

What Elephants Taught Me About Therapy: Pachyderm Lessons I'll Never Forget

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What can an experienced clinical psychologist offer a breeding program for the highly endangered Asian and African elephants? The success of the San Diego Wild Animal Park program was dependent on the knowledge of one highly skilled, intuitive elephant keeper with limited ability to articulate or teach what he knew to other keepers. The survival of the program depended on more staff who were well-equipped to deal with the considerable dangers of breeding elephants in captivity. Michael Yapko was invited to observe this keeper and identify his patterns of skill in handling elephants. If Michael could learn these skills and get the elephants to respond in the same way, then these skills could be taught to new staff. For Yapko, this life-changing experience brought many of the problems of humanity and clinical practice down to size and provided a new perspective on: the importance of striving to understand how people do things well, rather than analysing the past; assessments and recommendations of other professionals may be more a reflection of their personality than a true representation of the individual under consideration; the importance of context; the problem of 'impossible cases'; what is needed to be truly observant and the importance of being able to distinguish observations from inferences or theorising.

'If you can walk, you can dance. If you can talk, you can sing'.

A Zimbabwe tribal saying

Nothing could have adequately prepared me for the first time I stepped into the home of a herd of elephants. I had been told in advance that no matter where they all might be in their large enclosure, they would likely notice my presence right away.

I was told they would walk over to me with their trunks raised, a seemingly intimidating gesture to people but actually a harmless inquisitive sniffing of the air for my scent. Then, I was warned, it was likely that several of the more curious members would wrap their trunks around me, and gently get a 'feel' for me by pushing and pulling me while, presumably, getting a kinesthetic appraisal of my size and strength.

During this first greeting and evaluation, I was also warned I would be 'slimed,' the affectionate term of

the elephant trainers and keepers for the residuals of the ever-present mucus drippings from an elephant's trunk on your clothes and skin. In these first few moments with the elephants, I was told, the herd members would decide whether or not I was accepted as a new friend.

I was very anxious about entering the enclosure, but was fortunate for my first venture into the herd. The first elephant to greet me was Nita, the matriarch. As I came to discover, Nita is blessed with an exceptional disposition, the Mary Tyler Moore of elephants. I have never

before or since met any animal that was as gentle, tuned-in to the feelings of her group, and as even-keeled in temperament.

Nita approached me moments after I entered the enclosure, followed closely by a half dozen of her group. All had their trunks raised as they approached me, and in a matter of moments I was feeling the weight and textures of muscular trunks touching me everywhere (yes, everywhere!) and leaving a slightly gooey trail behind as a personalized souvenir of sorts. I was jostled and tested



as I nervously awaited their verdict as to my acceptability for what seemed like quite a long time. I was pretty sure I'd be accepted, because I tend to get along well with most animals. I'm of the unprovable belief that it's because they know how much I like and respect them. But, elephants were an untried species for me, so who could predict for certain how they'd react to me?

I learned firsthand a familiar lesson from the clinical context of how the assessments and recommendations of another trained professional may be more a reflection of his or her own personality or experience than a true representation of the individual under consideration.

I remembered why I was there in the first place, and my fears about what harm could come to me when being surrounded and manhandled by such huge creatures (five or six tons, give or take a ton), combined with the weight of their trunks all over me, made it difficult for me to breathe. At the same time, I felt an exhilaration unlike any other I'd ever experienced before.

A Phone Call and a Challenge

Weeks earlier, I had received a life-changing phone call from the San Diego Wild Animal Park (SDWAP). The SDWAP is approximately thirty miles northeast of the world-famous San Diego Zoo. Both are managed by the Zoological Society of San Diego and are known widely in zoological circles as being among the world's premier parks for exquisite animal display and, especially, the breeding of endangered species. The beautifully landscaped Zoo rests on 100

acres, while the SDWAP encompasses well over 2000 acres. The SDWAP's much larger size affords greater space for each animal group, and thus encourages more natural behavior. Their success in bringing many endangered species back from the brink of extinction is well known.

The caller from the SDWAP was Jim, a member of the park management. He proceeded to explain the circumstances behind his call. Jim told me that the SDWAP currently had 23 elephants, both Asian and African, and that they had the ambitious plan at the Park to establish a breeding herd of about 120 elephants. He explained that both species of elephants are highly endangered. They are still being poached for their ivory, despite international bans on ivory trading. Worse, as human populations continue

to increase, elephants inevitably lose the battle for their territory. They are routinely killed as unwelcome intruders when they simply go places that used to be part of their original homeland. In order to reduce their current and dangerously high risk for extinction, the SDWAP hopes elephants can be bred successfully in captivity, a difficult process at best.

