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Theoretical Concepts from Self Psychology Applied to Animal Hoarding[1]

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Abstract
Self psychology provides a theoretical framework for understanding the psychology of the animal hoarder. The following ideas from self psychology can be applied to animal hoarders and their animals to gain insight into the nature of the bond between them: 1) animals can serve a crucial selfobject function, such as cohesion, for hoarders, regardless of the actual, objective reality of the state of the animals; 2) the concept of archaic vs. mature selfobject functioning elucidates how hoarders are stuck in self-centered, archaic forms of relating with little empathic capacity; 3) the merger selfobject relationship allows hoarders to see animals as being one with them; and 4) disavowal and the vertical split explain how hoarders can live with animal suffering and be apparently oblivious to it. Similarities between self psychology and attachment theory are discussed.

Keywords
animal hoarding, human-animal bond, selfobject, self psychology

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and examine specific self psychology concepts that contribute to understanding the psychology of the animal hoarder. Definitions of self psychology and animal hoarding are presented first. Those definitions are followed by a brief comparison of self psychology to attachment theory, since attachment theory is often mentioned in the literature in relation to the etiology of animal hoarding. Finally, the following areas where self psychology can be applied specifically to animal hoarders are discussed: the importance of subjective reality in Kohut's self psychology; mature versus archaic selfobjects; animals and selfobject merger needs; disavowal: the vertical split and how disavowal compares to repression, denial, and dissociation. The conclusions section offers a discussion of some of the issues involved with applying self psychology to animal hoarding.

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Definition of Self Psychology Terms

In Kohut's (1971) self psychology, two of the main concepts are "self" and "selfobject." The self is a psychological structure that is the core of the personality and gives a person a sense of well-being, self-esteem, and general cohesion (Wolf, 1988). Wolf also states that the self is made up of ambitions, values, ideals, inborn talents, and acquired skills. To maintain a healthy sense of self, people need responses from the environment that will maintain and promote this sense of self. These psychologically sustaining responses might include empathy and soothing, affirming, or calming responses. These responses are provided by "objects" (people, animals, things, experiences, or ideas) in the surrounding environment and are called selfobject functions. The calming effect of the companion animal may be considered a selfobject function that for some people helps maintain an aspect of the self.

According to Wolf (1988), to be defined as a selfobject the being or experience must "evoke, maintain and give cohesion to the self" (p. 63). A nonhuman animal is defined as a selfobject only if he or she is considered essential to the person. The animal would be considered a selfobject only if the loss of the animal would create a sense of fragmentation, or falling apart, for the person. The reliance or dependency on a selfobject can be quite intense and crucial to a person's sense of well-being.

A companion animal may serve as an essential selfobject to a person so that when separated from the animal, the person feels a sense of emptiness, depression, or disintegration until reunited with the animal. It is not actually the person or animal that is the selfobject, however; it is the supportive function the person or animal provides that fulfills a selfobject need (Wolf, 1988). For example, if a dog offers the necessary soothing and calming function to a distressed person, then that dog is probably fulfilling a selfobject function for that individual. The person might then perceive the dog as a selfobject, although technically, the dog is not the selfobject but rather embodies the calming selfobject function for the person.

Selfobjects can be one of three types: mirroring, idealized, or twinship. Mirroring selfobjects build the self by providing acceptance and affirmation of the goodness of the self. Idealized selfobjects provide someone to look up to, identify with, and admire for their strength, calmness, wisdom, or goodness. Twinship selfobjects sustain the self by providing an essential likeness of the self in another (Wolf, 1988). See Brown (2004, 2007) for a more detailed description and examples of these selfobject types. Overall, self psychology recognizes the fundamental importance of establishing a sense of self and then sustaining that self throughout life by forming relationships that will help to bring out, maintain, and strengthen the various aspects of the self (Wolf, 1988).

