

Affective work in living and working with captive dolphins

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Abstract

Drawing from fieldwork in a marine park, the presentation will describe the relationship that dolphins and their trainers develop. It appears that learning how to be affected by and how to affect the partner is a key component of an interspecific collaboration that isn't sheer domination.

Text

1. A difficult fieldwork

The presentation is based on ethnographic work conducted with dolphin trainers at an aquatic park in Europe. This was a difficult (and too short) fieldwork for two main reasons. First, because people in aquatic parks are very suspicious about strangers coming into the backstage. They are always wary that animal welfare activists could infiltrate the team, pretending they are trainees or anything else. I had to build trust and convince everyone that I was not going to speak badly about the dolphins and their living condition. And second, because it is a very busy activity. No one has ever time to give to you. I did long interviews with 5 senior dolphin trainers, and these had to be planned well in advance in order to fit into their schedule. Besides that, I observed them at work, recorded on video 20 training sessions, and had some informal conversations with them. But not a lot. My main activity was indeed to sand here or there, trying to make myself as unobtrusive as possible

2. I did my observations in the winter, while the park was closed, and the trainers busy with teaching the dolphins new behaviours, and building the next summer show. At that moment there were 11 dolphins, 3 males, 4 females and 4 juveniles in the park. A team of eleven persons was there to care for them (2 males and 9 females). The work is hard, the salary is not very high, and one doesn't choose this profession if (s)he doesn't like animals. As Nolwen¹, the head dolphins' trainer said: "we see the dolphins more than our family". Some of the trainers, but not all of them, are very close to the dolphins: they dream about them, and being with the dolphins seems to be a very special experience:

¹ In order to preserve the anonymity of everyone, all the names, including dolphin names, have been changed.

“the first time you train them, the first time you’re close to them, when after that you enter your shower, and you cry, you... , you just don’t want to be separated from them; you smile the whole day whatever happens... it is so much... something so special that you don’t expect it. I, for my part, was not a ‘dolphin person’” says Sarah, meaning that she was not “crazy about dolphins” before she was hired by the park.

3. According to these words, there is something special about “being with a dolphin”. I would like here to explore this “something special” with the concept of “interpersonal self” that was devised by Neisser (1988), a cognitive psychologist, when he tried to identify several kinds of selves. Neisser was a friend and colleague of J.J. Gibson, who devised the concept of “affordances” and elaborated an original theory of visual perception. Neisser for his part devised the concept of “interpersonal self” as a supplement of the “ecological self” conceptualized by Gibson. This concept will also help us to understand partly the “collaborative work” with dolphins.

What is the “interpersonal self”? Just as the ecological self of Gibson is the self as it is engaged in the activity of perceiving the environment, « the interpersonal self is the self as engaged in immediate unreflective social interaction with another person. Like the ecological self, it can be *directly perceived* on the basis of objectively existing information.” It means that it isn’t a *construction*, but a *perception*. Elsewhere he adds: “The interpersonal self is not an inner state to be communicated nor a detector of such states in others: it is just a person aware of engaging in social encounter”. (Neisser, 1997: 27).

4. A shared structure of action

According to Neisser again, when people are engaged in social interaction, a shared structure of action can be created: “The participants respond to each other immediately and coherently, in both action and feeling; their reciprocal activities are closely co-ordinated in time. The result **is a shared structure of action** – a structure that both of the participants enjoy, and that neither of them could have produced alone” (392). Like the ecological self, most of the relevant information is essentially *kinetic*, i.e. consists of *structures over time*. These “structures over time” are patterns of nonverbal communication that the self and the other built jointly.

Neisser adds: “If the nature, direction, timing, and intensity of one person’s actions mesh appropriately with the nature/direction/timing/intensity of the other’s, they have jointly created an instance of what is often called *intersubjectivity*. The mutuality of their behaviour exists in fact and can be perceived by outside observers; more importantly, it is perceived by the participants themselves. Each of them can see (and hear, and perhaps feel) the appropriately interactive responses of the other. *Those responses, in relation to one’s own perceived activity, specify the interpersonal self*”. (391, emphasis added).

5. Dolphins and the interpersonal self

We can now come back to the dolphins. If the self is formed in relation to the other, we are allowed to suggest that a specific kind of interpersonal self emerges from the close interaction with dolphins. In Neisser’s words, the dolphins and the trainers jointly specify the interpersonal self of each other. It is the continuous flow of information about how the trainer affect the dolphin that gives her information about her interpersonal self or, we could say, that specifies her interpersonal self. Note that the reverse is probably true also: the continuous flow of information about how he affects the trainer gives the dolphin information about him, and specifies a dolphin’s version of our interpersonal self.