Jim went on to explain that the main problem is this: Breeding elephants in captivity is a very dangerous business. Very few places can accommodate groups of elephants, and even fewer still can maintain bull elephants. Bulls go through periods called musth (pronounced 'must') about every 12-14 months, times when testosterone flows freely and they become exceptionally aggressive. The danger to keepers and trainers from an attack is greater than usual at those times. But, all elephants, male and female, can be dangerous at any

time, simply because of their sheer size and strength. They tend to scare easily and become aggressive when scared. All it takes for someone to get killed is to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jim told me I had been recommended to him for the captive breeding project by Dr. Bill Campbell, the SDWAP's organizational psychologist and a skilled principal designer of the new training program about to get underway. Bill had recently attended a couple of my clinical trainings and was impressed with my ability to identify how people do things well, and how I can often teach others to do similarly well by applying salient behaviors and skills. It was this ability that they wanted me to bring to the SDWAP elephant project. I was to first observe the head of the elephant department, a fellow named Alan Roocroft. Alan is a wizard with elephants, but the problem was that he couldn't explain how he did his magic—it was so intuitive for him. My task was to try to identify his patterns of skill in handling elephants. When I could elicit similar behaviors in the elephants, then I could feel comfortable that I understood the process. If possible, the goal then was to teach others how to do what Alan did.

Wanting to accommodate an eventual herd size of 120 elephants, the SDWAP needed many more trainers and keepers. You can't just place a 'help wanted' ad in the newspaper for elephant keepers. The SDWAP has to train them themselves. Jim reaffirmed once again that elephant handling is a dangerous thing, and told me that every year many people around the world are injured and killed by elephants. He said the trainers and keepers' safety in working with the elephants is the SDWAP's paramount concern, and he hoped I might be able to help in that regard, teaching the skills to hopefully reduce the risks and increase safe elephant management.

Instantly, my head was swimming.



Work at the SDWAP? Study human-elephant interactions to try and identify what works on an inter-species basis? Expose myself to the considerable risks they wanted me to try to help reduce for newcomers to the elephant captive breeding program? How could I do that? How could I *not* do that?

Good Life Lessons Are All Around Us

Much of my professional focus for the last three decades has been on striving to better understand how people do things well. Specifically, as a clinician, I have been deeply interested in identifying the perceptual and behavioral sequences of people who are good at something, whatever it might be. For example, I am likely to notice the parent in the grocery store who is good at maintaining the limit of ‘no candy,’ even when his or her child is throwing an embarrassing tantrum. I almost feel compelled to ask that person about his or her ability to hold the line under fire: *‘How do you decide which limit you want to set? How do you maintain it under pressure? How do you keep from caving in when all you really want in that moment is for your child to be quiet? How do you endure the harsh looks from other shoppers who apparently think you’re a terrible parent? How do you...?’*

Some limit-setting strategies are clearly more effective than others. In the course of a psychotherapy career, how many ‘wishy-washy’ parents will I need to teach these same components of effective limit-setting? The answer: Lots. We can’t teach people what we don’t know, however. And, it seems we know much less about what it takes to live and function well, than we do about the many different ways there are to guess why people don’t function well, and then further guess what to do about it. My emphasis on identifying the patterns of skill evident in wellness, resiliency, problem-solving, relating well to others, and other important arenas of human experience often surprises others who want to know why I’m not analyzing someone’s past or analyzing their presumed psychodynamics in order to explain their symptoms. I’m too busy noticing and trying to understand and teach what works.

But, at the SDWAP, here was an extraordinary application of my

observing what’s effective, studying what is intuitive to Alan, and trying to make it explicit and learnable to others. Could I really learn to manage elephants myself as concrete evidence of my skill acquisition, much less get others to develop their own skills in elephant handling? I was to do this in a totally foreign (i.e., non-therapeutic) context that clearly has a great urgency attached to it, but a different kind of

urgency than what I’m accustomed to in treating people. I was told, and came to truly understand, that successful captive breeding is a primary source of hope for an entire species, and a magnificent species at that. A species that quite literally has scores of other species, both plant and animal, dependent on it for their survival as well.

I jumped at the chance.

Learning About Elephants: The Initial Phase

From the first time I entered the elephant’s expansive enclosure through the massive metal gate, I knew I was becoming a part of something very special. Not many people, especially in Western cultures, have had the privilege of coming to know elephants as unique individuals. My first task was to learn to identify specific elephants on sight. It took me many weeks to learn to reliably recognize individual elephants up close, and even a bit longer than that to learn to identify them from a distance.

The easy distinction to make instantly is between the two separate groups of African and Asian elephants. The Africans are physically much larger, with larger ears. All elephants flap their ears constantly as a cooling system of sorts, so noticing the ears of an elephant is easy. Both genders of the African species have tusks. The Asian elephants are smaller in size, and generally (but not always) only the males have tusks. The Asians have one ‘finger’ at the tip of the trunk, a maneuverable protrusion that serves to help grasp small objects, even as small as a coin. (What an extraordinary

appendage, the elephant’s trunk! It’s equally capable of uprooting trees and picking up a paper clip.) The Africans have two fingers on their trunks. There are many other physical differences between them as well.