Animal Hoarding: Definition and Brief Literature Review

The definition of animal hoarding includes: 1) failure to provide minimal standards of care for the animals; 2) lack of insight about that failure; 3) denial of the consequences of that failure; and 4) obsessive attempts to maintain and even increase the number of animals in the face of these failures and deteriorating conditions (Patronek, 1999). The consequences of animal hoarding include starvation, illness, and death of animals, neglect of self and others, and household destruction (Patronek et al., 2009). Please see recent reviews of the literature by Patronek and Nathanson (2009), Nathanson (2009), and Arluke and Killeen (2009) for discussions of the complex and poorly understood etiology of, and treatment issues involved with, animal hoarding.

Animal hoarding is not yet listed as a sign of any specific psychological disorder and is not recognized as a clinical entity or psychiatric diagnosis (Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium [HARC], 2002). According to Arluke and Killeen (2009), the inability to come up with a single diagnosis may be the result of a number of possible factors: animal hoarders may suffer from multiple pathologies; a novel pathology may underlie their behavior; or too few animal hoarders have been studied to define their actual pathology. Another problem with trying to find a psychological model for animal hoarding is that animal hoarding appears to be a very heterogeneous behavior. Patronek, Loar, and Nathanson (2006) have proposed that three types of animal hoarders may exist: overwhelmed caregivers, rescuer hoarders, and exploiter hoarders. The psychology, etiology, and treatment for the three types could potentially be different.

Patronek and Nathanson (2009) provide an extensive review of the literature on animal hoarding. They compare and contrast animal hoarding with object hoarding, apply attachment theory as well as the literature of personality disorder and trauma, and add their own clinical experience to propose a developmental trajectory for animal hoarding. They highlight the issues of self-neglect, squalor, need for control, complicated grief, compulsive caregiving, dissociation, and parental abandonment/neglect/abuse as some of the many aspects important to understanding animal hoarding. They also point out that all these issues require further research to define their role in contributing to animal hoarding.

Self Psychology Applied to Animal Hoarding

There is no existing literature specifically applying self psychology to animal hoarding. Brown (2004) and Alper (1993) have applied the theory of self

psychology to companion animals as selfobjects. Brown (2007) used the theory of self psychology to design an interview to explore the types of selfobjects a companion animal fulfilled for 24 participants, many of whom rescued animals. She found that companion animals provided strong selfobject functions to the participants and that the type of selfobject relationship could be determined to be of a mirroring, idealized, or twinship nature from the interview data. Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory has been briefly mentioned as a possible theory to help in understanding the etiology of animal hoarding as well as a way to understand the animal hoarder's present dysfunctional attachments to animals (Arluke & Killeen, 2009; Patronek et al., 2009). There is no other literature applying one in-depth psychological theory to animal hoarding.

Self Psychology and Attachment Theory: Similarities

Attachment theory and self psychology have some conceptual common ground. Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2005) conducted several studies using components of Kohut's self psychology (Kohut, 1971), and they discuss how some concepts from self psychology are similar to ideas from attachment theory as developed by Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1991). First, both theories stress that what happens during infancy is critical to the development of a secure, cohesive self. The availability and responsiveness of parents or other caregivers is essential for the development of the self. During infancy, the self is immature and totally dependent on caregivers for soothing and self-cohesion. But through a process of empathic interactions with the mothering figure (or selfobject) the child develops the capacity for self-regulation of emotional states and becomes less dependent on others. When a mothering figure is absent, abusive, or inconsistent, the stage is set for lifelong issues in relating to others and/or psychopathology. Kohut (1971) describes the resulting pathologies in terms of unmet selfobject needs and the development of disorders of the self.

Self psychology and attachment theory are also similar in that they both state that the support from others in the environment is necessary throughout the life span (Banai et al., 2005). According to Kohut, people will always need external support to maintain a healthy sense of self (or narcissism) throughout life, especially during times of crisis, life transitions, or traumatic experiences. Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1991) also feel that attachment needs are present and important throughout the life span.

Another concept that the two theories share is the notion that the abilities to self-regulate emotions and to maintain self-esteem and self-cohesion are developed through a process involving interactions with significant others in

the environment (Banai et al., 2005). This process begins in infancy with the parents, and eventually the person becomes able to self-regulate internal states. Kohut (1971) calls this process "transmuting internalization." It is similar to Bowlby's account of the internalizations of positive interactions with others that lead to the formation of a sense of attachment security.

