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# Turtle

## Working with adult survivors of pre-verbal sexual abuse

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### Introduction

Lacan's model of child development is of particular value when one attempts to work with an adult client who was abused before language was sufficiently developed to become the primary, conscious framework for meaning-making, i.e. pre-verbally.

Simply put, Lacan's model contains: the Real (that which we cannot know, because it exists before we have a conscious awareness. It is that which is not altered by anything else, any 'other'); the Imaginary (that which exists in the earliest relationship mother/other – but it is non verbal and is non symbolised. It exists in another realm, which is kinesthetic/sensational/emotive); and the Symbolic (which is the realm that the child enters into with the acquisition of language. In our culture, this is the realm of the patriarchy – which has specific implications for victims of pre-verbal sexual abuse).

The pre-verbal child is not preconscious – it has awareness of movement, sensation and emotion, and is developing a consciousness of self. The interface between self and other is diffuse. The child lives in an Imaginary universe, into which both the Real and the Symbolic intrude. The child can be enormously impressed, but has very limited ability to express.

Narrative memory cannot exist prior to the mental and psychological development of narrative ability. Pre-verbal memory is, therefore, of necessity non-narrative. It is kinesthetic, sensational and emotional – and, we hypothesise, it cannot always distinguish between self and other.

The desire of the self to communicate (with other), and the desire of the parent(s)(other) that the child communicate, are principal levers into the order of the Symbolic (language). Lacan calls this the mirror-phase. In terms of learning language, however, the child imitates the adult, rather than each imitating the other.

The rules about What is named, and How and When it is named, are laid down by the adults. The focus of naming is perforce on 'real' objects, rather than on subjective imaging. (The use of 'real' here is empirical – that which can be seen, heard, felt, tasted or smelt.) Language, in these early stages of the child's development, is for 'reality'. Drawing, painting are for imaging (the Imaginary).

As children are experimenting with naming whatever takes their interest, adults are establishing the difference between 'real' and 'imaginary'. (The use of 'imaginary' here refers to the images in a child's head which language is not sufficiently developed to express.) This process, these distinctions, assist the further development of Pre-verbal experience as an invisible 'pocket' universe. As the child differentiates self from other, the merged state – "me/mother/together = me? – becomes less 'real'. Mother/other insists, through language and its use, that mother/other and child are separate.

As the child reaches for the new "togetherness" of language, the old "separateness" of pre-verbality is what it strives to leave behind. The "pocket universe" becomes increasingly static and inaccessible within an expanding, complex and demanding "real" universe of communication (symbology). And, as the child becomes more reliant on symbology (narrative) to encode memory, the "pocket universe" becomes less and less available to memory.

The client who has suffered pre-verbal abuse may experience the 'pocket universe' as seemingly inappropriate compulsions, and untouchable, unjustifiable core beliefs driving them to react in certain ways. Metaphorically it is an unseen boulder, of unknowable size or composition, on the bed of a river, We can only deduce the existence of the boulder, by the flow of water around it, by the effect it has on otherwise undisturbed currents. The client may be able to describe how it feels to be the water, and even how the disturbance feels, but they cannot describe the boulder.

Pre-verbal (but not preconscious) experience can be narrated, by means of existing symbology, but it loses something in the process. It is transformed, in an essential way, by the process of narration, which uses language and symbology. The adult client's language and symbology, and degree of

identification with those existing symbols, was developed subsequent to the initial abuse. This, in itself, reinforces the “pocket universe” within which the experience happened, and which seems, to the client, to be inaccessible for narration – since the very act of narration involves processes which were unavailable during the experience.

For example: the client might describe a pre-verbal emotional experience, thus: “it was like being punched in the stomach.”

The therapist and the client may have a mutual understanding of ‘punched’ and ‘stomach’, and even some agreement around the impact of the chosen words – but the fact remains that the symbol/simile, for the client, post-dated the assault and, therefore, is inadequate to transfer, to themselves or to the therapist, the knowledge (whether partial or entire) of the experience.

Though conditioning would make this very unlikely, the client could punch the therapist in the stomach by way of description – affording the therapist, thereby; a more direct appreciation of the client’s experience. The therapist might then be aware of pain, astonishment and anger associated with the client’s behaviour. But for the experience to more closely mimic the client’s pre-verbal reality, the therapist may vocalise, but must not verbalise the pain/astonishment/anger, nor protest the assault, nor seek an explanation from the client. In fact, the therapist should confront the prospect of NEVER speaking of the experience at all.