Elephants (both Asians and Africans) live in a matriarchal society. They are intensely social creatures, with an inspiring sense of dedication and loyalty to each other. When you see large herds

What do we really know about bringing out the best in any species?

of elephants together, these are usually all females (cows) and the young (calves). When a male elephant (bull) matures, he leaves the herd to begin his relatively solitary life, only occasionally socializing when spending time with a few other males in what is called a ‘bachelor group.’ Bulls will rejoin the herd only temporarily in order to mate, and then they will leave again. (If you wish, make your own comparisons to certain men.)

The matriarch of the herd is the figure in charge. Like a drill sergeant of sorts, she directs the herd’s movements. When she says it’s time to move along, the others get moving. In the wild, it is her task to remember where the water and food are, and which paths to take to reach the essentials of life. The hierarchy is a relatively stable one, though younger and more aggressive females will sometimes challenge the matriarch - or each other - for a better position in the ‘pecking order.’ Watching two elephants push and shove for status while bellowing at each other is a spectacle to behold. Most of the time, though, the elephants are gentle with each other, and intimate in their frequent probing and touching of each other.

At the SDWAP, both the African bull, Chico, and the Asian bull, Ranchipur, are kept alone in their separate enclosures, just as they would be alone in the wild. The African cows are kept in a separate enclosure from the Asian cows, both living in their established groups. The two species do not cross breed.

Even before being among them, I had always liked elephants, an affinity most people seem to share. Elephants

have always had a unique place in storytelling through the ages, and have been the subject of countless myths and thousands of years of folklore. When I started working at the SDWAP, I went out of my way to read some of the tales of elephants that have been handed down over the generations, and I was impressed by the insight that in none of the stories I found was the elephant ever a figure of evil or a symbol of corruption. On the contrary, elephants were portrayed consistently as higher order creatures of integrity, manifesting the fine attributes of pacifism, wisdom, loyalty, selflessness, and perseverance. Even the 'here's what they did recently' stories I was told in my time at the SDWAP about their elephants were framed in an attitude of unabashed admiration and respect for their character, as well as their size. The elephant is the largest and strongest land animal on earth, but its reputation for gentle integrity is told in countless stories most of us learned as children.

But, to the contrary, the reason for my presence among the elephants was because of their potential for harm both to themselves and their human keepers. After all, these were not elephants in the wild, living in their natural physical and family environments. The elephants at the SDWAP were individuals with no common history, brought together under artificial conditions to try to function as a natural family. The hope was that once they began to reproduce, they would indeed become a family based herd, as in the wild. There was much to learn about elephants, though, despite humans having been around them and working them as power tools of sorts for thousands of years in Asia. (The Africans can be trained just as well, but hadn't been used for labor as they had been in Asia, especially for logging in the jungles of India and Thailand.)

Under what conditions might these gentle giants be provoked into a possibly lethal display of aggression? Under what conditions were they most able to manifest their gentleness, loyalty, intelligence, and other esteemed traits? What do we really know about bringing out the best in *any* species? What a challenge it was for me to meet a new 'family' whose members don't even speak my language, and to try to establish an alliance with them that

would make it possible to serve their right to survival, while striving to make it safe for caring and skilled people to be involved in this urgent endeavor. The destination – successful breeding – matters, but so does the journey – daily safe elephant management practices. Every single person I met at the SDWAP without exception, involved with the elephant program or not, shared a fierce dedication to the well being of all the animals, and to educating the public as to what they could do to help in local and global conservation efforts. I know of no more urgent an endeavor.

Meeting the SDWAP's elephant family involved many different skills, not the



least of which was sorting out facts from inferences. As I was introduced to each elephant by Alan or one of the keepers, I was offered some descriptive tales about this particular elephant. These included short histories of where the elephant had come from. This was most often from other zoos that couldn't manage the enormous upkeep an elephant requires, or from circuses or private owners that similarly found them too taxing to manage appropriately. As I learned quickly, keeping an elephant happy and healthy is more than a full time job. Just feeding them is a major task, because elephants eat a lot. They have a terribly inefficient digestive system, such that only about 40-50% of what they eat is nutritionally absorbed. As a consequence, elephants eat fairly constantly throughout the day, pushing up to 200 pounds of vegetation through their digestive tracts daily, while flushing it along with up to 50 gallons of water. If you ever find yourself following an elephant around, keep a safe distance and stay alert. You'll quickly discover why the

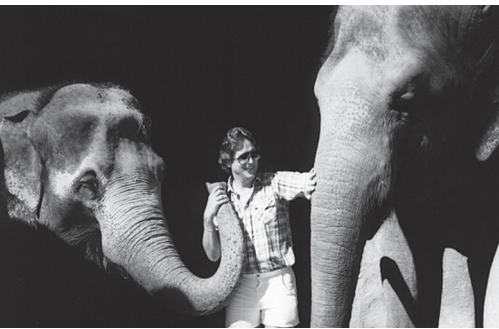
shovel is a primary tool of the elephant keeper's trade.