The Importance of Subjective Reality in Kohut's Self Psychology

According to Kohut's (1984) self psychology, the animal as selfobject provides an important function (such as self-cohesion) to the person. Whether or not the animal is actually demonstrating or feeling something, such as love, is not important. What is important is that the person *believes* he or she feels love from the animal. According to Kohut, the actual, objective reality of the situation is not necessarily a factor in the person's perception of the selfobject function. That perceived feeling of being loved may fulfill some essential psychological function, such as allowing the person to feel sustained, vitalized, or supported. An extreme example of this would be an animal selfobject who is dead but continues to fulfill some crucial selfobject function for the hoarder.

Some important aspect of the particular external "object" stirs an inner experience (feeling validated and connected) inside the person. The objective, physical aspects of a selfobject (whether a person or animal), would make little difference to the self or person. What matters would be the psychological functions that the selfobject fulfills for the person.

Following Kohut (1984), other self psychologists have argued that the selfobject is a real (not fantasized) aspect of another being and has a concrete anchoring in an intersubjective reality (see Tonnesvang, 2002). Kohut's original definition of a selfobject did not include this concept, however, and his definition will be used in this paper.

Self psychology can explain how hoarders may feel the animals are their essential or even primary reason for living, even though the animals themselves are in horrible health and may even be dead. In the case of one hoarder, an elderly man who hoarded 40 cats, it was discovered that he had 10 dead cats in a freezer in his basement. He explained that these were his favorite cats (S. LaFarge, personal communication, December 3, 2008). The animals were probably still providing a critical selfobject function for the man, regardless of their true state of being. It is possible that these favorite cats, even though dead, could be providing a mirroring selfobject function such as total acceptance for the animal hoarder. Furthermore, the hoarder might experience an intense sense of falling apart if the dead animals were removed.

This importance of subjective reality could explain how animal hoarders often feel they are saviors or saints on a rescue mission to save animals from euthanasia (Arluke & Killeen, 2009). Animal hoarders probably perceive the animals as being grateful or admiring the hoarder for saving them, even though they are being severely neglected. This mirroring function could give the hoarder the feeling of being a good and giving person despite the reality of the situation.

Mature versus Archaic Selfobjects

Kohut talks about archaic and mature selfobject relating, but he never completely defined the terms (Tonnesvang, 2002). The main differentiation between the two types of relating is the ability to empathize with the selfobjects and see them as independent others with needs and lives separate and different from one's own. Hagman (1997) refers to this as "self-centeredness" versus "other-centeredness" and goes on to say that the differentiation of the object from the self is fundamental to mature selfobject experiences and is the main factor differentiating mature and archaic ways of selfobject relating.

If people are relating to their companion animals as archaic selfobjects who are, more or less, extensions of themselves, they may be able to relate only in an anthropomorphic way. They would see the animals as part of themselves and be unable to empathize with how the animals really feel or to understand what the animals really need. And if they, themselves, are disordered in terms of self-care, it would be expected that they would be unable to perceive or care for the animals in an adequate way. People with archaic selfobject relationships can only imagine what they feel themselves, and what the animal feels is therefore only a projection of how they feel or how they expect the animal to feel.

One 55-year-old female animal hoarder, for example, began to hoard cats after she had a traumatic confrontation with her neighbor that frightened her. The neighbor threatened her, and she began to feel scared all the time. One day she noticed a kitten in the road who appeared scared. She took the kitten home. After that, she began to notice lots of kittens and cats who seemed scared. She said, "They are safe with me." The 31 intact cats in her apartment, however, forced her into bankruptcy, destroyed her apartment, and alienated family members and her boyfriend (S. LaFarge, personal communication, December 3, 2008). This woman was projecting her own fear onto the cats and then trying to soothe herself by making them "safe." Because she was stuck in an archaic way of relating, she was unable to see the reality of the suffering she was causing the animals.

Hagman (1997) outlines some of the defining differences between mature and archaic selfobjects. The following section will review Hagman's principles as applied to the animal hoarder.

