

Nise da Silveira and the companion species

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Abstract

This article aims to reclaim and reinvigorate ideas by Nise da Silveira (1992, 1995, 1998, 2015) about the relationships between humans and animals, as well as to discuss, along with authors such as Haraway (2007, 2021), Levinson (1962, 1982), Minerbo (2002) and Gentile (2021), the possibilities of animals as co-therapists in cases of mental suffering and to point to the enormous therapeutic potential of companion species. ■



Keywords
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Nise da Silveira and the companion species

Introduction

In 1955, Nise da Silveira found a starving, abandoned little dog on the outskirts of the Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II, the first mental asylum in Brazil and the second in Latin America, which opened in 1852 and located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. She took it in her hands, looked at a patient who was in the hospital and asked: “Will you take care of this little dog very carefully?” (Silveira, 1992, p. 112). He accepted and this little dog, which she later named Caralâmpia, would become the first animal therapist in Nise da Silveira’s practice.

Caralâmpia was Nise da Silveira’s childhood nickname. It was her father, Faustino, who gave it to her. For the psychiatrist, the word was related to the freedom of the imagination. When the world became threatening, she retreated into Caralâmpia. This world, a mixture of fun and protection, was used to reassure her in difficult times (Melo, 2007).

This unusual co-therapist, who inaugurated for the psychiatrist new possibilities regarding to clinical practice and research, would not be the only one. After it, there would be other co-therapist animals at the Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II, some of whom were even considered therapists in clinical contexts in which Nise da Silveira herself and the monitors began to assign themselves the role of co-therapists (Silveira, 2015).

In this article, we will try to present, rescue and thus reinvigorate Nise da Silveira’s thinking on the relationship between animals and humans. In dialogue with Haraway (2007, 2021), Levinson (1962, 1982), Minerbo (2002) and Gentile (2021), we will investigate the function of co-therapy attributed to animals in cases of mental suffering, ultimately reinforcing the possibility of thinking about the therapeutic potential of relationships between humans and other species.

Caralâmpia’s World

Nise da Silveira attached importance to the relationships between humans and animals not only because she had an affinity with animals, but above all because she observed a relational web between all beings: humans, animals, plants and also inorganic beings (Magaldi, 2020).

This vision, coupled with her understanding that the psyche defends itself when its balance is disturbed, that even in the most divided psyche there are life impulses, attempts at internal ordering, renewal and a return to reality, led the psychiatrist to bet on the affective connection between humans and non-humans as being able to intertwine and give rise to therapeutic contours in cases of psychic suffering (Magaldi, 2020).

When thinking about the processes of self-healing of the psyche and the rehabilitation of people in severe psychic distress, she pointed out two primary conditions, closely linked to each other, for the recovery: treatment (1) must take place in a free and mild environment, in which the *being* unfolds without interference, and (2) requires catalyzing relationships, bonds of reference, affection and constancy in the external world (Silveira, 2015).

Nise da Silveira (2015) called catalyzing relationships, or catalyzing affection, affective relationships capable of coordinating psychic functions in attempts to renew the psyche and which eventually enable the rehabilitation of sick people. She observed with her psychotic patients admitted to the Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II that, in addition to the bonds with the monitors, they formed excellent relationships with the animals that lived in the hospital. Thus, Nise da Silveira also dedicated herself to studying not only the closeness but, above all, the relationships between humans and animals (Silveira, 2015).

Nise da Silveira also recognized a potential therapeutic effect on animals in the relationship between humans and animals. She felt the need to protect animals and to “donate affection to those lonely beings to whom few men or women even spoke a word or made a friendly gesture” (Silveira, 1992, p. 112). In addition, here we can see the potential positive effect of expressing affection for both the giver and the receiver.

The concept of significant otherness developed by Donna Haraway (2021), an American philosopher and zoologist, seems to be in dialogue with Nise da Silveira (1992, 1998, 2015) and can therefore help us to think about approaches and relationships between humans and animals. She characterizes significant otherness as partial connections which pay attention to the similarities as well as the differences between beings with disparate histories but who, in constitutive relationships, are building a common future.

The relationships between significant alterities end up connecting non-harmonious lifestyles and disparate histories; they have the capacity to project a common future, to give rise to a “becoming-together”. Thus, companion animals, such as dogs, cats, horses, birds, fish and countless other animals, willing to engage in interspecies bio sociability would be for humans as significant alterities, as well as humans for these animals.

