Taking the hate: neurobiological and metaphorical representation

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States of Terror: Working with Hatred, Violence and Trauma Today

Abstract

A central problem in working with fostered and adopted children is the difficulty of taking in something new, when the taking in process itself is compromised or damaged. In considering this question I look at the relationship between representation & change in work with an adopted boy whom I will call Dan, which was pervaded by powerful hostility. A beaten dog came to represent part of Dan that stayed outside the therapeutic relationship, and snarled when approached. This arrangement perpetuated neglect and often felt like therapeutic impasse (Rosenfeld, 1987).

In this paper I investigate ways through the impasse involving re-presentation, in both the neurobiological and the metaphorical sense, as a means of development. I use clinical material to look at the change mechanism of psychoanalytic psychotherapy in work with extreme states of mind. Through re-presentation of old terrors in the context of the new relationship, new neuronal and psychic connections could be made. We could thereby progress in the transference from Bion's (1962) primitive inchoate dread through symbolic equation (Segal, 1957) towards the beaten dog and other representations, and thus (Klein, 1930) the possibility of a restored inner world, although precariously established and often felt to be under fire.

Introduction

First, a little glimpse of Dan:

On coming into the room, Dan immediately began to kick the football around the room aggressively. He seemed furious, talking about looking forward to something after school in a confused and confusing way that felt completely at odds with the mood here. He got more and more manic, sending the football hurtling against the window blinds. It felt very hostile.Then he got the marbles and started to throw them, smiling a forced and rather chilling smile as he did so. I intervened here, and he substituted playdoh. He seemed excited rather than angry now, getting carried away. He threw a lump of playdoh at the light.

Working with Dan evoked intense emotion: it was exhausting, frustrating, confusing, and at times infuriating. Luckily he did evoke tenderness in me too. Dan's background was one of severe neglect. He and his siblings were passed around in the family until at three, Dan was taken into foster care for a year before being placed for adoption. His adoptive family found his behaviour challenging to the point of unmanageable. He would attack his parents and trash his bedroom. He would hurt himself; pinching and kicking himself and digging his nails into his skin. After a stop/start series of interventions interrupted by funding cuts, he was offered psychotherapy at our local NHS trust.

During the first phase of therapy, represented by the session material above, it was very hard for Dan to stay in the room with me. Sometimes this turned into a game of hide and seek, but often it felt more extreme; for example, he would make a dash for the fire exit or switch all the lights off in the corridor, or push the emergency call button. There was evidently a feeling of danger for Dan in connection with being taken into the room with me. If we were to begin to make connections between the world of his past and that of his present, we needed to explore the qualities of who I was for him with great caution on my part and courage on his.

As child psychotherapists, we are well acquainted with states of terror; we work with hatred, violence and trauma on a daily basis. I think we therefore have a contribution to make to the wider dialogue in society about these states of mind - how they are fostered, and how they can be transformed. What I propose to do in this paper is to revisit elements of psychoanalytic theory that address extreme states of mind, on a continuum with psychosis, in relation to work with Dan, in which embodied hostility was at risk of holding him hostage in a climate of fear and preventing his development.

Freud wrote about how patients suffer from reminiscences, memories which "persist for a long time with astonishing freshness and with the whole of their affective colouring [but] unlike other memories of their past lives, are not at the patients' disposal". (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895:7). They are embodied memories, experienced truth that is unrepresented, unrepresentable in fact, in the context of the patient's lives, other than by the symptom. We talk about presenting symptoms; perhaps trauma is traumatic to the extent that it is unrepresentable in relation to what we know, though continually presenting and re-presenting itself in the flashbacks of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The continual present of PTSD seems to need mediation, by representation in another relationship.

I would like to examine the way in which transformative representation of extreme states of mind happens relationally. I will look at the body-mind process in work with Dan through which inchoate terrors began to be re-presented in the context of the therapeutic relationship, to take shape, first concretely and then in imaginative representation. In this way, eventually his fears could become explicit relatable features of the emotional landscape we inhabited together, rather than an implicit all-pervading way of experiencing the world: represented, rather than continually re-presenting themselves.

I hope to show how the clinical process in Dan's case and others like it is both neurobiological and metaphorical; biology and art meeting in the re-presentation of terrors in the transference. It seems to me central to the problem of working with hatred, violence and trauma that neurobiological

regulation and the capacity for psychic development are intimately linked, achieved through the making of an embodied relational story that can contain and survive monsters. Bion's theory of alpha function teaches us that bodily terrors are taken in a modified, survivable form into the mind through representation in the mind of the mother. Consequently not just the event but this reflective relationship to experience can then be internalised. Crucially, both the monster and the bodily responses of hate and fear need re-presentation in and then representation by the therapeutic relationship, so that they can be internalised in a modified form, along with the implicit relationship to experience.