Besides learning something about each elephant's personal and possibly occupational history, the tales I was told about each included an assessment of their relative standing in the elephant hierarchy, a personality assessment of their temperament and personality traits, a behavioral assessment involving 'objective' descriptions of their behavior at the SDWAP in both individual and group contexts, a social assessment involving an appraisal of which ones were in alliances with each other and which ones were competitive with each other, a medical assessment as to the general level of health and the implications for eventual success in their breeding or any special physical care they might require.

To most people, and to me at the start of my work at the SDWAP, elephants pretty much look alike. But, closer observation leads you to discover how different each elephant is as an individual. And, through repeated exposure to members of 'my new family,' I learned firsthand a familiar lesson from the clinical context how the assessments and recommendations of another trained professional may be much more a reflection of his or her own personality or experience than a true representation of the individual under consideration. What one keeper ignored as insignificant and thus didn't bother to report, another keeper thought of as important. Similarly, what one keeper perceived as 'troublesome behavior,' another keeper would view as 'lively' or 'playful.' (I remember wondering how teachers or therapists considering a recommendation for a child to be given Ritalin made such important distinctions.) It helped me to remind myself from the beginning that assessing elephants according to human criteria wouldn't make any more sense than evaluating someone born and raised in a rural small town by urban 'street smarts' criteria.

Yet, the natural tendency is to do exactly that. Each of us has our own individual frame of reference from which we form judgments, interpretations, and our emotional and behavioral reactions to people and circumstances. The social and clinical psychological literature is filled with examples of how our culture,

race, gender, age, personal history and a thousand other factors consciously and unconsciously affect our reactions. But few in our field have been tasked with considering how our merely being human affects our interpretations of the meaning of things or events, in this case animal behavior. Zoological and biological anthropologists, animal physiologists, ethnologists and others



have pondered and researched such issues, but I am none of these. I'm a clinical psychologist, relying solely on clinical skills acquired through nearly three decades of doing psychotherapy with individuals, couples and families, striving to extend these skills into a new domain through this project at the SDWAP.

Still, the natural tendency is to seek out what, if anything, is familiar in an alien environment. In the case of elephants, it affirmed a crucial point about perception that the lens I looked through- looking for similarities between us - allowed me to find what I was looking for. There are plenty of similarities between humans and elephants to discover: Elephants have nearly the same life span as humans, about 65-70 years. Elephants are highly social creatures, choosing to live in family groups to which they are loyal and dedicated for life, and that they will protect selflessly in times of danger. Elephants are naturally curious, and are explorers, but are also cautious and even skittish in the face of the unknown. Elephants transform the landscape to their needs, clearing sections of forest and digging holes for water and caves for salt. Elephants pass information to each other through complex communications, including infrasound messages transmitted below the threshold of human hearing. Elephant babies are relatively helpless, and are dependent

on their mothers for breastfeeding until around the age of two. They are dependent on the whole family for physical protection, and for the intensive socialization necessary to learn what it means to be an elephant. This even includes the fundamentals of how to use their trunk, a flopping tube of confusing muscle and tissue that takes months of practice for baby elephants to master!

Elephant socialization is intensive and involves learning the appropriate social behaviors of how to negotiate a space in the hierarchy, how to function appropriately as a member of the group, how to curb aggression and still get the point across, how to nurture and bond with others, and countless other such complex social behaviors that must be performed skillfully for both the individual and group's benefit. Elephants have likes and dislikes, good and bad moods, and even a sense of humor. One of the elephants was a practical joker named Cookie who would take your things, hide them, and then convincingly feign total innocence. For example, if I put my clipboard down and looked away, even for just a moment, I'd turn around and my clipboard would be gone. I'd look at Cookie, the only other living thing around, and ask her where she put it. And there she'd be, innocently staring off into space as if to say, *'What clipboard? I never saw a clipboard. It was gone before I even got here!'*

The search for and discovery of elephant parallels to people could go on and on. The bigger challenge, though, was to set aside as best I could the prejudices, the fairy tales, the theories I'd learned, and the assessments of others, to simply strive to find what was already effective in the patterns of Alan's human-elephant interactions, and how to reproduce and teach those patterns to the new trainers.

There's One in Every Crowd

One of the elephants inspired fear in me from the very start. Her name was Cindy, a sizeable and enigmatic cow. Cindy had been declared a 'sociopath,' an enormous Charlie Manson with a trunk. She had been moved to the SDWAP from the Portland Zoo, where she had killed a trainer. The SDWAP had accepted the acquisition of Cindy, taking her on as a challenge, and a challenge she was.

She was an unruly old teenager/young adult, who was involved in frequent skirmishes with the other elephants that soon necessitated her to be isolated for the safety of everyone. The last thing anyone wanted or needed in the program was a belligerent elephant. A simple shove of one elephant by another into the moat lining the periphery of their enclosure could result in a broken leg, one of the worst things that can happen to an elephant. Elephants are on their feet almost every hour of the day. If they lay down for more than a couple of hours they risk suffocating under their own weight, so great is their mass. Elephants' legs are built like columns or pillars, and their big round feet are mostly foot pad, for elephants actually walk on their tiptoes. Elephants are very protective of their feet, needing them to stay healthy in order to be on them all day. When an elephant attacks, it's unlikely to try to trample you and risk its legs or feet. A broken leg, therefore, can be tragic, and is one of the most common reasons for having to euthanize an elephant.