Animals as co-therapists

In her attempt to bring animals closer to patients and vice-versa, Nise da Silveira experienced difficulties and suffering. She heard rude comments from her colleagues at the Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II and they failed to grasp her intention and the meaning of her research. In 1960, Joaquim Fernandes, the hospital’s administrator, ordered that the animals be removed from the establishment, without success (Mello, 2014), and in 1961, in the enclosure where the animals stayed at night, nine dogs were poisoned (Silveira, 2015).

American psychoanalyst Boris Levinson, sympathetic to Nise da Silveira’s proposal, sent her letters showing his compassion for the research and corroborating the idea that, for some patients, animals were the only way to mental health (Silveira, 1998). Levinson’s contributions (1962, 1982) are interesting and shed light on the practice of animals as co-therapists. In 1962, he wrote the article *The dog as a “co-therapist”*, in which he reported the case of a child in psychological distress who, despite not interacting with him or other people, formed a bond with the dog that stayed in his office. Over time, this child tried to include the psychoanalyst in his games with the dog and also established a bond with him. According to the author, the child made an excellent recovery.

For the psychoanalyst (Levinson, 1962, 1982), relationships with animals can point the way towards mental health, with animal co-therapists being catalysts, helping humans in their processes of regression, acceptance and, progressively, healing. Some patients, he comments, feel the transference relationship with the therapist to be threatening, and in these cases the animal enables experiences of interaction without anxieties about losing the object and of mutual acceptance. The animal, in some cases, can even become the human being’s first relationship beyond themselves throughout their maturation process.

In the article *C(ã)es-terapeutas: o enquadre a serviço do método na análise de uma adolescente*, by Brazilian psychoanalyst Marion Minerbo (2002), we see another case in which animals appear as co-therapists. The author mentions that the analysis of one of her patients was only possible thanks to the dogs and even humorously divides the analysis into two periods: before the dog (B.C.) and after the dog (A.D.). Minerbo, who, in her analysis with Taís, was looking for “[...] other channels of communication, since, in the transference field, words, mine and hers, had this strange property

of turning into plastic...” (Minerbo, 2002, p. 16), found a new direction when Taís started bringing her dog Loli to the sessions.

For Minerbo (2002), “the road to the recovery of the human [...] passed through a long canine period” (Minerbo, 2002, p. 20), and she, Taís and Loli found “new channels for the circulation of affection” (Minerbo, 2002, p. 20). The psychoanalyst said: “Taís’s affectionate tone was addressed to me through Loli [...] my affection was offered to the dog, but it was Taís who received it” (Minerbo, 2002, p. 20). After a long period of analysis with the participation of Loli and, later, the dogs Sandy and Billy, Taís continued the analysis without the animals in the sessions.

Wasn’t this precisely what Levinson had observed? In other words, could it be that Taís’ transference relationship with Minerbo had been perceived as threatening by the patient and that the animal had enabled interaction without intolerable anxiety about losing the object? It’s a good hypothesis. What we can say with certainty is that the affective connection between Taís, Minerbo and the dogs was able to intertwine and give rise to therapeutic contours (Magaldi, 2020) and that the animals helped the relational process, indicating paths towards mental health (Levinson, 1962).

Another important contribution comes from Katie Gentile (2021), an American psychoanalyst, in her article *Kittens in the clinical space: expanding subjectivity through dense temporalities of interspecies transcorporeal becoming*. One day, Latrice, Gentile’s analysand, came to the analysis wanting to adopt a cat. The analyst was worried about the cat because Latrice had suffered neglect and abuse as a child and had recurrent episodes of anger and violence, which could hurt the animal. To Gentile’s surprise, Latrice rejected this narrative and adopted the cat. The relationship between Latrice and the cat, according to the author, turned out to be a relationship between subjects with particular rights and provided Latrice with new forms of representation and symbolization.

In this article, Gentile (2021) tries to demonstrate another aspect of the relationship between humans and animals, in addition to the therapeutic potential of the relationship: the bond between Latrice and the cat is characterized as a relationship between “subjects with particular rights”. In this way, she points to the animal’s agency, disentangles the human from their imaginary pedestal, as Nise da Silveira (2015) suggests, indicates interspecies co-constitution and refers to significant otherness.

Gentile (2021) rightly criticizes certain uses of animals as co-therapists because they can be understood from a human-centred perspective as objects or instruments. Donna Haraway (2021) similarly questions the idea of unconditional love from animals. Wouldn’t it be caninophilic narcissism? Man manifesting his intentions in his objects? For these authors, the relationships between humans and animals should be thought of in terms of co-constitution; they are shared becomings and not relationships between pre-constituted subjects and objects.

