

Facilitating Change: Boundaries and the Human-Nature Dialectic

Marianne Spitzform

Abstract

The author examines the relationship between man, nature and the tightness' of the boundaries of the species. The individual relates to family and community, as a set of individuals from which it derives its integrity, and self-awareness. Expand the boundaries and 'a way to open new possibilities for exploring human culture and its relationship with nature. The classical psychoanalysis has explored the cultural world as separate from the outside. But the individual and the group are placed in the broader context of non-human world.

Keywords: group, nature, boundaries, change, ecosystem

Nature, broadly defined as the non-human world, is subject to human manipulations such as fragmentation of ecosystems, loss of wildlife habitat and the effects of air and water pollution. Our capacity to both see and not see is vexing. My premise is this: the extent to which we avoid responsibility for our part in living unsustainably on planet earth rests on the degree of impermeability between individual and group and our inflexibility in altering focus from one to the other, particularly across species boundaries. I will explore the relationship of the individual to the group, not in the sense of group psychoanalysis, but rather, questioning the process by which our group affiliations are constricted or enlarged. The individual, enclosed by the membrane we call our skin, relates to a panoply of others - dyads, family, and community – all collections of individuals, yet taking on their own integrity, a kind of 'selfhood.' My primary interest is in asking what conditions facilitate the shift of what I will call the boundaries of consideration(1). What are the circumstances – intrapsychic, interpersonal and transpersonal – that allow an enlargement of the sphere of our concern, that permit an extension of our sense of participation to a larger group, especially when that group comprises species other than our own? In writing here about the psychological conditions that might be usefully considered with regard to our relationship with the natural world, my hope is to be provocative. I see this effort as in no way exhaustive or static. Expanding the boundaries of consideration is simply one way to open to new possibilities as we explore the interface between human culture and its embeddedness in nature. Let's consider an example. After years of study and public hearings, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recently recommended that grizzly bears be "re-introduced" to the mountainous Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness which encompasses a large region at the border of Western Montana and the Idaho panhandle. This proposal is similar to the recent successful re-introduction of the grey wolf to Yellowstone National Park. Both wolves and grizzly bears were removed from these ecosystems by human

hunting. The Governor of Idaho immediately filed a lawsuit to stop the process, and on the Montana side of the Wilderness, where I live, the fear that bears will wander into the valley, threatening the lives of humans, especially children, once again came to the fore. So here we have an image of nature as irredeemably separate, and nature as the ominous, threatening Other. I want to use this example to 1) think about the individual, the group and nature in psychoanalytic theory and 2) consider ways in which psychoanalytic theory may be of use in the context of degradation of the natural world, and alternatively, restoration of nature's processes upon which individuals and groups have had negative impacts.

Pines (1998), after providing Geertz's definition of a person as *<<a bounded, unique, more or less integrated center of awareness, emotions, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole. . . .>>* has posed a provocative question: *<<would this description not also apply to certain types of groups?>>*. Is nature as a whole, or its component parts, experienced as group? Do citizens of the Bitterroot Valley who fear for their children, relate to grizzly bears as malevolent creatures, hungry and quarrelsome, who mean them harm, as a group? What are we to make of this tendency to 'read' fearful and aggressive intent to the other, in this case bear? It seems apparent, at least in this example, that the tendency to tighten or constrict the sense of 'self' to the individual, or to the group of our own species is most likely to be expressed under conditions of perceived threat. Thus the residents of Idaho and Montana who oppose the restoration of grizzly bears to the ecosystem speak for the group of humans who feel endangered by this possibility. And they remind us that the threat is not only corporeal, but financial. Guides and outfitters, for example, will be required to adopt more stringent and initially costly methods of storing food and handling game carcasses when in the backcountry. So, by what means do we determine our group of reference? How and when do we experience ourselves as limited to the corporeal body of the individual, or in contrast, as a participating member of the corporeal body, say, of the earth. In fact, it appears that we humans do treat non-human animals as groups. For example, the Montana Stockgrowers Association has opposed both the re-introduction of grizzly bears into the Selway-Bitterroot and earlier did the same with regard to wolves in both Yellowstone and central Idaho. Members of the Association are concerned about grizzly bears killing livestock. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, projections indicate that 50-110 years in the future, at a population level of 280 grizzly bears, yearly livestock losses to depredation by bears could range from 4-8 cattle and 5-44 sheep. Livestock losses in the first few decades are anticipated to be minimal until the bear population increases appreciably. Yet such facts do not reassure many in the agricultural community. While Geertz's definition: *<<a bounded, unique, more or less integrated center of awareness, emotions, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole. . . .>>* is difficult to apply to the group of re-introduced bears in its entirety, what does seem plausible is that we humans view a group of animals as in some way "organized into a distinctive whole" with intention – in this case, to prey on livestock. How does this happen psychologically (over and above facts about actual,

and obviously limited, predation) and conversely, what are the psychological underpinnings of a response that sees the group of bears as more than predators?