The Experience of Relationship

Relating in terms of a mature selfobject would mean experiencing the other as a separate being. It would require the participation of the person in securing, using, and nurturing relationships with people or animals to meet selfobject needs. A person with archaic selfobject functioning would expect the relationship with the selfobject simply to happen, with no effort on their part.

Some hoarders passively accumulate animals (Patronek et al., 2006) either when animals just show up at their homes or are dropped off by people in the community. This kind of relating requires very little effort on the part of the animal hoarder.

Mature Confidence

Mature confidence in the selfobject experience with another is something that is learned. People learn to trust that the other person or animal will continue to meet their needs in spite of some failures, shortcomings, or uncertainties. The archaic selfobject relationship is just assumed. There is a naive confidence that the objects providing the selfobject experiences will always be there and never fail to meet the needs of the person.

This archaic mode of selfobject relating works out nicely for the animal hoarder. With a house full of animals, selfobject experiences being provided by them are always available. The animals are essentially captives and have no choice but to be there for the person, who can be confident that they will always be there, even if they are dead. For example, one hoarder said, "This is their world. They are conceived in my house, born in my bed, and die in my basement" (S. LaFarge, personal communication, December 3, 2008).

Flexibility of Function

Mature selfobject relating is characterized by flexibility in both level of need and how one goes about meeting those needs. Times of stress, loss, or frustration may intensify the need for selfobject experiences with others or even the need for archaic selfobject functions. A person with mature selfobject relating can find the people or animals to meet those selfobject needs during those times and can be flexible in how they get the needs met—i.e., they may get mirroring from one animal or strength from another, idealized, animal.

The person needing archaic selfobject experiences would be restricted by the specific needs of the core self. For example, if the person relied on twinship selfobject experiences for the likeness to themselves of a kind of soul mate, then they would only be comforted by animals who met that specific need.

The animal hoarder with archaic selfobject needs would rely on the animals to fulfill all selfobject needs at all times and would be unable to seek out other types of support. This could include an inability to use humans to provide selfobject functions. The hoarders may experience the animals as providing an all-or-nothing type of emotional support where they will fall apart or crumble without them.

Personal Agency

Achieving mature selfobject experiences requires an active role for the person in seeking out, nurturing, and maintaining selfobject responses from others. The maturely functioning person acts within a selfobject milieu to "make it happen." By contrast, the person functioning on an archaic level just expects to be the passive recipient of love and care from the selfobject milieu.

Again, this works out nicely for the animal hoarder. The animals as selfobjects are captives and relationships with them do not require the same effort as a relationship with a person might. The animal hoarder may feel little need to care for the animals, since they are there to fulfill the hoarder's needs and not vice versa.

Other Recognition

Kohut (1984) stresses that in mature selfobject relating, the other is experienced as a separate and distinct center of initiative. Hagman (1996) argues that the concept of recognition of the subjectivity of the other is perhaps the key aspect of mature development. The other is perceived as having a unique and differing perspective and center of experience.

In the archaic selfobject experience, the subjectivity of the other is only dimly perceived and plays little, if any, part in the experience of its key functions. In other words, a person relying on an animal for archaic selfobject needs would not see the animal as a separate being with thoughts, feelings, and needs of his or her own. The animal would be seen as being there simply to fulfill the needs of the person, regardless of the animal's true state of being. For the animal hoarder, this could mean that the animal is ill or has died but is still seen as being there to meet the hoarder's needs.

The Experience of Reciprocity

In mature selfobject relating, the recognition of the other as a separate self is an integral part of the experience, and the person or animal involved will reciprocate based on their assessment of the other's needs. There is a give-and-take process of mutual recognition and reciprocity. In archaic selfobject relating, however, the other person or animal is perceived as giving selflessly. The self of the other is not considered when archaic needs are being met. There is no mutual engagement. The exchange is one-sided. For example, the animal hoarder would expect to have his or her needs met by the animals, with no sense of obligation to meet the animals' needs.