Nise da Silveira (1998, 2015), recognizing that relationships between humans and animals are wrapped up in complex webs of projections and identifications, presented a therapy without specific outlines and objectives, but based on relationships (Silveira, 1992). In her book *Imagens do Inconsciente* (Silveira, 2015), she described the case of Djanira, an inpatient at the Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II, who suffered from irreducible mutism and had undergone countless electroshock sessions without her condition improving. Djanira did, however, relate to animals, sharing food with her cat Cravina and always painting with her on her lap. On July 26, 1961, Djanira, an inpatient with “irreducible mutism”, was surprised by a monitor while talking to her cat. According to Nise da Silveira, the patient’s relationship with animals led to a significant improvement in her symptoms and she even composed a samba for a dog on the piano.

Carlos, another patient of Nise da Silveira (2015), who used many neologisms and dis-

ordered words in his sentences, remained absorbed in his internal world until he met the dog Sultão. According to the author, the two were great friends, but when Sultan died of poisoning in 1961, Carlos became more inaccessible than before. Two years after Sultão's death, however, the patient established a bond with another dog called Sertanejo. They became inseparable friends and Carlos would express matters relating to the dog in intelligible sentences.

We can see in these accounts by the psychiatrist that Nise da Silveira's practice, which valued relationships and affection between beings, made humans and animals meet in their particularities. She thus presented a therapy that does not consider animals as objects, but as subjects with particular rights, and that takes into account co-constitution, shared becomings and significant otherness. The proof of this is that Sultão and Sertanejo became friends and transformative affections for Carlos, just as Djanira and Cravina constituted their biographies in the flesh and in the sign.

We understand that Nise da Silveira's proposal of animals as co-therapists, despite not having specific outlines and objectives, takes some directions related to (1) catalyzing affection, which can be thought of along with the problems of transference (even if it is not reduced to these problems), taking into account the contributions of Boris Levinson and Marion Minerbo; and (2) the understanding that humans and animals can present shared becoming and relationships between subjects of particular rights, considering the contributions of Donna Haraway and Katie Gentile.

The companion species

Relationships between humans and animals involve interspecies cooperation in affective and instrumental aspects, but also agonistic interactions¹ and the spread of diseases. These relationships are relevant socio-ecological phenomena

because, through environmental changes and cultural practices, human beings have changed the behavior and morphology of other species over time and, through these relationships, the human species has also been altered (Cabral e Savalli, 2020).

Today, animals are considered allies in the treatment of depression, anxiety and Alzheimer's, they have cardiovascular health benefits, contribute to lifestyles that involve care (Haraway, 2007), help in the development of adaptive personality traits (Levinson, 1982) and, in addition, there is evidence that people who have pets attend fewer medical appointments, consume less medication for hypertension, cholesterol and insomnia (Haraway, 2007).

According to Haraway (2007), these benefits to humans are not solely due to the emotional support that animals offer, but above all because complex forms of interspecies communication occur. The key to understanding this phenomenon lies in co-constitution, taking into account the very agency of animals, how they approach and interact with humans.

Dogs, for example, have the ability to interpret social behavior, use communicative cues, gestures, body orientation, body movement, distinguish between friendly and threatening approaches, assess the social context, recognize human emotions and integrate auditory and visual stimuli. They are present in 44.3% of Brazilian households, yet another part of these animals lives in the streets, in communities and in neighborhoods, surviving in a wandering way, through marginal interactions with humans (Cabral e Savalli, 2020).

Penteado and Safra (2022), in their article *A memória do ethos: um estudo exploratório sobre a relação entre o ser humano e os cães no mundo contemporâneo*, point out that the human-dog bond is becoming increasingly close. The authors work with the hypothesis that the human being is in a deep crisis, in which there is a gradual loss of the sense of otherness, so the presence of animals indicates a way of recover-

¹ Relationships that affect both human and animal welfare.

ing the *being-with* that is proper to the human condition. Dogs, in particular, have great synergy with humans, they are susceptible to the experience of care-love, they become home and family, companions and witnesses to human afflictions.

In 1982, in the article *The future of research into relationships between people and people and their animal companions*, Levinson presented four possible areas of research with animals: (1) the role of animals in different cultures and ethnic groups over the centuries; (2) the effect of animals on the development of personality, emotions and attitudes in humans; (3) communication between humans and animals; and (4) the use of animals in psychotherapy, in institutions, with elderly people and/or those with some pathology.