Even then, the therapist has an adult cognitive frame of reference for the assault. For what the client can never do is regress the therapist to a physical, emotional, psychological and mental condition of helplessness, identical in its genetic and environmental history to the child the client once was – and punch it in the stomach.

Nor can the client overlay on to the therapist, subsequent to the punch, the client’s own developmental history, complete with meaning-making around physical or emotional assault.

Helplessness, for the pre-verbal child, is an essentially different experience from that of helplessness for the verbal child, or “helplessness” as a symbolic concept, associated with ‘child-ness’.

## Client A

Client A is around 40 years old, physically, socially and professionally functional. She was sexually abused by her grandfather from the age of 15

months to approximately 9 or 10 years. Through corroborative evidence from her parents, she is satisfied that the abuse took place. Her memories are primarily kinesthetic or visual, with very little chronological or physical context.

Hypothesis: since the initial abuse trauma occurred when the client was pre-verbal, this did not permit its inclusion in narrative memory, once narrative ability developed. What cannot be named is not "real".

Abuse that continued to occur after the development of narrative ability could still not be included in narrative memory. To do so would threaten both the existence and autonomy of conscious self, by threatening the merged-state of self/mother necessary for the development of conscious self. The child, in its preconscious merged state has neither the mental nor psychological development, nor the experience to evaluate fear (danger) or pain (damage) either quantitatively or qualitatively. Any threat or hurt is potentially lethal. ("What will kill me, will kill my mother ... What kills my mother, will kill me...")

Conscious self developed concurrently with language. What was not contained/defined by language belonged to the merged (unspeakable = unknown = unsafe) self, and therefore threatened the self who could communicate/relate to the parent/other.

The trauma of abuse is incomprehensible to the pre-verbal child: it will 'kill' her and her mother (merged state). To protect herself/her mother, the child developing language and consciousness of self, must not remember or verbalise the abuse.

The client continued to "store" the abuse experience "safely" in kinesthetic "memory". The fragments of visual and kinesthetic memory surfaced most acutely, in PTSD fashion, when the client began a new sexual relationship. In life situations, these symptoms were an inconvenience, and were well-managed.

However, because they continued to present in her primary relationship, she decided in session to work more directly on the "trauma". The therapeutic alliances were well established. Both the client and the therapist acknowledged that some of the abuse occurred when the client was pre-verbal, since this was corroborated by the client's parents.

The "flashbacks" initially presented themselves outside the session room, and were described, by the client, as physical "stuckness" or immobility, mental

“treacle” or slowing-down, and “tetanus” or lockjaw, an inability to speak or make a sound. “Stuck”, “treacle” and “tetanus” were the client’s own words, “code-words” she called them, used initially to describe the experience, but not the content, of flashback, and subsequently, to identify the onset or presence of flashback. These codewords were accepted and affirmed by both her partner and her therapist.

As session work progressed, the client was able to access these “flashback” experiences in the presence of the therapist. The therapist observed that the client could describe very little of the visual or contextual content of the flashbacks. Most of the describable content seemed to tell of her own physical or emotional condition, with only very occasional, extremely localised descriptions of anything outside of herself: the underside of a bed she hid under, the glans of a penis the size of a baseball (“like the close-up of a huge tongue sticking out”), or the subsequent unspoken knowing (later corroborated) that her grandfather wore boxer underpants. The therapist hypothesised that the client remembered the “hiding” and the terror, rather than the “terrible thing” she was hiding from. (She remembered how the water flowed, rather than the boulder.)

The therapist hypothesised further that the client’s experience, as an adult, of saying No was primarily an experience of the power of symbol. In session, the client came to distinguish between the symbol No, and the feeling “no”. She came to realise that the feeling of “no”, was powerlessness, and guilt.

In intimate (sexual) relationship, the arrival of flashbacks (the utter powerlessness of “no”, the ineffectualness of No from child-prey to adult-predator) conflicted painfully with her adult needs and wants. She felt “wrong” and “weak” in her memories of the abuse, because she hadn’t acted on “no” (i.e. fought), and because she hadn’t insisted on No. In fact, she remembered, on occasion, agreeing to place herself in the power of the abuser, in order to protect her mother from knowledge that “would kill her.”

In session, work continued with the cognitive differentiation between primary statements of belief (“I’m wrong – bad – weak”) and adult experiences of autonomy. The feelings of wrongness and helplessness were further identified as belonging to the primary constructs.