I will use personal experience, as it seems important that we concern ourselves with the reality of individual/group/ nature boundaries as lived, and not merely in theory. I live within a mile of the Bitterroot Mountains close to the confluence of the Clark Fork and Bitterroot Rivers on five acres of valley bottom. Two years ago I was awakened at 3:30 AM by the braying of my guard donkey, notifying me of a predatory attack on the Shetland sheep that share her pasture. I interrupted the attack, which was shrouded by fog, sure only of the fact that my flashlight beam met a single pair of eyes. The bite wounds were deep, and the veterinarian suggested they were made by cougar. Tracks in mud were consistent with this hypothesis. In the context of grizzly re-introduction it is not lost on me that it could be a bear attacking sheep next time. Am I in favor of re-introduction? Yes. Do I want my sheep injured or killed? No. I reconcile the apparent contradiction by expanding the boundaries of consideration. By this I mean that to stop at the level of my corporeal safety, or the safety of the animals in my care would be to miss alternative boundaries of consideration. This requires that I balance benefit (and sometimes risk) to myself as individual, to society, and the ecosystem. But which society? This is, in essence, a question of shifting focus from individual to group. The society of grizzly bears in the North American continent includes the island of bears remnant in Yellowstone National Park, now genetically isolated and therefore doomed to eventual extinction. Biologists anticipate that bears re-established in the Selway-Bitterroot will eventually mingle with Yellowstone bears, and facilitate genetic viability. Thus, I can shift to the boundary of my relationship with the population of Northern Continental Divide grizzly bears from my concern with the potential loss of life of my sheep or my neighbor's children. To extend the boundary further I can investigate predator-prey relationships within the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem, and the contribution of a predator such as the grizzly bear to ecosystem health. Concern with health at this scale requires different capacities than the restrictive concern about sheep or individual human health. Classical psychoanalytic theory portrays human nature as inherently competitive and aggressive. This narrow reading of human nature can be utilized to focus upon the individual, which in this discussion, would mean a constricted, impermeable boundary of consideration (protect humans, protect sheep, no grizzlies). As Sheldon Roth notes(1999): *<<Classical psychoanalysis spent many years engaged in exploration of a mental world separated from the external world, a world of innate fantasy trends and patterns. The nature/nurture dilemma was heavily weighted in the direction of a programmed psychological nature. The attention to intrapsychic determination of behavior was a swing of the pendulum toward appreciation of unconscious psychological life. The shadow of this gigantic intellectual object was long cast on our rational ego>>*. When we rein in our boundaries to the level of the individual, the impact of our choices upon the human community as well as other species or the earth itself, is ignored or denied. One result is that this minimizes intrapsychic conflict that might result from cross-species