For reasons of time and space, I will try and follow one strand of representation, inevitably leaving out much else that was relevant in the twists and turns of the long path of this therapy, which I have written about elsewhere (Sutton, 2014).

The abandoned dog and the show

There was a little soft toy dog in Dan's therapy box, which would often be thrown and kicked around in sessions, much like the football I have mentioned, though this felt more personal, more cruel. The dog seemed to represent the kicked around part of him, with which he would not explicitly identify (Anna Freud, 1936). If there was any kicking around, and for him there certainly was, he wanted to be on the kicking side, not the kicked. Furthermore, in his adoptive home, there was a much-loved dog, who seemed to provide his mother with a less ambivalent love object than Dan himself. So he had all kinds of reasons to hate this little dog. He may also have been sparing me the full force of his hatred (Balbernie, personal communication, 2013) - the dog was getting it, instead of me. Eventually in our work together, the idea of rescue would surface and it seemed to be linked to the need for a cover-up show. In this the dog motif was central. It accrued symbolic complexity over our work together, representing neglect and abuse, and eventually the possibility of transformation.

I once to my shame inadvertently called him by his family dog's name, which is similar to his own. I thought of the sharp pang of shame as mine, but then wondered if I may also have been picking up on something unrepresented, the non-verbal cues alongside his smiling disavowal. Perhaps it related to the 'remarkable thing' (Freud, 1915) of unconscious-to-unconscious communication, that we might now call empathy. This is substantiated in Schore's (2003) right-brain-to-right-brain channel of communication, allowing us to feel undercurrents running below the words.

Perhaps there was a connection between this pang of shame and the pervading hostility. Maybe hostility was a potential development - the hope of someone else being to blame for the badness? There are clues that the attribution of blame/responsibility was foggy early on. For example, later in the session above,

He got a blanket, and put it over his head, walking towards me in monster mode, saying strange words, then asking in a monster voice, 'Who are you?' I tried to voice his fears about who I might be, this strange lady who said strange things. I then worried that putting it into words made it more frightening for him. Perhaps it did, for he then tried to put the blanket over my head, which I prevented. He opened the cupboard and climbed inside. I said he wanted to hide himself away - maybe it was very scary thinking about the monster. As he curled himself onto the top shelf with its hard edges, it felt horrible.

The emotional flavour of the being shut away was complex, involving a feeling of horrible punishment, but also a protective impulse, though whether this was directed towards himself or me was hard to distinguish. Perhaps the person he really wanted to punish, or rather, needed to hold responsible, was the monstrous me in the transference, as representing the qualities of his early experience. I hesitated to take this up, for fear of triggering his fears about what kind of monster I might turn out to be. My omission left him with the hatred, and furthermore perhaps, with the reinforced feeling that the relationship with his object could not survive the direct force of his hostility.

There is an element of surviving this in the session implicitly, in that I was still available to him after his having thrown marbles at me earlier, but I did not explicitly accept the force of his hatred towards me until some time later in the therapy, when I think he found it helpful.

For some time, the vulnerability of Dan's kicked dog stayed mainly outside the therapeutic relationship, while inside it he swung between re-presenting the chaos and hostility of his early world and showing me the rather manic second skin (Bick, 1963) performance he had developed to survive it. In the first weeks and months of therapy, the dog concretely took a kicking, and it was clear that somebody needed to. The intensely persecutory nature of what it felt like to be seen - seen as responsible for the badness, I think - was represented by a vicious saw later in the session I have quoted above:

A stolen car was pursued by police, and went to hide in a wooden play house. Dan piled on two big cushions and two blankets for further protection. Even this wasn't enough; the police car had the helicopter on its side, which had a saw that cut through the cushions and blankets to get to the hiding place. It felt vicious. I said there seemed to be absolutely nowhere safe for this little car to hide, and, feeling nervous and unsure whether naming this would be helpful or not, I tried to link it to what had happened in our session, how frightened he may have been about what I "saw". I suggested that he may feel that what I saw was a very bad boy who threw things, and not a boy who felt scared sometimes. Then he said he needed the loo, and I felt I'd overdone it.