The client reported cognitive relief. However, the feelings of “wrongness” and the experience of “flashback” helplessness continued in the present. The client also sometimes reported “resisting” resolving the feelings of wrongness – and

“feeling guilty for choosing wrongness over health”.

During one session, this reporting appeared to precipitate the client into a kinesthetic “flashback” (knees to chest, arms wrapping own body, unable to speak or move). The client and the therapist had previously established that, when the client was in this state, her need was to be “invisible”, but she also needed to hear the therapist speak, in nonevocative language, in order to safely locate her.

The therapist’s voice is part of what facilitates the client’s emergence from “flashback”. The therapist “follows” the client’s timing around being able to speak, being able to be asked for information, or being able to offer it – this being the point where adult cognition becomes available again to the client.

When the client indicated that this point had been reached, the therapist held the therapeutic window open for any spoken description the client might wish to make of her kinesthetic awareness during the “flashback”. This time, Client A said: “Turtle .... I’m a turtle.”

Turtle, when threatened, pulls her head, feet and tail into her shell, and becomes immobile. Turtle, in her shell, is “invisible”. Turtle, feeling “no”, withdraws.

The discovery, for both client and therapist, was that Turtle represented her pre-verbal “no”. Client A, during “flashback”, couldn’t say No, but she could *do* No. She had *done* No, when she felt “no”. The sense of guilt and wrongness began to abate. “Turtle” was a first bridge between the “pocket universe” and the “real” symbolic universe. To discover that she had rejected her abuse and her abuser – *and to discover the evidence in her own body-memory* – was an essential, enormous relief.

Turtle continued to be empowering. Having established “Turtle” as a code, between herself, her partner and her therapist, to describe/announce a flashback or a feeling of “no”, she could be affirmed in “no” in a way previously not possible. The resonance between “no” and No began also to be affirmed. Lacan’s mirror-phase clearly operates.

Thus far, in terms of Client A’s subjective reality, Turtle represented an absence of negative self-judgement. Some sessions later came another breakthrough. Anticipating a flashback, using Turtle to express “no” (by actually pulling her head into her jumper) and having this seen and affirmed by the therapist, Client A announced, from inside her jumper and with an

astonished sense of pride “Turtles know about things like that!”

The absence of negative self-judgement (“wrongness”) had become confidence in the rightness of “turtle-no” – confidence, in essence, in the “rightness” of herself in the as yet still unknown pocket universe.

With this confidence, again recognised and affirmed by both partner and therapist, “Turtle” began to evolve from a single symbol into a symbol tree. Differentiating between flavours of Turtle, other words could safely be attached to “Turtle” to express these e.g. “Turtle-here”, meaning awareness of present danger, or “Turtle-gone”, physical, emotional and psychological withdrawal in response to danger. Turtle-gone represented the client’s kinesthetic memory/experience of dissociation, Turtle was now not merely a bridge from pocket universe to symbolic universe – it became also a bridge back, so that the client’s adult symbols could be imported and tried out against pre-verbal experience. Thereby, it preserved and promoted both the integrity of self and the increase of autonomy.

With the development of turtle-symbology as a tool, the pre-verbal pocket universe moves into the order of the Symbolic, and can be remembered and narrated. Now the pre-verbal experience can be integrated as part of the adult’s life-story.

## **The Therapist**

Pre-verbal knowledge is “held” primarily in the kinesthetic. It will evidence itself kinesthetically, express itself kinesthetically, and can usually only be accessed kinesthetically. The clues, for the therapist as well as for the client, that a pre-verbal ‘pocket universe’ exists, will be found primarily in kinesthetic awareness. The language used to describe this awareness has, by and large, escaped most of the judgemental loading which accrues to descriptions of emotional or cognitive processes, and is therefore more likely to include “pocket” as well as “symbolic” awareness. “I itch ... I scratch” has its psychological equivalent, but it exists more vehemently in the everyday of common reality. If the client elects to describe kinesthetic rather than emotional or cognitive awareness, the client’s awareness may be of the incongruencies of kinesthetic behaviour in given emotional or physical circumstances. The therapist’s awareness may be of the congruencies between the kinesthetic behaviour and their map of the effects of pre-verbal abuse. However, at all costs, the therapist needs to consider the dangers of interpreting

this to the client – of providing a symbolic frame for a universe that, as yet, recognises no symbology. **NO MORE WORDS** should be added to the client's language. The client is attempting to create a new language of their own.