empathy or concern, and also prevents any distraction from efforts to exploit the resources deemed necessary to sustain the life of the individual. A further advantage to constriction of concern to the individual is the ready demarcation of good vs. bad, strictly in terms of personal gain or survival. Further, aggression which is difficult to contain can be projected into the other, whether the other be a group of humans or non-humans, now experienced as dangerous. Though classical theory focuses upon experience at the level of the individual, it provides a number of terms and constructs that are helpful for this discussion. Specifically, the theory of defense mechanisms has considerable heuristic value. In particular, the mechanisms of denial, projection and splitting all appear to come into play the less permeable the boundaries of consideration from individual to group to cross-species group or natural entity. The concept of identification, originating with Freud, is another useful construct to which I will return shortly. Relational theory tends to emphasize the group of two (typically analyst/analysand or mother/child) as a more useful focus of inquiry than the individual. And it posits that a primary task for the human is the management of tension between safety and exploration, both in relationships and work. A variation on this theme, from intersubjectivity theorists, is the 'fundamental conflict' between the extremes of self-delineation on one hand, and attachment, where *<<each pole precludes the other>>*.(Livingston, 1998). Stephen Mitchell(1988) describes the relational perspective as follows: *<<In this view, human beings are simultaneously self regulating and field regulating>>*. We are concerned with both the creation and maintenance of a relatively stable, coherent sense of self out of the continual ebb and flow of perception and affect, and the creation and maintenance of dependable, sustaining connections with others, both in actuality and as internal presences. The dialectic between self-definition and connection with others is complex and intricate, with one or the other sometimes being more prominent. Self-regulatory and field-regulatory processes sometimes enhance each other and sometimes are at odds with each other, forming the basis for powerful conflicts. The intrapsychic and the interpersonal are continually interpenetrating realms, each with its own set of processes, mechanisms, and concerns. I propose that the task of shifting from concern for individuals to the group, especially if that group is comprised of another species, or a diverse, interconnected array of species as in a watershed or ecosystem, rests on three psychological variables: the experience of identification, the containment and modulation of affect and the capacity for imagination. As noted above, the concept of identification first arose in classical theory. When it appeared in Freud's thought and writing, the term was used ambiguously over succeeding attempts to build on his earlier work. At first, identification was linked to loss. It was viewed as an internal mechanism for the maintenance of connection with the person or object that was no longer present. Later, identification was seen as a normal developmental process by which those to whom we have emotional bonds, are remembered and represented inwardly. Just as in the process of identification with an individual we take in values, goals and expectations of the other, so too in identification with a group. If I identify with the Montana Stockgrowers Association, I am primarily concerned with the

survival of my sheep, minimization of predation, protection of market value and my overall financial investment in the flock. If I identify with a pro-restoration group such as the Defenders of Wildlife, my concern shifts away from my own safety and that of my property (sheep), to the well being of the grizzly bear as a species in the lower 48 states, and the benefits expected through restoration, for the ecosystem as a whole.

Identification with a group comprised of humans would seem, for most of us, to be an easier task than identification with the needs of a group comprised of another species or a collection of interacting species as in an ecosystem. Here, the expansion from individual to field espoused by the relational perspective is valuable, as it allows placement of the human individual and social group within the context of the wider non-human world (2). The containment and modulation of affect is also important in thinking about the ways boundaries of consideration are alternatively constricted or enlarged. In particular, anxiety can be seen as a factor in the transformation of a narrow(individual) boundary to the broader boundary of identification with a group. The shift in frame of reference from the health of the individual to the health and well-being of another species is likely to involve the exercise of restraint and humility in the service of a larger good. Such restraint will require that anxiety both be felt, and tolerated as it challenges us to consider what is 'enough.' To the extent that I inhibit fulfillment of my own desires, anxiety must be met with the satisfaction of preserving balance and enhancing the integrity of the web of life. This is even more apparent when boundaries are expanded to the level of harmonious interconnection necessary for ecosystem health. Here, an emphasis on the attachment side of the equation, in contrast to self-delineation, becomes a necessary condition. Our theories of anxiety regulation have not been extended to the realm of our relationship with a potentially dangerous animal, much less the relationship of human within ecosystem. Yet we know that <<*Healthy human beings grow within a culture of embeddedness where others provide reciprocity, gratification and impetus for continued growth.*>>. (Pines, 1998) If we allow this message to be writ large, a new perspective on health emerges, which rests in a mature inter-dependence of human and non-human worlds. The capacity to expand boundaries of consideration requires us to reconceive the culture of embeddedness in new ways. Here relational theory offers the possibility of viewing individual affective life as inextricably bound to that of the group, whether the group be a human dyad or ecological community. Spezzano (1993) writes:<<*The essence of this position is that affects do not exist apart from relationships. Whatever we feel, we always feel in context. Even a person alone is aware of existing in a world of other people, and whatever he feels at the moment will be the result of his assessment of his position in that world*>>. When position in the world is extended beyond human groups to nature, affect must be viewed within this extended set of relationships. Imagination,(forming a mental image of something not actually present to the senses) is a third psychological capacity that allows the individual to creatively consider the lives of non-human beings and the inanimate. Imagination is discussed evocatively from within the relational point of view. Rycroft