“There is something, when you are in the water with a dolphin, something that goes (happens?) between you and the dolphin, there is something very strong when you are in the water with a dolphin. You have the feeling that she feels your own way of being, she feels if you are not doing well, if you are irritated or if you are reluctant to work.... I don’t know... maybe you just imagine but... there is something that goes on which is quite surprising” (Brian). Being in the water with a dolphin gives rise to an unusual (and very emotional) interpersonal self. If this is so, we must suppose that the kinetic structures that are shared have specific properties.

The dolphin’s extreme sensitivity to nonverbal cues may be part of the answer. “Dolphins are very sensitive, they get excited very easily, they are very sensitive to touch, to noise, to everything that surrounds them” (Brian). It is thus easy for the trainer to see the impact that (s)he has on them and to feel his interpersonal self. Information flow is continuous.

6. Nonverbal communication

Of course, “nonverbal communication” is crucial here. But it is important to say that this nonverbal communication has nothing to do with “communicating information about my internal state”. It has to do with building together common kinetic structures. And through this kinetic structures there is a “direct knowledge”² of the partner which is two-way:

a. trainers can know a lot about dolphin’s mood by observing or feeling the variations in the way they are “together” with them. “It is important to feel the rhythms of swimming or approach of the dolphins in order to know in which mood they are” (Brian).

b. And the reverse is probably true: according to the trainers, dolphins can tell a lot about them, just by observing trainers coming to them at the beginning of the training session “you arrive at the tank border, they already know how you are” (Nolwen). There is an extreme sensitivity, on both sides, to the body of the partner, and a knowledge of the other that is probably driven from the awareness of the interpersonal self.³

7. Interpersonal self and training

“Being together” is a crucial condition for a good training session and trainers routinely check it. “With time, you become able to see: ‘he is with me or not’, ‘he is willing to work or not’. According to Robert, this communication is mainly sustained by the eyes: “a dolphin who is with you, it is four eyes that are looking at each other. If he is not that much with you, there are only two eyes, the connection is not so strong....”. The trainer needs to be mindful, attentive and completely present to the dolphins. Otherwise the training session is jeopardized.

² Let us repeat that, according to the social affordances theory, the social partner is not constructed, but is directly perceived.

³ This sensitivity is built through the course of repeated interactions over time. Saying that the social partner is not constructed, but perceived, doesn’t mean that the knowledge is not learned. On the contrary, dolphins and trainers learn how to perceive their partner. In other words, working with dolphins is to learn how to be affected by them; it is to learn to discern which nonverbal cues to attend to, through a continuous process of education of the attention (Gibson and Ingold).

When dolphins are not engaged, or interested enough in the training, much of the trainer's efforts are aimed at re-establishing the right commonality of behaviour, and they do so by working on the common kinetic structures of the interaction. Moving their body in a dynamic way, they try to attract dolphins in the right kinetic structures. But it would not be enough to just "move" in a dynamic way. Trainers must "feel" in the mood. They adjust their behaviour towards the dolphins by adjusting their intersubjective self. They don't intent to communicate anything to the dolphins, but rather to "be with them" in the right mood. They do this by adjusting the rhythm of their behaviour to the dolphin: they make eye contact and then move in a "dynamic" way in order to carry the dolphin with them, while adjusting their own feelings. "You give them the desire to work by being dynamic, happy, and aware" (Robert). The trainer must be eager and happy to work with the dolphins, and he will "transmit" his desire to the dolphins. This reminds me of the "affect of vitality" that Stern identified in the mother-baby interactions. But of course, there is nothing that is "transmitted". It would be more exact to say that an "interested", or "engaged" interpersonal self emerges from the shared pleasure of the interaction. Trainers must work on their body, on the rhythm of their behaviour, and on their emotions in order to "create", through shared kinetic structures, the interpersonal dolphin that will be eager to engage in a training session.

This is why, if a trainer is not feeling well, she is invited to stay apart and help with the preparation of the food instead of training the dolphins. Not only could she be incapable of motivating the dolphins, but she could even be harmful to them: "Sometimes you are... you have problems with your family, so you're not going to be 100 % with the animals and... you'll be irritated thus... judgements and behaviours, everything is going to be distorted, and you will think: he's making fool of me..." (Brian). If the trainer's perception is distorted, he will behave in a disturbing way for the dolphins and this will alter the dolphins-trainers' communication system as a whole.