The therapist cannot overestimate the momentous and exciting nature of what the client is doing. This is the birth of language, the creation of tools to communicate with self and other. We can hypothesise that for the client, this is true illumination. The process, for both client and therapist, should be one of mutual learning, entering unknown territory in which they are both pioneers. The therapist has psychological maps. The client has awareness of sensation and context – a shouting voice, violent movement, and the liquid bowels and chattering teeth of his/her own terror. The words which emerge to describe this context and sensation may initially be as disconcerting or seemingly inappropriate for the client as for the therapist. The challenge, for both, is to listen and learn.

The therapist may discover that the client's pre-verbal kinesthetic image for the imminent threat of assault is now expressed as "lizard-darting".

The client is learning to integrate the cognitive, symbolic map for "Daddy is angry. Daddy is/will hit me. Hitting hurts. I have to be still and invisible; I have to run very fast!" – and to rediscover/narrate more fully the experience of Lizard, darting.

As new neural connections form, the client can experience an excited sense of empowerment which pushes relentlessly for expansion of those connections – and integration of the thereby acquired knowledge into existing understanding. Much of this process will happen outside the therapeutic hour. The client's timing is not the therapist's! The therapist's most supportive role may be that of "safe house", "witness" and "cheering from the sidelines". It cannot be overemphasised, in this, that the therapist's use of their own language/symbology to "facilitate" understanding, may have the reverse effect, and obstruct the necessary development of the "pocket universe" from the Imaginary to the Symbolic.

For the client, attempting to narrate a pre-verbal experience using existing adult symbology (trying to describe the "pocket universe" with the language of a common universe) can have various negative effects – even though the client may believe and have experienced narrative psychotherapy as a positive tool.

The client may feel fraudulent or inadequate in themselves. The words don't



touch the feelings/memories, don't represent them accurately. This may lead to a deepening sense of isolation and "wrongness".

The client may feel fraudulent and inadequate to the therapist/therapy – "I'm continuing to make a fuss about something we've already talked about/ we've already covered this, she/he will think I just want attention."

The client may feel confirmed in their "wrongness" – "See? I'm beyond help – none of the usual solutions work with me." Or "I'm so bad, he/she can't imagine/believe this really happened like I'm telling it."

The client may blame the therapist or the therapeutic process for "failing to understand" what she/he is saying – and withdraw the "pocket universe" from therapy. The unspeakable becomes "the unspeakable".

The client may, through common or therapeutic language, discover the commonality of his/her experience – but feel it as a loss of something so intrinsic, so personal to their knowledge of themselves, that they stop speaking of it, in order to protect their sense of identity. "To expose it to the common coin of language, is to expose it to the whim of valuation – it may be debased or appreciated according to a system I have no knowledge/control of." (Client A)

The process of truly narrating a pre-verbal experience, is the process of development from the order of the Imaginary to the order of the Symbolic. In order to achieve this, the client must be able to identify with, practise with, be affirmed with and finally claim her/his own personal symbol for each facet of that experience.

These symbols will likely, though not necessarily, need to be other than the symbols/language commonly used to describe such experiences. Symbols (language), used during the intervening years between abuse and therapy, will have accrued significance unrelated perhaps, except by social use, to the experience the pre-verbal child underwent.

### Cassandra

Don't deny me  
my monstrous –  
don't tell me  
you can't see  
the crescent of

iridescent scaling green  
my sleeve uncovers  
inadvertently.  
Don't refuse  
the brief confused  
revulsion in your lover's  
fingers touching me  
encountering  
not skin  
but a thin crispness  
of chitin.

Do you understand?  
I can bear  
my difference.  
Just – don't abandon me  
to the loneliness  
of again being  
the only soul on earth  
to know:  
The aliens  
have landed.

With thanks to Client A for her consent to my use of her raw fabric; to Sarah Calvert for helping thread the needle; and to Lindsay Quilter for "Cassandra".

### Postscript

In session-work, Client A has added another branch to the symbol-tree of Turtle: "Turtlemove". This to describe something which had hitherto not happened:

Turtle, in the presence of danger, and having withdrawn and become "invisible", MOVED to accommodate/defend her own physical situation.

Hypothesis: The "pocket universe" is not static or inaccessible. It exists *concurrently with* the "real" symbolic universe, and is influenced by/evolves concurrently with the adult client's understanding/integration of the Imaginary with the Symbolic.

The challenge, for the therapist working with a client whose traumatic experiences include pre-verbal abuse, is not merely to be conscious and careful of their cognitive and emotional presence in narrative (Symbolic) psychotherapy, but to be equally aware of their kinesthetic (body/behaviour) presence in relation with the client's Imaginary, here-and-now "pocket universe."