The Capacity to be Empathic

Hagman (1997) explains that true empathy is an important characteristic of maturity. Mature empathy requires the experience of the other from both a subjective and an objective point of view. Hagman believes that mature selfobject experience involves a sense of empathic connection that involves a simultaneous recognition of self and other, characterized by cognitive and emotional sharing. True empathy is very limited or nonexistent in archaic selfobject relating. If animal hoarders are unable to recognize the otherness of the animal, they would certainly be unable to identify how that other would be feeling or thinking. The capacity to be empathic is obviously lacking in animal hoarders. They are most often surrounded by animals in various states of need and do not appear to recognize this. Their ability to recognize states of hunger, pain, suffering, and even death is seriously impaired.

Self-Transformation

Mature selfobject experience is transformational. By engaging with others in creative and unpredictable ways, we grow to include other-than-me experiences. Through our relationships with others who may be serving selfobject functions, our boundaries can expand, and we can include new elements in our self. On the other hand, archaic selfobject relating only serves to meet the needs of the self and does not allow for change. Animal hoarders relate in a limited and narrow way with the animals. The animals are used as objects to meet their needs. There is no growth or change occurring in these one-sided relationships.

Altruism

Self psychologists stress that the ability to offer to another the opportunity for a selfobject experience is the most developed capacity of mature selfobject

relating. This would mean an individual serving the needs of another because their emotional needs are perceived as having priority over his or her own. One example of this is the parent who puts his or her own needs aside to be the mirroring selfobject that the child may need at that moment. Another example of this is the psychotherapist who offers him or herself to a patient to create the opportunity for a healthy selfobject experience. Altruism is not possible for people functioning only at archaic levels of selfobject experience. To be altruistic requires the awareness of the other as well as empathy to perceive his or her needs.

Animal hoarders may attempt to appear altruistic by claiming to be an animal rescue or animal shelter organization. This, however, is only a facade that is quickly dispelled by a look into the true living conditions of the animals.

Animals and Selfobject Merger Needs

Another characteristic of individuals who are stuck in relating in archaic modes (such as lack of recognition of the otherness of the animal or an inability to empathize with the animal) is that they rely on merging with the selfobject to get their selfobject needs met. Wolf (1988) describes this type of person as one who can only receive confirmation of their sense of self by seeing the mirroring or idealized selfobject as being an extension of them. These merger needs are usually primitive mirroring selfobject needs to be totally one with the selfobject animal. But Wolf (1988) also mentions an idealized selfobject need that he describes as an intensification of the idealizing need that requires being one with the idealized selfobject. And finally, Kohut (1984) states that the merger needs can appear as any of the three selfobject types—mirroring, idealized, or twinship. They all have in common the need to merge with, or be one with, the selfobject.

Animals as selfobjects lend themselves to being good merger selfobjects. Relationships with animals leave more room for projection of a human's emotions. Animals are unable to disagree with a human's interpretation of how they feel or what they want. People can believe animals feel and think exactly like them whether or not they actually do. Humans are less likely to tolerate another person's inaccurate perception of themselves. This makes it easier to believe that an animal (vs. a human) is a soul mate, is one with the person, or is able to read the person's mind. Therefore, animals may create better merger selfobject experiences than humans do.

An example of a merger selfobject relationship is a hoarder who raised Irish wolfhounds. She talked to her therapist about how she would lie on the bed, back-to-back with a dog, and imagine they shared the same spine. In this

example, the hoarder is clearly deriving satisfaction from imagining being one with her dog (S. LaFarge, personal communication, November 23, 2008).

Disavowal: The Vertical Split

One often cited characteristic of animal hoarders is their use of denial or other methods of justification for their situation (Nathanson, 2009; Vaca-Guzman & Arluke, 2005) and the refusal to acknowledge that a problem exists (Nathanson, 2009; Patronek, 1999).

The following section describes one psychological mechanism—known as disavowal—that would account for the animal hoarder's apparent lack of awareness of his or her environment. It will also discuss how disavowal compares to other psychological mechanisms that might be involved.