The difficulty of processing fears with such a quality of imminent danger is apparent. In keeping my comments in the play, I could seem to be abrogating responsibility. In naming my role in his fears, explicitly representing the badness myself, I could exacerbate his terror and trigger a primitive response, bypassing his prefrontal cortex, cutting out thought before action, and directly activating the fright response of his amygdala, adapted as it was for survival in a hostile environment. What I tried to do was to walk a narrow tightrope, which hinted at a representative link with the session, but identified

the fear and not the monstrous badness that was felt to cause it - which I experienced in the room as the viciousness of the saw. He immediately needed to leave the room at that point. Even beginning to approach the nature of it felt inflammatory. When you have been that frightened, you do not want to be reminded of it - and yet it inescapably infuses your body until it can be mediated by someone else. I think to some extent, the dog helped with this. It seemed to represent the kicking he had experienced in his early world, and put him in a relation to it of some agency, instead of helplessness, along the lines of Anna Freud's Identification with the Aggressor (1936) or a more aggressive version of Freud's (1920) grandson's cotton reel game.

However, Dan's attacks also had a communicative function. In Bion's investigation of the relationship between awareness and psychosis, he suggests that the psychotic mind is dependent on the “minute splitting of all that part of the personality that is concerned with awareness of internal and external reality, and the expulsion of all these fragments so that they enter into or engulf their objects” (Bion, 1957: 61). My interest here is in the communicative rather than the punitive or destructive element in this. Even evacuation is a communication of sorts potentially, depending not only on the intention of the patient/infant, but, crucially for our theme, on the response of the object. Dan's hurling of faecalesque playdoh around the room was both evacuative, destructive and communicative - he was (potentially) showing me: this is what it feels like!

In Attacks on Linking (1959) Bion no longer sees projective identification as a defensive phantasy expulsion; what emerges is a process involving two minds – fragments are ejected as a means of communication, so that they can be investigated in a personality strong enough to contain them, for eventual representation at a more opportune time. After six months' work, Dan wanted to use string as a rope to swing on after attacking the room in world war two as he put it, perhaps as a way of representing his question about whether I was strong enough to hold him, and survive his attacks. I said I thought he wanted (I should have said needed) me to be strong enough to hold him, even if he attacked the room in world war two. Joseph (1978) has

written about the need for the therapist to contain powerful communications of emotion for quite some time and explore their meaning internally before returning them to the patient. Alvarez (2012) has highlighted the therapeutic risks of returning them too soon. On this occasion, perhaps I had waited and endured world war two long enough; he seemed relieved, hiding at the end and seeming pleased to be found.

Eventually we had to move to another clinic, and during this period, the dog began to be used differently. It came and went between sessions with him. He would cheerfully throw it into the air and catch it as he came down the corridor to sessions, more playfully now, in charge of it as a transitional object. The sessions were tricky, but less chaotic and sinister.

In Marilynne Robinson's beautiful book, Lila, about the life and mind of a young girl growing up out of a damaging childhood, Lila begins to put questions to a preacher in her mind. She finds: "This kind of thinking made a change in her loneliness, made it more tolerable for her" although "she knew how dangerous that could be". The idea of a conversation with someone who would want to get to know, who could bear not to be trusted, even to be avoided, seems to have made loneliness a state of mind, rather than "just how her body felt" (Robinson, 2014:34). It may be that Dan's use of the dog at this point was made possible because he could use his relationship with me as a place to first show and then see the badness, rather than live with it as just the way his body felt.

There was still active hostility, but it felt less pervasive, and more directly aimed at me. At this stage in the work, when Dan was crouching high on some shelves and throwing anything he could reach at me, it felt less about rage or fear and more about stuckness. I encouraged him to think with me what might be going on. He answered crossly: “No! This is when you tell me what I’m showing you!” I could not help but smile, and said I thought perhaps he could help me with that now. He did not agree, but he did climb down and stop throwing things, and we talked about how much he hated me sometimes. It felt like a huge relief to him to get that out in the open between

us, but I think it was only possible because of the "tell me what I'm showing you" relationship, where hostility could be represented, not just re-presented.

His cross remark showed that he did seem to have internalised the idea of representation as a new way-of-being-with (Stern, 1998). My telling him what I thought he was showing me seemed sometimes - when I could manage the right communicative musicality (Malloch, 2000) - to make the difference between meaning and meaninglessness and function as a form of regulation when emotions were extreme.