Here, Brian introduces yet another question, to which I'll come back later: the disturbing (and distorting) emotions in the training. "Don't put emotions in the training" is one of the first rules of operant conditioning, the training method that is employed in every sea park. Because if you let emotions come in the training, your judgment will be distorted and you will confuse the animal. As we can see, the question of emotions is a very tricky one, because in a way trainers need them, in order to keep the dolphin interested and eager to engage in the training, and to be sensitive themselves to nonverbal communication, but they also need to avoid some kind of emotions. Otherwise, a training session might very quickly turn frustrating for both sides, and generate violent or abusive reactions.

8. Personhood

In this marine park, dolphins are given personalities and personhood. According to Milton (Milton, 2002, p. 81), personhood is tightly linked to the question of emotions. "We perceive personhood in things that appear to have emotions". If it is true that "our sensitivity to the personhood of non-human animals depends on the intensity with which they engage our attention *and respond to what we do*" (as suggested by Milton, following Bird-David), it is not surprising, given their sensibility and the way they engage human beings, that dolphins are given personhood. But it should be stated that the perception of personhood, according to Milton, is NOT the projection of an intention in the machine

(this is mere anthropomorphism). It relies on the direct perception of the animal's way of being and behaving: his gait, for example, or, in the case of one of the dolphins, her look.⁴

Actually, the park is well known among other parks as a park where trainers-dolphins' interactions and relationships are "affectionate" rather than based on sheer dominance. I would add that, according to the head trainer, the park is also laughed at for this by their colleagues. "Here, says proudly Nolwen, we let the dolphins be themselves". She means that each dolphin is respected in his personality: exercises are adapted according to the strength of different bodies; dolphins are allowed to be different one from the other, and are treated accordingly. They are allowed a degree of freedom in the sense that if they don't obey or refuse to work, trainers try to understand why and may accept it. In a way, thus, she also means that the dolphins are allowed to *talk back* to the trainers. They are *listened* to. For this to be possible, a specific *perception frame* must be in place. A frame in which people are ready to perceive what dolphins do *as a response* to them and not, for example, as an information about a schedule of reinforcement.

In her paper about animism (1999), Bird-David called "responsive relatedness" the tendency to see changes in animals (but also in plants and other elements of the natural world) as *responses* to what we do or how we feel. It sets a kind of conversation with the natural world, where it makes sense that trees, rain or animals talk back to human beings. The perception of personhood in non-human others, as in human beings, "offers the possibility of an intersubjective relationship, and so adds a dimension which is not present, for example, in a purely aesthetic experience (Milton, 2002, p. 86). Because the environment is given the opportunity to talk back or comment *about* what human beings are doing to it, responsive relatedness opens a whole new range of perception and it radically changes the rules of communication. It establishes a social relationship between people and their environment. It may be considered as the basis for caring and letting otherness exist.

Nolwen has established this kind of responsive relatedness with the dolphins she is in charge of. She lets the dolphins "answer" or "talk back" to her and her trainers and she uses this to get information about the dolphins: how they feel and how they are going. But this has to be carefully managed, because it might go against another rule that has been stated above: never let your emotions enter the training. Indeed, to let the dolphins "talk back" is to make oneself open to the possibility of being affected by them, i.e., to be emotionally responsive. "It is important to listen to your animal. To listen to what you have in front of you, to look at it, and to understand. You must not be silly when you work with dolphins". (Brian).

In order to manage this complex matter, some rules have been informally stated. Typically, trainers are not allowed to believe that a dolphin is making fool of themselves. If a dolphin doesn't behave as expected, trainers are urged to find explanations either in themselves (I'm not doing things correctly), or in the life of the dolphin (a male is harassing him, his is sick, ...). They are allowed to understand the dolphin's deviant behaviour as "he's telling me that something is wrong with my training (or with himself, or with the situation)", but not as "he's making fool of me", "he's bad" or "he's vicious", etc. The difference is a crucial one. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is the same difference that we find between

⁴ At the beginning of my stay at the park, I was told by one of the trainers explained me that a particular dolphin was to be recognized thanks to her look – that is to say, by the way she was looking at people.

labelling a deviant child's behaviour as "sick" or "pathological" and giving him some remedy to stop it, or being ready to read this "deviant" behaviour as a response or a commentary about what we are doing to him (including treating this behaviour as a mere pathology and not listening to it).

According to Nolwen, most parks drastically limit their interactions and their "conversation" with the dolphins. The animals just have to obey instructions. They are not allowed to talk back and, when they do so, they are not listened to.

