles Veterans Administration, clinical psychologist Lorin Lindner teaches veterans how to care for and communicate with rescued parrots who, like them, suffer from PTSD and other trauma-related conditions. Like other therapists, Gloria Grow uses empathetic listening to hear chimpanzee testimonies, Elke Riesterer “reads” emotional and somatic states, and Vera Muller-Paisner deciphers equine symptoms and behavior like visual Braille.¹²

All engage in a highly sophisticated dialogue of body, sense, and sound, attending to every nuance of their charges and how they themselves react and feel. Their interspecies communication methods depend in part on what C. G. Jung and Sigmund Freud called the process of “transference-countertransference” in recognition that therapy is more than just two people sitting together—effective therapy is relational.

In another example, Eileen McCarthy, founder and director of the Midwest Avian Adoption and Rescue Services (MAARS), an organization that treats traumatized and abused birds like Angelo, has embarked on what is essentially an emerging parrot psychiatry.¹³ At MAARS’ rescue center, The Landing, trained staff attend to the emotional and physical recovery of parrots, as in the case of BeeCee. Joseph Yenkowski, a clinical psychologist and

volunteer at MAARS, discovered the source of BeeCee's intense hostility to women by listening in during a therapy session to the parrot's cathartic rant, which reproduced the voice of a woman screaming abusively, doors slamming, and children crying. Over time, BeeCee was able to integrate his traumatic memories and is more comfortable socializing with women. In nearly every way. The Landing's human staff and parrot residents are the home and flock these rescued birds lost or never had.

What Trans-Species Psychology Teaches Us about Ecotherapy

The examples above contrast starkly with most mixed-species therapies, formally referred to as animal-assisted therapy (AAT). AAT is one of several growing areas in ecotherapy. Whether it involves a dog, cat, horse, dolphin, or elephant, the primary purpose of AAT is to improve human health through the healing properties of nature. On the surface, AAT appears benign. However, it has the potential to be exploitive and damaging to animals: a medium for using nature merely as a tool or stage upon which humans act out life.

Unlike their human counterparts, AAT animal therapists are generally not given the choice to engage in therapeutic work. Cetacean experts Drs. Toni Frohoff and Lori Marino both speak of the harm imposed by dolphin-assisted therapy (DAT). Even the "best" captive DAT facilities that capture dolphins from the wild endanger free-ranging populations by traumatizing individuals and depleting their numbers.¹⁴ Further, Frohoff who specializes in dolphin communication, notes that the famous "dolphin smile" is actually a fixed facial feature and by no means indicates joy.¹⁵ Our cultural projections can cause us to misinterpret dolphins who, when forced to interact with humans, may actually be expressing fear or distress that is masked by their "smile." The same consideration holds for domestic animals.

For centuries, cats, dogs, horses, chickens, and other domesticated species have lived biculturally with humans. They have been defined by their place in human culture, and their behaviors have been judged by human values and standards. Horses, for example, are assumed to enjoy being ridden and wearing a bit because "that is what they do." Indeed, many riders maintain that their horse seeks out to be ridden and harnessed. However, attachment theory—the field in psychology and neuroscience that

describes how psyche is relationally shaped—suggests an alternative explanation: it may be less that horses enjoy the bit than they are desirous of emotional connection, almost any connection, with their primary relationship. The importance of bonding cannot be underestimated. Holocaust survivors, such as Elie Weisel and psychiatrist Henry Krystal, have described the strong emotional bond that develops even between prisoners and their keeper.¹⁶

At the sanctuaries and programs described above, the first and primary goal is to support animal well-being. Human healing and transformation are not ignored, but they take place in the process of being in service to animals. Focusing on the care of nature reverses the cycle of abuse and violence that has spawned today's ills while it initiates human healing. When we work in a trans-species setting, we learn how much of our own healing comes from letting go of the idea that humans are so special and separate from everyone else. Respect and care for animals lead to respect and care for our own disconnected and disowned animal selves: a reunion of hearts and minds.

Trans-species psychology also teaches that nature is someone, not *something*, whose well-being is as important as our own. As we begin to interact with animals more closely, there is an implicit need to examine carefully the nature of the evolving relationship to avoid perpetuating abuse and objectification. In AAT and all other ecotherapies, it is critical to seriously reflect on what implicit assumptions may exist that deny or impinge upon animal agency. Our newfound kinship encourages alternative ways to interact with other animals that are based in species parity, not domination.

Science has discovered tiny mirror neurons that give us the innate ability to sense the suffering and joy of another.¹⁷ But, in truth, knowledge of the brain is unnecessary, for it only confirms what we have known all along. Love transcends shape, size, color, age, and any other external feature. Angelo, his human family, and countless other trans-species families are testimony that above all, we truly cannot heal at the expense of another. Through the embrace of all animals, trans-species psychology catalyzes the emergence of a trans-species culture where “living like an animal” transforms from a derisive epithet to an aspiration we all strive to achieve.

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Horses, Humans, and Healing, Neda DeMayo

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Resource:

Visit Neda DeMayo's horse sanctuary online at <http://returntofreedom.org>.

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Gardens That Heal, Elizabeth R. Messer Diehl

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