For Cindy to stand any chance of rehabilitation, she would have to agree to live peacefully with the others, and be willing to accept the authority of the trainers as well. Cindy showed no inclination to do either. With no other elephants to challenge, and an established history of ignoring social protocols, Cindy took occasional swipes at her keepers. Taking even one, though, simply could not be tolerated. All who came near her were warned to be hypervigilant around her. The combination of keepers who understandably felt intimidated by her, and her apparent indifference to establishing a positive relationship with anyone, made Cindy the program's most obvious 'problem child.'

My task at the SDWAP was to learn something about the skills necessary to manage elephants safely and in so doing, minimize the risk of injury or death for the keepers and trainers. It wasn't my assignment nor was it appropriate for me to try to treat an elephant with a presumed DSM-IV diagnosis or even try to co-design a treatment plan for her. Besides, I simply didn't know enough about elephants at the time to do so. Alan, who had lived and worked with elephants since his early adolescence, was

utterly perplexed by Cindy, and every reasonable attempt he made to cajole her into taking a step towards 'normalcy' was met with opposition ranging from direct to indirect. I doubt any clinician has escaped the discovery of the similarly harsh reality that our clients can defeat our best efforts by simply doing nothing. We are not difficult to 'beat,' in that sense. Consider all the disorders for which our ability to help others is limited, and then further consider how much less there is to understand and overcome when your client is five or six tons of stuff you'll never truly comprehend. Alan's and everyone else's hopes for Cindy were the fuel for many discussions and strategy-planning sessions, but ultimately the near-misses of Cindy's aggression proved too much for everyone. Cindy was shipped off somewhere to another zoo, with someone else optimistic enough to want to give her another chance to redeem herself.

The lengthy and ultimately futile episode with Cindy at the start of my work at the SDWAP troubled me. It raised many of the same unnerving questions clinicians ask themselves repeatedly when they encounter the seemingly 'impossible' cases. There are excellent and highly visible clinicians and teachers who have suggested that therapy cases aren't really impossible, there are only clinicians who aren't creative/flexible/persistent or 'something' enough to find the key that opens the lock. But, is that really true? Or is it an ideal that captivates an audience of therapists who, by their nature, are forever striving to improve their treatments? Can anyone or everyone change, if only exposed to the right combination of people and circumstances? The optimistic view of the client as a 'glass half full' often helps clinicians establish a higher standard of functioning that clients eventually may live up to, just as people will often live down to our lowest expectations when we see their glass as 'half empty.'

The simple truth is, we haven't learned and still don't know enough about how to reach 'damaged' interiors, whether those of humans or elephants. As a result, Cindy was given what has been termed 'Greyhound bus therapy,' the shipping off of a troubled individual (usually a homeless, transient person no one will miss) to someplace else for others to

worry about. Our prisons and hospitals are filled with people who, like Cindy, seem unreachable in any genuinely human way, the damage already having been done, the bridges already having been burned. Elephant people sometimes say what prison guards say – '*once the line has been crossed, where an elephant*

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has attacked a human, there's no known way to make a good recovery. There's only containment.' All that we don't yet know about how to bring out the best of humans – and elephants – has led us to focus on trying to contain or ideally, to correct what's wrong. What I learned at the SDWAP with Cindy highlighted the limitations of only having a focus on what's wrong and no idea how to evoke what's right.

Elaborate, Deep, and Impractical?

I have never been a big fan or advocate of elaborate and complicated theories or models of human behavior. I think we tend to flatter ourselves with some of our beliefs, such as intricate psychodynamics to over-explain people's poor choices, or faith in an organized and benevolent unconscious mind that can be trusted to absorb the deeper meanings of metaphors we tell, or with our beliefs in an 'inner sage' and 'the self as all powerful.' I think it's fairer to say that some people are very good at doing some things, and the special skills they've acquired are often learnable by others who strive for similar achievements. Can anyone be a genius like Einstein? Or an Olympic swimmer like Ian Thorpe? It's tempting to think so, and popular psychology has made a fortune from people wanting to believe they can have 'the wisdom of the ages' or the ability to 'heal virtually any disease' with just the 'right' attitude or technique.

I have promised much less to people but prided myself on being able to deliver what I promise. I have emphasized a pragmatism in living life that is less concerned with being 'right' and is more concerned with being 'effective.' Having

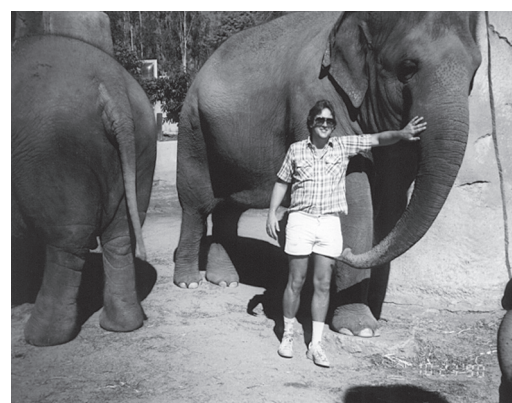
had the privilege of studying directly with many well known and celebrated therapists of our times, I learned early on that I will not be able to get the same responses from people they can get. And, as a corollary, I discovered much to my surprise that they will not get the same responses from people that I can get. Yet,

as clinicians, we all share the need to accomplish similar goals, even if we take different individual paths to get there.