9. Trust

At Nolwen's park, trainers can swim with the dolphins, between the training sessions, and they often do so, although in many other places this is impossible. Contrary to parks that organize swimming programs for the public, here the swimming takes place outside any training frame. Trainers do not give instructions to the dolphins nor do they feed them during those "free" swimming. Many trainers I have talked to explained me that this is the result of their politic of "letting the dolphins be themselves". It allows trust to be built. In order to build trust, they have two main rules:

1- Never keep a dolphin failing. Nolwen insists that this is the worst thing that can be done to the mutual trust between dolphins and their trainer. Everything must be done in order to keep the dolphin successful. Otherwise, they will lose their interest in learning. "They like to work; the most important thing is for us not to take that desire from them."

2- By letting the dolphins "be themselves", they build a significant relationship with each dolphin around and outside the training. Because in most parks trainers are only doing the training, they don't build a relationship with the dolphins and they don't let the dolphins "talk back". Maybe the dolphins try to, but they aren't heard as such. They are not heard in their own frame of reference, but only in the trainers' one. There is no conversation but a domination. The relationship is very poor. Indeed, it is a one-sided relationship: trainers decide and dolphins have no other choice than to adapt themselves.

Conclusion

I would like to end with a comment about the story of Tillikum. Most people have explained his aggression by "savagery" or "madness". But to my point of view, it could better be explained as a desperate attempt to get back some control over a relationship that was very frustrating; as some other trainers have hypothesized, it was perhaps a response to a behaviour of the trainer that was felt like a betrayal by the orca. It is not *despite* the fact that the woman attacked was a beloved trainer that the attack was so savage, but *because* of it. In other words, it is an attempt to change the nature of the relationship. It is communication about the relationship, as would say Gregory Bateson. Because even if human beings ignore relationships, dolphins nonetheless probably pay attention to their relationship with the trainer. It is easy to understand why it matters to them. When dolphins are transferred from one park to another, they not only need to adapt to new trainers; they also need to adapt to new rules (about what is allowed and what is not, for example) and to new models of relationship with the trainers (and maybe the other dolphins as well). If it is true that, as suggested by G. Bateson, among others (Bateson, 1980:121) that among cetaceans the communication about relationships is complex, and that they have a complex social life, then we can suppose that they devote a great deal of their intelligence to understand and determine the models of relationships that

prevail in their interactions with the trainers. From that it follows that any disappointment or punishment at this level of communication is about to lead to important suffering.⁵

This communication has examined some aspects of the affective work that takes place in a marine park where dolphins are kept. It shows how human and animal beings find ways of living and working together and the kind of very intimate togetherness that they are able to create. Trainers know how to affect themselves in order to affect the dolphins; they benefit from an enriched interpersonal self that comes from “being with” the dolphins, and the most experienced among them develop a very acute perception of bodily cues that help them “understand” the dolphins. But the sea park is also the place of very complex and messy mix of sometimes contradictory implicit statements about dolphins, their affective life, their intelligence, their sensitivity and ability to suffer. The “dolphin’s representation”, if there were one, that emerges from the daily work with dolphins in a marine park is absolutely not a polished, clear and univocal one. Like in the zoo, it is a messy one, full of contradictions, and for some dolphin trainers these contradictions make their work quite hard. They must be sensitive to the dolphin’s emotions and “put emotions in their work” in order to work efficiently, but at the same time, when it happens that they complain about the departure of one dolphin to another park, they are disqualified by the management as “too emotive”.

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⁵ Cf. the remarkable study led by dolphin trainer Karen Pryor (Pryor & al, 1969) in which a dolphin who is reinforced for *novel* behaviours fails systematically because she produces what she has been reinforced for previously. In fact, in this situation, the “rules of the game” have been changed, and the dolphin is punished for doing what she has learned from previous experience was right. She is deeply affected by this, and turns depressed for a few days. The trust relationship between dolphin and trainer is jeopardized and the trainer has to give the dolphin some “undeserved” fishes, in order to save the relationship. The dolphin is disturbed and depressed until she finds the solution to the problem and then exhibits several totally new behaviours in a row. After that, trainers reported that her personality changed and that she became a dolphin much more extraverted than before. This experiment has been interpreted by G. Bateson as a case of double bind that leads to creativity. Besides showing that the dolphin suffered when her expectations about the pattern of relationship weren't met, it also demonstrates that captive dolphins are cognitively able to resolve tasks that demand a high level of abstraction as it is the case with the concept of « novelty ».