Disavowal

Kohut (1966, 1971) first developed the terms *disavowal* and *the vertical split*, which were later elaborated by Goldberg (1999, 2000) and Silverstein (2007). Kohut originally used the terms to explain two aspects of narcissism—grandiosity and depression—that exist side by side but are incompatible. According to Kohut (1971), the vertical split involves "the side-by-side conscious existence of otherwise incompatible psychological attitudes *in depth*" (p. 177). In the vertical split, the person has conscious awareness of the other state but disavows it. Because disavowed mental content contradicts one's predominant self-image, it is kept apart from, but not out of, conscious awareness (Goldberg, 1999).

Goldberg (1999) expanded the concept of disavowal and the vertical split to include other disturbances beyond grandiosity and depression. He included other issues common to narcissistic disorders such as shoplifting, cross-dressing, some forms of infidelity, and binge eating as disavowed self states when they are uncharacteristic of a person's typical behavior and are concealed from most people. For example, a successful salesperson could be engaged in shoplifting. The person would be aware of what she is doing but would feel ashamed of that side of herself and actively hide it from others. The vertical split involves a stable, ingrained configuration of aberrant personality and behavior (Goldberg, 1999).

According to Goldberg (1999), people with disavowal do not know what propels the behavior, yet they understand that it is necessary and vital for them. Disavowal is not the same as the idea that affects may be isolated or walled off from thoughts. In addition, reality is not distorted. Disavowed

actions are not psychotic-like, and people are not unaware that the actions occur in reality. Rather, the meaning of that reality seems strangely unfamiliar (Basch, 1983-1984).

Disavowal and the vertical split may illuminate how an animal hoarder can appear to have two opposing parts of themselves. While they state that they are rescuing animals, for example, they are actually seriously neglecting and even killing them. According to HARC (2002), hoarders who were employed appeared to be able to live a double life, with coworkers never suspecting the true conditions in their homes until their homes were investigated by animal rescue authorities. Some hoarders may see themselves as animal saviors, while they know that they are providing insufficient care to the animals and actively hide the conditions from others. The animal hoarder may know that they have the urge to collect more animals and that they are neglecting them, but they do not know what propels the behavior. They do understand, however, that the behavior (animal hoarding) is necessary and vital to them.

Disavowal is different from repression, denial, or dissociation. Below is a brief description of each of these psychological mechanisms.

Repression

Repression is defined as a defense mechanism that keeps unacceptable impulses or ideas out of consciousness (Rycroft, 1973). Psychoanalytic theory indicates that the use of repression is accepted as a normal part of development and of adult personality (Schaffer, 1954). In general, people differ more in their selective use of the other defense mechanisms than they do in their reliance on repression. Repression appears to be built into all the other defenses and is therefore considered the basic defense. Everyone seems to expend some psychic energy keeping persisting and disturbing infantile strivings out of consciousness (Schaffer, 1954).

Repression is different from disavowal in that repression involves a horizontal split (Silverstein, 2007). This concept involves Freud's (1961) idea of a repression barrier where the person is ignorant of what is below the barrier, and the mental contents are inaccessible. In a horizontal split the impulses, conditions, or states are situated one on top of the other, and the person has no awareness of the one on the bottom (Kohut, 1971). For example, a person could be depressed and have the grandiosity repressed (or pushed out of conscious awareness). This person would have no awareness of the grandiose part of themselves. That would be an example of repression and a horizontal split. Repression does not always involve an incompatible aspect of a person. With disavowal and a vertical split, or side-by-side states, the person remains aware of both aspects of themselves.

An example of repression with an animal hoarder could be that the person has repressed feelings of hostility toward the animals for requiring medical attention that he or she cannot manage to obtain. The hostility would be below the repressive barrier, and the hoarder would be unconscious of this feeling.

Denial

Denial is a very basic unconscious defense mechanism. Like repression, denial eliminates mental contents from awareness. It is a tendency to deny painful sensations and facts (Fenichel, 1945). Anna Freud (1946) called this type of refusal to acknowledge displeasure in general "pre-stages of defense." Unlike the other defenses, denial is a defense against perceptions, and it is usually directed outward (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). For an animal hoarder, this might mean denial of the death of an animal. He or she may continue this denial with a fantasy that the animal is still alive and carry on as if the death has not occurred.