Variations in procedures are a fundamental necessity in adapting therapy to the needs of individuals, despite our field's temporary flirtations with 'invariant prescriptions' a few years ago, or its current emphasis on empirically validating treatments and the ongoing efforts to even manualize them. I wondered how this 'right' vs. 'effective' issue would play out with the elephants.

Studying What Works: Alan, The Elephant Man

Alan is the man in charge of the elephant program at the SDWAP. He left his home in England as a young teen, the legendary boy who ran off with the



circus. He came under the tutelage of a well known elephant trainer named Karl Koch in Hamburg, Germany, at one of the leading elephant showcases not only in Europe, but in the world. Alan learned their habits as well as the intangibles of elephants by living with them, growing up with them, perhaps even being

trained by them simultaneously as he built his life with them. Inquisitive by nature, and by character a perfectionist, Alan learned to be observant enough early in his life to make himself a perfect elephant man, or at least the best he could be.

Alan is the man I came to meet and to learn from. I have met and studied many master clinicians in terms of their words and deeds, but never before did I have less to bring to an interaction. I had no zoological experience, and there was nothing I could tell Alan about managing elephants. But, the reason I was there was to elicit from him some of his patterns of effectiveness by asking my questions, learning his procedures, carefully observing behavioral sequences – i.e., Alan in action – and then duplicating them as best I could. In this way I would try to discover whether his sequences were learnable by me (or anyone else). The evidence of success would be clear if I could get responses from the elephants similar to those obtained by Alan. I had no grand illusion that I could distill Alan's extensive experience with elephants into some simple formula. What I did have was an expectation that I could develop an awareness for at least some of the sequences of Alan's behavior that could be learned by new trainers and keepers, without them having to go through a lot of trials and errors, particularly when errors could be fatal.

Following Alan around and being his close observer meant being where he was and doing as he did. Bill Campbell was right there too, adding his insight to the process. Alan was wonderfully cooperative with the project, even though it meant giving up some of his privacy, his alone time with the elephants, and whatever silence he was used to having when doing his demanding work. I tried to be as minimally invasive as possible, but my mere presence was an inevitable intrusion, compounded by my incessant questions. As in clinical interviewing, almost all my questions are aimed at understanding how someone does something, rather than why they do it. Asking 'how' instead of 'why' diverts me away from theorizing or making inferences (which are inevitable, of course, but are meant to be minimized). Instead, I am focused on being more observant about sequences of thought

and /or behavior and the consequences they generate. (If one studies the phenomenon of iatrogenesis, i.e., when therapy harms rather than helps, the greatest likelihood is that this occurs when therapists interpret their clients' behavior from a theoretical perspective that the client doesn't align with.)

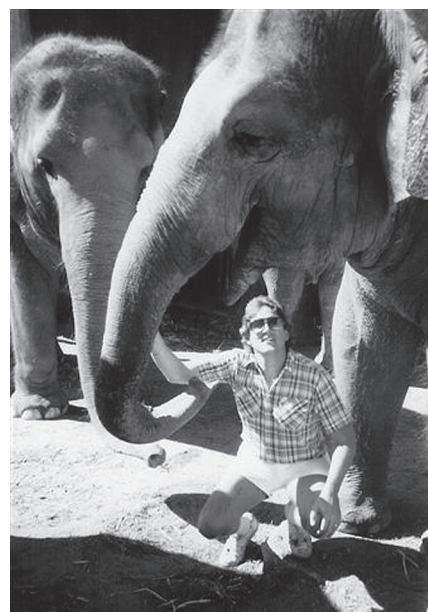
So, I asked Alan many 'how' questions: How do you determine an elephant's readiness to do a training session? How do you know when an elephant is either over or under-stimulated? How do you know when an elephant is merely irritated well before it gets full blown angry? How do you know when an elephant is testing a limit versus merely being playful? How do you know when to let the elephants work out a conflict themselves versus when to step in and separate them? How do you decide when to deviate from an established management protocol and when to enforce it? How do you evaluate new applicants for the position of trainer or keeper in terms of their fitness to work with the elephants?

Alan sometimes lacked in his ability to articulate crafted replies to such questions. But, he more than made up for it in his willingness to try to name the previously unnamed, his curiosity to take what had been intuitive and make it more explicit, and his clarity in his greater mission of doing the best he could for both his elephants and staff.