(1968) suggests that << *imaginative activity relies on the 'negative capability,' or the ability to rest in uncertainty, mystery or doubt without foreclosing experience by reaching for fact and reason*>>. Winnicott, too, saw the development of imagination as essential for the individual to be able to explore both the affective experience of the self and the wider unknown world. Being fully alive, in this view, rests in the capacities of imaginative, playful elaboration of self and other. The expansion of the other to include groups across species can be seen as a complex step, which draws upon both emotional and imaginative empathy. Classical theory does not specifically add to our understanding of imagination, but in describing mechanisms of defences, classical theory helps us to understand, via projection, certain aspects of myth in which animals become larger than life and imbued with magical meaning. For instance, there is a story in Northwest indigenous cultures, of a woman who falls in love with a bear, marries him and gives birth to his children. This leads to consternation and jealousy in the men of her family and tribe, who eventually kill her bear husband. Hunters report that the skinned torso of a bear shows an uncanny resemblance to that of a human. An interesting question emerges: does this recognition of kinship facilitate the projection of our own aggression? While there is no doubt that a grizzly bear can be a fearsome animal when surprised or provoked, it is known generally to be a shy animal that tends to avoid humans when it has not come to associate humans with a source of food. Whether in response to the 'otherness' of bear, or its' similarity, reminding us of common ancestral lineage, it is apparently easy to see the group of grizzly bears as inordinately threatening and a convenient imaginative receptacle for our own dangerously hostile impulses (3). To summarize, in the scenario of grizzly re-introduction, several facilitating psychological conditions can be described. To put these in personal terms, I must tolerate my anxiety over the potential attack on sheep (or myself) while continuing to value the well being of the gene pool of grizzly bears. When I remember my 'place,' co-evolving with other predators, my fear of the bear can be balanced by our sameness, as fellow creatures who struggle to survive, reproduce and die. This balance may well rest in the capacity to remain imaginatively open to the possibility that my health is irreducibly linked to the health of the ecosystem, including all of its component 'parts' and the interconnecting processes that weave us together. This does not eradicate my anxiety. But the tension between self-delineation and attachment is more easily borne to the extent that I remember sameness rather than difference, affinity rather than enmity. The shift from individual to group, and within group, from human to other species and even to ecosystem will be of practical use to the extent that boundaries of consideration can be flexibly expanded. When the sense of self includes the capacity to identify with non-human others, contain and modulate anxiety, and make creative use of the imagination, we will be better able to permeably receive from the natural world as well as have an impact upon it.

Notes

1) This term was introduced by Wes Jackson of The Land Institute at the Science and Environmental Health

Network retreat in November, 2000.

2) From the perspective of self psychology, Kohut's concept of twinship describes the basic need for sameness or likeness in relation to others, seen as a normal requirement in childhood and adult life. A sense of sameness between humans as aspects of the natural world is noteworthy within indigenous cultures, but conspicuously missing from mainstream Western psychology.

3) Defense mechanisms also appear to fuel the divisive rhetoric between those who favor grizzly re-introduction and those who do not, with each demonizing members of the opposing group and intensifying the polarization of belief and emotion. More recently, this phenomenon has extended to groups ostensibly on the same side. In each instance, projection of aggression into the other has been used to modulate emotion, while creative use of imagination and identification all but disappear.

References

- Kohut, H. (1984). *How Does Analysis Cure?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Livingston, M. S. (1998) "Harvest of fire: archaic twinship and fundamental conflict within a community and in group therapy." In Harwood, I.N.H. and Pines, M. Eds., *Self Experiences in Group*. London: Jessica Kinglsey Publishers.
- Mitchell, S. M. (1988). *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Pines, M. (1998). "The self as a group: the group as a self." In Harwood, I. N. H. and Pines, M. Eds., *Self Experiences in Grou*. London: Jessica Kinglsey Publishers.
- Roth, S. (1999). "Foreword" in Stark, M. *Modes of Therapeutic Action*. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Rycroft. C. (1968). *Imagination and Reality*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Spezzano, C. (1993). *Affect in Psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, N.J.: The Analytic Press.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1974). *Playing and Reality*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin.

Marianne Spitzform, has lived in Missoula since 1972, having found her true home during her first trip to Montana for geology field camp five years earlier. She finished a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at the University of Montana (1979), and also studied theology at Harvard (MTS 1970). Since 1985 she has been in private practice and also teaches Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. Marianne loves horses, hiking, travel and reading. The relationship between people, nature and health has fascinated her for years.