Fenichel (1945) explains that this wish-fulfilling denial of unpleasant realities is a very common occurrence in small children. As reality testing develops during maturity, it becomes more difficult or even impossible to use this wholesale falsification of reality. Attempts at denial in later stages of development have to fight against a more mature ability (by the ego) to perceive and remember accurately—for example, the animal did actually die. In Freudian theory, the stronger the ego (along with reality testing) becomes, the more a person relies on experience and memory, which slowly weaken the tendency to use denial. Only adults with weak egos continue to use denial (Fenichel, 1945).

In the case of a hoarder, this might be denial of the loss of an animal. The animal hoarder may not feel the loss of a lost or absent animal. He or she may deny the loss, thereby avoiding the feeling of sadness, and possibly replace the animal with another animal.

Dissociation

By contrast, dissociation is defined as the lack of integration of various parts of an experience such as thoughts, feelings, or images into the stream of consciousness (Carlson et al., 1993). Dissociation is often related to some sort of trauma. In the case of an overwhelming traumatic event such as abuse, rape, combat, or natural disaster, people may separate different aspects of the experience. They may not remember all components of the event. This separation protects the individual from being overwhelmed.

Dissociation can be a defense or a diagnosis. For example, at the time of a trauma, a person may use dissociation to block awareness of what is actually happening. This could be a healthy use of dissociation. But long-term use of dissociation to block out the traumatic event interferes with the work necessary to process the trauma and put it into perspective and can lead to impairment or distress and a diagnosis of dissociation (Spiegel, 1994).

With dissociation, the core self of the person is protected from the full impact of the trauma by remaining unaware of the split-off part, which might be memories, thoughts, or feelings related to the trauma. There can sometimes be some alteration in cognitive processes (Silverstein, 2007). Disavowal, by contrast, does not involve any disruption in cognitive processes, and the person remains aware of the split-off aspect.

Whether or not animal hoarders use dissociation can be assessed by use of standardized scales and/or structured interviews. Please see Briere and Armstrong (2007) for a review and discussion of the instruments used for psychological assessment of dissociation. There has been some evidence that there is a significant, positive correlation between dissociation and companion animal attachment in samples of college students (Brown & Katcher, 1997, 2001). A recent replication of the studies by Brown and Katcher failed, however, to find a significant correlation between companion animal attachment and dissociation (Green & Green, 2010). Green and Green did find a significant positive correlation between companion animal attachment and absorption—a psychological trait that is correlated with dissociation and hypnotizability. It is usually assessed by questions measuring how deeply involved a person gets while reading, watching a movie, driving, etc. Further research involving direct assessment of dissociation in animal hoarders will be necessary to clarify this relationship.

An example of dissociation by an animal hoarder would be that he or she felt traumatized by a bad fight between the animals where one of the animals was killed. The hoarder might dissociate from the emotions of the event but still be able to relate what happened on a factual level.

Conclusions

The primary question that can be answered by these self psychology concepts is this: how is it possible for animal hoarders to insist on their love and devotion to their animals and yet be severely neglecting and even killing them at the same time? The answer is that animal hoarders: 1) can be fulfilling powerful selfobject needs from the animals regardless of the animals' actual states of

being; 2) rely on self-centered archaic selfobject relating whereby they are incapable of true empathy with the animals; 3) view the animal selfobjects as being merged with themselves and therefore sharing their thoughts and feelings; and 4) could be using disavowal or the vertical split to keep the true nature of squalor, illness, and death out of their day-to-day thinking.

Understanding the concepts discussed above may help therapists and others empathize with the animal hoarder and could guide interventions. For example, one goal of psychotherapy for people with merger selfobject needs would be to help patients develop the ability to give up the merger needs and be sustained by more mature forms of relating such as the empathic attunement coming from selfobjects of adult life (Kohut, 1984).