Alan had an established routine for the elephants. Overnight, they were kept in a specially outfitted building called 'the barn.' Around 6.00 am each day we began by entering the barn and turning on the lights. This was Alan's cue to sing out an enthusiastic, 'Good morning, ladies!' He would inspect each elephant in what seemed initially to me to be a cursory glance, presumably a global appraisal to make sure four legs and a trunk were all still there. However, I soon learned that Alan's well-practiced eye could spot details in an instant that escaped even experienced others – a crack in a toenail, a spot on a flank that had been rubbed up against a wall, or some hay that had been thrown about instead of eaten. The foremost skill Alan had developed over the years, that he simply thought of as 'just the way I am', was his ability to observe animals and events quickly and in detail. I

also discovered that, in Alan's case, his observational skills were almost entirely associated to the elephants. He was not as interested in people, and his observations in the human realm were considerably less accurate or detailed. Alan's observational skills did not tend to cross the boundaries of context, spilling over from the elephant domain into other domains. In this way, Alan reflected a basic principle of human behavior: Our responses are generally tied to specific contexts. Psychotherapists may be wonderfully perceptive about their clients, yet their own personal relationships may be troubled. They may be wonderfully patient and tolerant with their clients, yet may be impatient and critical at home. They may set limits well with their clients, yet may enforce too few with their own children. Simply put, the skills evident in one context may not be well applied in other parallel contexts. In Alan's case, his ability to observe what was going on with his elephants was an exceptionally well developed and critically important foundation on which to build the other necessary skills for sound elephant management.

To be truly observant, one must be more externally than internally focused, more selfless than self-absorbed, and more active than ruminative. These were immediate targets for integration into the new keepers' training. Exercises to increase perceptual acuity and decrease self-absorption were already a significant component of my clinical hypnosis and strategic therapy courses for clinicians,



and these were adapted easily to the elephant program.

Another skill directly related to observational skills was Alan's ability to distinguish observations from inferences or theorizing. Alan did not clutter his mind with ruminative analysis of the 'meaning' of elephant behavior. He noticed what they did, and he learned to detect early behavioral cues that indicated something was about to happen. For example, when entering the barn, and turning on the lights in the morning, one of the first tasks was to get urine samples from each elephant, monitoring each one's estrus cycle in order to know when the possibility of

a better one when action is needed. There is plenty of evidence, for example, that rumination and analysis in the place of effective action increases dramatically the risk for depression. In the context of working with elephants, the 'analysis paralysis' could well be the basis for a slow reaction time that might culminate in injury or death in the elephant enclosure. Encouraging decisive, timely, goal-oriented action in new keepers and trainers would be another vital skill to teach them.

There are many skills Alan possesses, too many to mention here. One to note, though, is his deep and abiding respect for the elephants themselves.

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conception might be greatest. With barely a glance, Alan would run from elephant to elephant, out of physical sequence of course – making it all the more impressive – grabbing a fresh specimen bottle on the way, and he would get a bottle in place for a sample catch just as the elephant commenced urination. Alan could 'just tell' when an elephant was about to relieve herself; but, over time, I noticed specific behavioral indicators that made it possible for me to eventually predict accurately as well.

The ability to observe without interpreting meaning was one of Alan's most sophisticated abilities. He didn't attribute an aggressive behavior, for example, to assessments such as *'she's in a bad mood today'* or *'she has a mean streak.'* He'd note it, react to it by moving her away from the others for the moment or changing his behavior around her in some way, perhaps becoming more or less engaged or demanding with her. Alan's ability to take effective action without going down the 'what does this mean?' road was often essential for recognizing dangers – or opportunities – without the delay of unnecessary contemplation. As the clinical literature has subsequently shown us, analysis and the formation of interesting interpretations may be a more profound response, but it isn't necessarily

Alan took as an indisputable given and hadn't seemed, to me at least, to see any need to analyze the wondrous nature of elephants. To him, their nature was clear: Smart and kind, loyal and curious, serious and intentional, playful and childlike. I was often struck by random comments he would make about elephants and how, if he'd been a therapist describing people instead of an elephant trainer describing elephants, he'd have been a Milton Erickson or a Virginia Satir unwaveringly professing an appreciation of all that is inherently good and right about people. Alan deeply cares for his elephants, and his descriptions of them are filled with affirmations about what is best about them.

Pointing out their best wasn't always easy to do, of course. As thinking, proactive creatures, elephants can be mischievous and even destructive. They can even do things we find objectionable, things that from our human perspective we would naturally interpret as negative. For example, our first live Asian birth, a wonderful cause for celebration at the SDWAP, was a little guy named Omar. But, the moment he popped out, or to be more accurate, spilled out, his mother rejected him. She had never seen a baby elephant before, and was clearly scared. As it turns out, none of the others in

the herd had been around babies before, either, and they were just as agitated in Omar's presence. He was socially and, for his own protection, physically isolated. Without breast feeding, Omar never acquired important antibodies. Without ongoing social contact with the herd, actually more of a collection of abused and discarded animals than a herd, Omar failed to thrive. He suffered infection after infection, developed brittle and breaking bones, and eventually had to be put down after several difficult months steeped in the hope the situation would improve. It was one of the most profound personal tragedies for all of us who had come to love Omar and hope for his survival. The sadness and grief we shared was intense and painful. And, it was a political tragedy for the SDWAP, which needed public and member's support for the elephant program, support that tends to dwindle quickly when everything doesn't go exactly right.