However, it was not until two years into the work that he used the symbol of a dog to convey powerful feelings of hurt and abandonment, and for the first time, the dawning hope of a sustained compassionate response. I had been a few minutes late for this session, and had kept him waiting.

He told me Thursday was going to be a sad day - his dog was ‘getting it cut off’. I thought of Dan’s own emerging manliness. I asked why, and he said he was humping everything. Very soon, he started to tell me about a sad, abandoned dog that he’d seen in a hot country, and how he dreamt about him and wanted to go and rescue him. I wondered aloud if the two dogs might be linked in his mind, the one that humps everything, and the one that is abandoned. It was a bit like how I was late, just when he was wanting to see me.

We talked for some time about the pain of the abandoned dog, until Dan shook his head and said not to talk about him any more. ‘Too painful and sad?’ I asked, and he said yes, he hated to think of it. I agreed that it was very painful to think about - maybe he needed me to just keep it in my mind? He said yes, but went back to the subject, and the practicalities of taking care of him. This felt like something new in our sessions, and I was heartened. He pictured himself, first alone when he was older, and then with mum and dad as back-up, going to find him and any other dogs who were abandoned, to rescue them and give them a home and proper food. He said not to talk about it any more. There was a pause, and then he said, ‘but I think about him at

night'. We said nothing for a moment, and I felt we were both picturing the poor dog, and feeling the sadness of it. He said he had barbed wire marks on him. I thought of the hurt, abandoned dog in Dan, and said he felt the marks of cruelty on him were still there.

The idea of rescue had surfaced, and we seemed by this stage in the work to be able to feel the sadness of the abandoned dog together, although it was painful, and could also talk about my disappointing him in a more regulated, less explosive way. However, it seemed to link to the need for a show. Dan went on to take out a picture he had drawn, in which he was lead singer in a stadium performance. He added the dog, high in the air above the stage. I thought of going from abandoned to on high, zero to hero, as it were.

His attempts to celebrate the dog in a compensatory way may have had shades of omnipotence about it, placing him up there above the stage, but it felt a very different place from the chaos of world war two or the persecution of the vicious saw. He went on to add an easter egg near the stage, with zigzag patterns based on an old thunder and lightning drawing of his.

The dog motif in this session seemed to be used to exemplify first the cruel neglect, then a dawning sense of hope of a compassionate response. We were able then to think about the isolation of the show, which has been his way of countering the neglect, and then there seemed to come a more real sense of wanting something joint, which brought joyful possibilities, the easter egg with its transformed stormy patterns. We could both feel the beauty of the egg, and I asked if he was proud of it. He said in my mind it was something to be proud of, but for him it was just natural.

This seemed to represent a growing capacity for emotional regulation through the new relational meaning offered in our relationship: not you are bad but you are cross with me because I let you down. His wild stormy feelings had been re-presented to me but also represented through our relationship and survived between us, and so now they were less terrifying in his own mind; they had not destroyed everything in their wake. There was the potential for

something new between us in his mental landscape, represented by the easter egg, and also by drawings he began to do of desert landscapes including "a quiet volcano" and streams of water. The possibility of new life could be represented between us, perhaps because he had been able to re-present in our relationship his early world with its cruelty and shame, and find a new relation to it in its representation in my mind and in our relationship.

I would like to turn now to a discussion of psychoanalytic theory in relation to extreme states of mind and representation or the lack of it, and touch on the link with neurobiology.

Discussion

In conceiving psychoanalysis as a mechanism of change, Freud began by noticing what the body was expressing in hysterical symptoms.

> We might perhaps suppose that the patient had formed an association between her painful mental impressions and the bodily pains which she happened to be experiencing at the same time, and that now, in her life of memories, she was using her physical feelings as a symbol of her mental ones. (1895:144)

His link between bodily pains and painful mental impressions prefigures Hebb's law (1949) by which neurons that fire together, wire together, creating neural networks of associated impressions, ideas and feelings. Freud's definition of trauma is that which pierces the protective shield of the mental apparatus; there is no mental schema, no representation. He suggests that patients suffering from trauma "are more concerned with not thinking of it" (Freud, 1924: 282) - perhaps less through repression than through dissociation. However, despite the ego's attempts to withdraw from indigestible reality in the service of maintaining some kind of social functioning, in psychoses and in PTSD the reality of the trauma seems to break through the ego's disavowal.