Self psychology as a primary form of psychotherapeutic treatment for animal hoarding is not recommended, however. The techniques for self psychological treatment are in some ways similar to other long-term, psychoanalytically oriented techniques (e.g., use of free association and interpretation) and tend to require intelligent, insightful, motivated, and cooperative patients. According to Patronek and Nathanson (2009), animal hoarders tend to be suspicious of authorities, have little motivation to comply with treatment or pay for services, and have many cognitive impairments such as lack of insight; poor abstract reasoning; difficulty understanding cause and effect; poor problem-solving skills; and problems organizing, planning, and executing a task. Animal hoarders often require the supervision of a parole office to maintain contact with a psychotherapist and often see any counseling as "an unjustified intrusion into their 'peaceable kingdom'" (Patronek et al., 2009). Furthermore, animal hoarding is often ego-syntonic—i.e., not considered to be a problem by the hoarder—and a secretive behavior for the hoarder (Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000). Therefore, psychotherapeutic techniques where the psychotherapist takes a more active role would be warranted. There are no published data on types of psychotherapeutic intervention and treatment for animal hoarders (Patronek et al., 2009).

The idea that merger selfobject relationships may be most relevant to animal hoarders is based on the idea that many animal hoarders talk about the wish to be merged with, or at one with, their animals. That information comes from anecdotal reports from psychotherapists working with animal hoarders in clinical settings (S. LaFarge, personal communication, December 3, 2008 and J. Nathanson, personal communication, September 18, 2009). It would be useful if more such clinical case studies could be systematically collected and reported.

It is quite possible that animal hoarders were functioning at more mature levels of selfobject functioning before the onset of the hoarding behavior.

Patronek et al. (2006) have noted that there are often traumatic triggering events, such as a loss of a stabilizing relationship, economic hardship, or major health issues, which can play a precipitating role in animal hoarding. Furthermore, this is sometimes followed by a response of complicated grief (Nathanson, 2009; Patronek et al., 2009). Complicated grief, which is also known as traumatic or pathological grief, is defined by Cutcliffe (2002) as "the failure to return to the individual's pre-bereavement level of emotional well-being or performance.... [E]motional, behavioral and spiritual dysfunction persists" (Cutcliffe, 2002, p. 33). These issues may cause regression to more primitive modes of psychological functioning, such as archaic selfobject functioning and relying on a primitive defense such as denial. These primitive modes of psychological functioning might also be consistent with organic brain impairment or some other psychiatric condition. Patronek (1999) states that one quarter of his sample of hoarders had to be institutionalized or placed in guardianship or a supervised living situation, which suggested some sort of mental deterioration.

The concepts of mature versus archaic selfobject relationships can be applied in a more general sense to help clarify the phenomenon of bond-breaking behaviors like neglect, abuse, or abandonment. Animal hoarders are probably not the only ones engaged in bond-breaking behavior who are lacking empathy and mature self-selfobject relationships. Further research would be needed to see whether archaic selfobject relationships are typical of people who neglect, abuse, or abandon animals.

One problem with differentiating the vertical split and disavowal from repression, denial, or dissociation is that these terms are not entirely mutually exclusive. A single person could be using all these defenses around differing issues. For example, an animal hoarder could be using disavowal to deal with compulsive animal collecting. The individual may consciously know it is going on but have the experience walled off from his or her sense of self. The person may have repressed painful childhood memories of people taking animals away, in which case, these events would not be remembered. The person could also be in denial that the authorities have demanded a reduction in the number of animals . The individual might have some memory of someone saying this but feel that it didn't pertain to him or her. And finally, the death of an animal may cause a dissociative response where the animal hoarder is now split off from the emotional reaction to the death. The person may be able to talk about the death but be unaware of an emotional reaction to it because it is dissociated.

One way truly to understand the underlying and complex psychological mechanisms at play with animal hoarders would be to have extensive inter-

views and/or therapy sessions with them. This would require cooperation as well as the ability to verbalize these abstract psychological concepts. Given that most animal hoarders are not likely to cooperate with authorities, are not motivated to seek help, and are secretive about their hoarding (Frost et al., 2000), getting cooperation in psychotherapy would probably be difficult. There may, however, be some cases of psychotherapy mandated for animal hoarders that could be illuminating if the therapist could evaluate whether or not these self psychological concepts seem to fit the individuals. I hope this paper will help stimulate further exploration of how self psychology can provide a window into the psychology of the animal hoarder.

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