Being elephant-centered (i.e., client-centered) in orientation, Alan respected the elephants' need for structure and predictability. They don't like surprises very much. So, there was a daily sequence to follow of greeting them in the morning, pulling the loose chains off a front and back leg (to prevent them from fighting during the night and possibly injuring each other), taking urine specimens, leading them out of the barn, inspecting their feet for signs of needed foot care, hosing and washing them, doing a training session to teach simple behaviors (e.g., presenting a foot to a keeper for toenail filing), and then leading them out to the enclosure for the day where the public can enjoy watching them and where they can feed and play and socialize. Maintaining the protocols was another aim of the teaching program for new trainers and keepers. I had to emphasize the necessity to set aside the desire to be a 'cowboy' and ride the elephants, or the desire to skip an established procedure in order to implement a novel one of your own. Trainers and keepers need to have the ability to fit into an existing framework, simply because that is how elephants do best. They feel better, act and react better, and thrive better with the comfort of a routine. And, creating the conditions for elephants to thrive is the goal.

Absorption in a Noble Task

I learned gradually more about elephants than I ever thought I'd want to know. I came to know each of the elephants quite well, and even got wonderfully close to a few. I learned how different each of their personalities was: the practical joker, the sociopath, the lover who just wants to touch and be touched, the one who is the 'voice' of reason, and the curious intellectual.

My favorite elephant was named Jean. She was an affectionate, demonstrative elephant who just wanted to be wherever the action was, meaning the trainers and keepers. In particular, though, and who knows for what reason, she formed a special bond with me, a connection I reciprocated. She was my attentive shadow. She had this peculiar attachment to my tennis shoes, and she loved to sneak up behind me (elephants are unbelievably quiet walkers, their big padded feet muffling the sounds of their footsteps as they walk) and grab them, playfully causing me to land on my backside. If elephants can laugh, she'd be standing over me laughing, as if saying to me, *'I can't believe you fell for that again.'* Jean was a sweetheart. She'd have followed me to the moon for a chunk of chocolate, a mild and pleasant addiction we shared.

One of the biggest tragedies at the Park was when we lost both Jean and her baby in childbirth. Despite valiant, even heroic efforts to save her, no one knew enough of what to do when the baby got stuck in her birth canal. Amazingly, the first ever caesarean section performed

on an elephant was performed on Jean. Her surgery and recovery process, innovatively but clumsily involving a hoist to keep her upright, made the news everywhere, and there were lots of well-wishers who wrote to the Park from all over the world. But, in the end, all we didn't know about normal conception, normal gestation, and normal deliveries made it impossible to save either Jean or her baby. 'Tragedy' seemed an understatement to me. My grief over losing Jean and her baby was intense.

I could tell many elephant stories, ranging from the great successes to the tragic failures. But I cannot convey in a short article the depth of love I developed for these creatures who embody a loyalty and integrity I wish all humans could experience and learn from. The thought of a world without elephants is excruciating to me. Captive breeding programs like the one at the SDWAP are a means for slowing the march toward extinction, run by dedicated scientists and animal experts whose devotion to the animals is awe-inspiring. But, I doubt there is an elephant conservationist anywhere who would suggest that captive breeding will, by itself, be enough to ultimately save the elephant. Only by saving vast amounts of its natural habitat can this goal be accomplished. Elephants eat too much and require too much space to hope passively they will somehow survive without our aggressive help.

Bill Campbell and I eventually published our work, and he creatively wove our ideas and techniques together into a training program he conducted for

the new keepers and trainers. However, politics, money, and other unfortunate circumstances eventually conspired to change the aims of the San Diego Wild Animal Park and the Zoological Society of San Diego. The elephant breeding program went from active and robust to comparatively inactive. The difficulties in managing elephants, even for a Park as dedicated, well-equipped and knowledgeable as the SDWAP, brought the program to a halt. It is a terrible blow to the chances for their survival, because elephants need all the help they can get. Recently, however, the Park acquired seven new African elephants and a new baby boy was born soon after their arrival at the Park. A new age is dawning for the elephants at the SDWAP.

Part of any positive psychology is to think beyond human experience, appreciating and respecting life in all its forms. We don't have to appreciate only elephants that amuse us directly in zoos or circuses. We can best appreciate them simply for what they are. Readers of this magazine tend to already think systemically, so it isn't much of a stretch for them to appreciate that when we destroy habitats and let entire species die or dangle on the edge of extinction, we're ultimately hurting ourselves.

My work at the San Diego Wild Animal Park a dozen years ago was a privilege. It was also a welcome 'red alert' signal, abruptly rousing me to the realization that the world is a much bigger place than just my office and my schedule of therapy clients. And it needs some immediate attention.



AUTHOR NOTES

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