Bucci (2011) suggests that dissociations occur in response to events that are extremely painful, experienced as threats to life or to the organization of the self. If the caregiver is the source of the traumatic experience, avoidant dissociation is inevitable. In a disorganised attachment where the caregiver is frightened or frightening, the child needs to avoid knowing the source of the extreme pain - for Dan, the identity of the monster - in order to go on with life, because of physical and emotional dependence on the caregiver.

Once this dissociation is wired in, it becomes the symptom that prevents change. Siegel alerts us to the brain's capacity "to represent, in the moment, patterns of activity in which direct influences from the past are encoded…the organization of memory and the brain's function as an anticipation machine enable it to "represent the future" (1999: 304). We 'know' what we are seeing/experiencing; we have seen/experienced it before[1]. Furthermore, when this kind of implicit knowledge is survival-related, it is prioritised.

Freud's was a one-person psychology, and later thinkers of course, Bion and Winnicott particularly, developed his theory to include the mind of the (m)other as formative. Freud's concept of repression excludes what is unacceptable to part of the self, but Bion's and Winnicott's theories go further in looking at the derivation of such a prohibition. If there is no such thing as a baby (Winnicott, 1960), developmentally speaking, only a mother-baby dyad, we have the roots not just of internalised objects (Klein, 1959) but of relationships too (Fairbairn, 1949) and qualities of experience (Bion, 1963), which Stern (1998) has called ways-of-being-with. Another way of seeing repression is that unacceptable aspects of experience go unrepresented *in that primary relationship.* The prohibitive relationship is then internalised, so that internal awareness is not possible, either, despite the efforts of the nervous system to express the nature of the felt experience. Something about the experience is incompatible with the received representation of the (m)other, or perhaps the relationship with her. At a more extreme point on the

[1] For example, see the impossible elephant image, widely available on the internet.

continuum, psychosis might be the result of an experience incompatible with any coherent representation of the relationship.

Perhaps psychosis then can be understood as a failure of representation in the face of extreme experience. Symptoms of psychosis overlap with those of a post-traumatic state of mind. In fact the British Psychological Society recently published Understanding Psychosis (2014), which states:

> Indeed there is no way of clearly separating 'psychotic' experiences ... from problems resulting from trauma which might attract diagnoses such as 'post-traumatic stress' or 'personality disorder'.

Perhaps at the root of the violence, hatred and terror we are considering today is desperation for someone to take Bion's nameless dread, Winnicott's fear of falling forever, the feeling that terrors cannot be made sense of, belong to no relational context that might give them meaning. Holding someone responsible for the fear, having someone to take the hate and represent the object in the terms of the transference, to take compassionate responsibility for the failures of holding, seems to offer a way forward, provided careful attention is paid to what the patient can bear, "a piecemeal step at a time" (Alvarez, 2012: 20), through the new qualities of the way-of-being-with offered by the new relationship.

We seem to need another mind to help us move from re-presenting extreme states of mind to representation at one remove from the experience, so that we can find a relation to it, rather than be trapped in a repetition of a past in the present. I have mentioned Stern's concept of new "ways-of-being-with" as a possible way forward. He sees these as emergent properties of the nervous system and the mind, making use of multiple representations of lived experience. "It is now accepted that internal representations develop epigenetically through successive developmental states" (Blatt, Quinlan, & Chevron, 1990), which means that change can begin to happen internally, through implicit experience. Clinical experience with Dan and others like him, though, suggests that there needs to be representation of the old order in the new relationship, otherwise the new experience is just the old re-presented,

regardless of new possibilities because of their inherent danger to a child whose system has been adapted to red alert.

Pally's work on memory supports this view. In writing about the reconstructive properties of memory processing, she describes how what is later remembered "is constructed on the spot", together with all the sensory and emotional impressions of the present moment, and is not an exact replica of what happened in the past. "All the neural elements involved in the processing of events... serve as new information to be stored as additional memory traces of the event" (Pally, 1997: 1229). These new neural elements include the qualities of the present relationship, including a representation of the search for meaning, Bion's getting to know (1962: 47).

We are profoundly social, profoundly meaning-making creatures. The two are inter-linked; we seek meaning through contact with others that establishes the story of who we are, of who we need to be in that particular social setting in order to find a place to belong. When traumatic early experience like Dan's has failed to produce a coherent story, and/or produced a story in which we are the source of the badness - inevitably provoking conflict with the fact of our own existence - there needs to be a new relational story that incorporates hatred and fear with a new representation of badness as a dynamic quality rather than a personal attribute. Unless and until this happens, the symptom in search of meaning continues to present itself.

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