Levinson (1982), like Nise da Silveira (2015) and Haraway (2021), considers animals to be life partners on earth and suggests a careful investigation of the relationships between humans and animals, whether domestic or wild, because human existence undoubtedly depends on the way these relationships occur.

In the writings of Nise da Silveira (1992, 1998, 2015), we find stories of co-constitution between humans and their animal companions. The psychiatrist seems concerned to show that, in order to understand what happens between humans and animals, relationships must be studied above all and that these (catalysts) relationships occur not only in consulting rooms and institutions. In her book *Gatos, a emoção de lidar* (Silveira, 1998), she presents to us the story of the French sculptor Camille Claudel (1864-1943), who was forcibly interned in an asylum in the south of France, where she remained for more than 30 years. In her letters, Claudel not only denounced her suffering, revolt, loneliness and the terrible conditions of the asylum, but also wrote about a cat, which helped her fill some of the emptiness she felt. In the same book, Nise da Silveira tells of the philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), who repudiated the imaginary royalty that man attributed to himself and who, while with his cat, asked himself:

“When I amuse myself with my cat, who knows if she doesn’t make me her hobby, more than I make her mine” (Silveira, 1998, p.21), dealing, in a caricatured way, with the agency of animals, co-constitution and shared becomings.

Also noteworthy is Nise da Silveira’s (1992) remarkable observation in her book *O mundo das Imagens*, which can also be taken as an example of a co-constitutive narrative: that people living in the streets are often accompanied by dogs. They are friends of destiny. This friendship is often the person’s only link to life and having its importance recognized, for example by the therapist, is often the key, the gateway to a new relationship between humans, in other words, the psychic environment of a possible bond.

Conclusion

Nise da Silveira (1992), when she received the little dog Caralâmpia at Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II, began a therapeutic practice that focused on the affective relationships between humans and animals as capable of providing therapeutic outlines in cases of psychic suffering. This practice, which comprises a relational web between beings, is intended to relate animals to humans, but not to use animals as mere instruments or objects, thus removing man from the imaginary pedestal he has created for himself (Silveira, 2015).

Nise da Silveira’s ideas about the relationship between humans and animals should be revived and reinvigorated through dialogue with contemporary authors — such as Boris Levinson, Marion Minerbo, Katie Gentile and Donna Haraway — in order to think about the possibilities and limitations of animals as co-therapists in cases of psychic suffering, as well as the potential of these interspecies cooperations.

Nise da Silveira’s therapy, despite not having defined outlines, should be studied (and updated) based on the concepts of (1) catalyzing affection and (2) co-constitution. In the psychiatrist’s works we find stories of many animals, significant otherness for her and her patients,

and we recognize that studying significant alterities can move humanity towards the conception of the relational web between all beings (Magaldi, 2020).

Finally, among the many stories told by the psychiatrist, we would like to highlight one last narrative of co-constitution, which occurred between Nise and her cat Belle-Minette. This “wild” cat didn’t like the typewriter, but had fun playing

with the sheets of paper. The cat even participated in Nise da Silveira’s work, as recognized by the author herself, something that could be understood as a co-authorship, leaving prints of her paws and scratches on some of the manuscripts (Silveira, 1998). ■

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Resumo

Nise da Silveira e as espécies companheiras

Este artigo procura resgatar e revigorar ideias de Nise da Silveira (1992, 1995, 1998, 2015) acerca das relações entre humanos e animais, além de discutir, em conjunto com os autores Haraway (2007, 2021), Levinson (1962, 1982), Minerbo (2002) e Gentile (2021), as possibilidades e as limitações dos animais como coterapeutas em casos de sofrimento mental e indicar o potencial terapêutico das espécies companheiras. ■

Palavras-chave: Nise da Silveira; espécies companheiras; animais como coterapeutas; animais de companhia; psicologia junguiana

Resumen

Nise da Silveira y las especies de compañía

Este artículo intenta rescatar y revitalizar ideas de Nise da Silveira (1992, 1995, 1998, 2015) sobre las relaciones entre humanos y animales, además de actualizar, a través de autores como Haraway (2007, 2021), Levinson (1962, 1982), Minerbo (2002) y Gentile (2021), las posibilidades de los animales como co-terapeutas en casos de sufrimiento psíquico y señalar el enorme potencial terapéutico de las especies de compañía. ■

Palabras-clave: Nise da Silveira; especies de compañía; animales; animales de compañía; psicología junguiana

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