

How to Understand Boanthropy, Lycanthropy, and Zoanthropy: Bipolar Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Schizophrenia? William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

The Ethical Standard 9.01 (Bases for Assessments) of the American Psychological Association's (2017) Code of Ethics provides the following guidelines:

Psychologists provide opinions of the psychological characteristics of individuals only after they have conducted an examination of the individuals adequate to support their statements or conclusions. When such an examination is not practical [e.g., such as with ancient historical figures], psychologists document the efforts they made and the result of those efforts, clarify the probable impact of their limited information on the reliability and validity of their opinions, and appropriately limit the nature and extent of their conclusions or recommendations. (p. 13)

Clinical zoanthropy is a rare delusion in which a person believes himself or herself to be an animal (Blom, 2013). In the English translation of his review of the international scientific literature from 1850 onward, Blom (2014) found only 56 cases of clinical zoanthropy. Approximately 25% of the patients in these cases were diagnosed with schizophrenia, 23% with psychotic depression, and about 20% with bipolar disorder. The patients consisted of 34 men and 22 women, whose symptoms lasted anywhere from a single hour to decades.

Differential Diagnosis

The delusions seen in cases of clinical zoanthropy can be translated into the formal language of the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. *Bizarre delusions* include psychotic beliefs of experiences that cannot occur in reality (e.g., such as human metamorphosis into an animal) as opposed to *non-bizarre delusions*, which are beliefs of experiences that actually can occur in reality (e.g., such a person's belief that another person is spying on him or her). Bizarre delusions have traditionally been associated with conditions such as Schizophrenia (see American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1994). In the more contemporary *DSM-5*, bizarre delusions can be symptomatic of mental disorders such as schizophrenia (F20.9), delusional disorder (F22), bipolar disorder, with psychotic features, current or most recent episode manic (F31.2), or bipolar disorder, current or most recent episode depressed, with psychotic features (F31.5). Because biblical and religious languages are often metaphorical and symbolic rather than historical and scientific, formal differential diagnostic distinctions are meaningless when speculating about actual, potential, or hypothetical mental disorders present or absent in an ancient historical personage.

Boanthropy Hypothesis

A specific type of zoanthropy known as *boanthropy* consists of a delusion in which a person believes himself or herself to be a bovine. History's most famous sufferer of boanthropy may have been Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. According to the Biblical prophet Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar was punished by God and lost his sanity for a period of 7 years:

³³ Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws. Daniel 4:33; NASB)

Kroeger and Evans (2009) speculate that Nebuchadnezzar's behavior may have been a manifestation of clinical *lycanthropy* (i.e., a form of clinical zoanthropy consisting of the delusion of being a wolf). Notwithstanding the Bible's 13 references to wolves, usually as metaphors for greed and destructiveness (Bright, 2006), the scriptural description in the Daniel 5:21 (i.e., "... his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven...") appears to be more consistent with boanthropy. The boanthropy hypothesis may also be more

consistent with the agricultural and sociocultural contexts, in which cattle are more common than wolves in the religious motifs and also in geographic prevalence rates (i.e., presumably more oxen and cattle than wolves in ancient Babylon). Nevertheless, the *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* (Goldenson, 1984) makes it clear that the term lycanthropy can refer to an animal other than a wolf: “a condition in which a person has delusions that he or she is or can become a wolf or other animal” (emphasis added, p. 431). The American Psychological Association’s (n.d.) *APA Dictionary of Psychology* has adopted Goldenson’s (1984, p. 431) definition of lycanthropy word for word:

1. the supposed transformation of a human being into a wolf or other animal (from Greek *lykos*, “wolf”). Belief in lycanthropy reached epidemic proportions in Europe during the 16th century, when 600 supposed lycanthropes were sentenced to death for having committed violent crimes in animal form. Also called lycomania; zoanthropy.
2. a condition in which a person has delusions that he or she is or can become a wolf or other animal.

Etiological Factors

As early as the late 1800s, Sigmund Freud observed “cases in which a mental disease has started with a dream and in which a delusion originating in the dream has persisted” (2013, p. 113). Within a sociocultural context, Nebuchadnezzar’s dream may have become a self-fulfilling prophecy enhanced by the impact of Daniel’s interpretation. Given that a person’s actions and beliefs can be modified by hypnotic suggestion, one might be tempted to speculate that Daniel’s interpretation may have included elements of metaphor, suggestion, or embedded commands such as those used in hypnosis. It is conceivable that several significant embedded commands—implicit, unintended, or otherwise—are contained in the salient section (Daniel 4:24-25; NASB) of the dream interpretation that Belteshazzar (the slave name of Daniel) gave to the fearful Nebuchadnezzar:

²⁴ this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king:

²⁵ that you be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.

From a psychodynamic perspective, Carl Jung provided the following interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar:

He was turned back into a primitive man and all his conscious reason was taken away because he had misused it. He regressed even further back than the primitive and became completely inhuman; he was Humbaba, the monster, himself. All this symbolized a complete regressive degeneration of a man who has overreached himself. (Adler, & Hull, 1976, p. 126)

In terms of possible medical etiological factors, *hypertrichosis* (also known as werewolf syndrome) is a very rare condition characterized by excessive hair growth anywhere on a person’s body. Acquired hypertrichosis lanuginosa (L68.1) commonly affects the cheeks, upper lip, and chin. This form of hypertrichosis may also affect the forearms and legs, but is less common in these areas. Severe hypertrichosis can manifest in an almost “furry” physiognomy which, if accompanied by the rare clinical syndrome of delusional lycanthropy, could certainly result in a frightening appearance. In reality, because the two unrelated conditions of hypertrichosis and lycanthropy are both very rare, the comorbidity of both of these conditions occurring at the same time in an individual would be extremely rare.

Conclusion

The wolf's symbolism as an enemy of flocks and a metaphor for evil men with a lust for power, greed, destructiveness, and dishonest gain is actualized in the Book of Daniel's account of a phase (delusional, manic, or otherwise) in the life of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. By whatever name called—boanthropy or lycanthropy—Nebuchadnezzar's psychotic delusional condition appears to have been some form of zoanthropy. In his analysis of history's most famous sufferer of zoanthropy, Daniel Smith-Christopher (1996) provides a note of caution: "Although to see in this some form of recognizable mental illness (e.g., lycanthropy) push [sic] the sense of the story beyond the more common motifs of reversal of fortune and the bringing down of the proud" (p. 74).

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