

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON SYMPTOM PRESENTATION IN CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

Children are exposed to contemporary ideas through a variety of media experiences including television, videos, movies and the internet. With the increasing influence of the paranormal, and ready access to the images of this cultural phenomenon, it is not surprising that these ideas may color symptom formation in vulnerable children. Several case vignettes are used to illustrate this phenomenon. A familiarity with prevalent cultural ideas may help the child psychiatrist to better understand the context and meaning of a child's symptoms, irrespective of diagnostic category.

The observation that popular culture influences symptom expression has long been recognized. Prevalent cultural ideas may influence symptom formation, in vulnerable individuals, in two different ways. These ideas may form the content of delusions in psychotic disorders; or they may represent repressed internal conflict. Freud suggested that the return of the repressed was the most important explanation for “uncanny” experiences and often used myths and popular stories as evidence for his psychological theories (Terr, 1985).

The Aliens Have Landed!

Themes relating to aliens and extraterrestrial beings have become commonplace and have been incorporated into children’s literature as well as into the variety of visual media that children are exposed to. Thus the influence of satanic and demonic possession of medieval times, spread through the media products of the printing press (pamphlets and books) (Goodwin, 1996) has been replaced by science fiction and paranormal ideas more in keeping with twentieth century culture.

While the sky has always been a popular haven for non humans and represented an extraterrestrial dimension for fairies and other ghoulish creatures, it has been the shrinking of the earth’s frontiers in recent years with space exploration (Bartholomew et al, 1991) and the evolution of science fiction that have encouraged the paranormal to become so influential. Initially, science fiction had more limited appeal, although it did engage latency age and adolescent boys and “scifi” fan clubs developed in the late 1930s. As the trend over the last half century moved away from the work to the picture, science fiction comic books flourished (Asimov, 1994). With more instant access to media experiences such as television, videos, movies and the internet, science fiction and the associated paranormal culture have become a

potent everyday influence on the thoughts and perceptions of individuals. Moreover, the delivery of the daily news and the “X-files” on the same living room screen may further blur the distinction between reality and fantasy for vulnerable individuals.

Current alien typology

It is helpful to clinicians, working with children and adolescents, to understand the spectrum of alien or extraterrestrial culture. Generally speaking, this spectrum involves variations on a theme (Anderson, 1997). “Type two”, consisting of hulking humanoids with enormous bald heads shaped like a chef’s toque are exemplified by the “Klingons” and “Ferengi” (also from the “Star Trek” series) and by the exposed-brain aliens as seen in “Mars Attacks.” “Type three” represent the prototype “real” aliens as described in reports of UFO abductees. These aliens have emerged during the past few decades as fetus-like, small, gray, hairless humanoids with large, almond-shaped eyes portrayed in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” and the “X-Files.” UFO Abductees report a complex sequence of events in which alien creatures, usually humanoid, short in stature with slanted, dark, almond-shaped eyes, seemingly emotionless, compel the subject’s participation in an abduction (Laibow and Laue, 1993). The stages typically include capture, medical examination, theophany, communication and return. [Not every stage is present in each episode, but some aspect is invariable. A typical sequence is presented in the film “Fire in the Sky.”]

Clinical Application

A fixed belief in the paranormal may be seen in chronic psychiatric disorders, with these beliefs providing a psychotic rationalization for a delusional world. A 14 year old boy, with childhood onset schizophrenia, had developed fixed delusional ideas about alien interference. He

described and drew these aliens as mask-like hominoids with almond-shaped eyes. He had observed an alien spaceship hovering over his family home. Having been fascinated with the “Star Trek” series from a young age, he was convinced that he had been taken to the space ship where he met his “Star Trek” friends amongst the other aliens. He initially believed that the aliens, to whom he attributed his visual and auditory hallucinations, had entered his head in a “fright flash”, changing his intelligence and resulting in his schizophrenia. Later he decided that a female physician on the spaceship had operated on his brain, providing him with special schizophrenic intelligence which was a comfort to him as he struggled with acceptance of his psychological deficits. The female therapist’s familiarity with the Star Trek series and her abilities to use this understanding in establishing a therapeutic connection with this young boy has facilitated his acceptance of his diagnosis and engagement in treatment.

A 13 year old boy with Asperger’s disorder subject to increasing peer conflict and teasing, was preoccupied with a search for intelligent life on other planets, determined to escape from the life he knew on earth. He had been fascinated with extraterrestrial phenomena from an early age and these interests had monopolized his one-sided social interactions. Perhaps a metaphorical use of the “Force”, introduced as a sort of spiritual substrate to the universe in Starwars, may allow a therapeutic connection with this isolated boy.

In the following case vignettes “the aliens” represent repressed internal conflicts and an understanding of current popular culture assists us in better interpreting the psychological dilemmas of these children. A 12 year old boy with an extensive experience of family violence, identified with the aggressor in all aspects of his daily interaction with the exception of a fear of alien abduction. He described recurrent experiences where a humanoid type alien appeared at his

window. He was able to identify with the idea that the alien image represented his own fear of being hurt by his estranged, abusive father and was no longer troubled by these images. In a similar vein, a 15 year old male with post traumatic stress disorder, used alien beliefs (as depicted in the movie “Fire in the Sky”) to express and symbolize the affective and cognitive experiences of multiple childhood trauma (Takhar and Fisman, 1996).

An 11 year old boy presented with symptoms congruent with a major depressive episode with psychotic features. His thought content included a belief that he himself was an alien from the “Galaxy of LL.” He had presented with suicidal ideation, believing that he had to kill himself to save the planet earth, since aliens from “Galaxy LL” wanted his help in their plan to destroy the earth. His responses to the stimulus cards of the Roberts Apperception Test for Children (Roberts, 1987) contained themes of abandonment as did his kinetic family drawing. In addition to biological management of his depressive disorder, therapy involved the exploration of this sense of abandonment and literal alienation from his family. A solution-focused family therapy approach was helpful in assisting him to find his place within the family system when he had been displaced by the birth of his sibling two years earlier. His alien beliefs were no longer evident once his mood was euthymic.

An 8 year old was referred for an evaluation because of a dramatic change in mood and behavior and fears that included seeing “aliens.” She described them as cold and white with big eyes, no nose and a big mouth. She enthusiastically engaged others, including her parents, with elaborate descriptions of “the aliens”. A sibling with a chronic medical illness had been born two years earlier and had become the focus of the family’s energy. Prior to the arrival of “the aliens” this child had been convinced of blindness in her left eye on one occasion and a paralyzed

arm on another, both of which had resolved with medical reassurance. With an interpretation that “the aliens” were her imagination’s expression of her worries, and instructions to her caregivers to selectively ignore them, the aliens disappeared. This occurred prior to mood stabilization.

For the practicing child psychiatrist, a knowledge of popular culture can provide insight into the meaning of symptoms and assist in building rapport and establishing a therapeutic alliance.

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