The Scapegoat and the Holy Cow in Group Therapy

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About the Author

Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D. is a New York State licensed psychologist who has practiced psychotherapy for over 33 years. He has authored 25 professional articles and 13 books on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. His books include *101 Common Therapeutic Blunders, The Art of Hating,Counterresistance* and *Psychotherapy with People in the Arts*. He has also written and directed two feature films— *Therapy* and *Brooklyn Nights*. He lives in the Pennsylvania Poconos with his wife, Julia.

The Scapegoat and the Holy Cow in Group Therapy

Tolstoy once said that all happy families were alike and that all unhappy families were unhappy in different ways. I would say that all unhappy families and all unhappy groups (as in therapy groups) are also alike in certain ways. Both unhappy families and unhappy groups tend to have scapegoats and holy cows, members who are devalued and on whom everything is blamed, and members who are idealized and to whom all credit is given. This paper looks at the etiology of scapegoats and holy cows and how they may be approached in group therapy.

Introduction

The novel and movie, Ordinary People (Guest, 1968), provides a deft portrait of a family in which one son is rejected and the other is idealized. In this family the mother is the dominant parent, so she becomes the “casting director” and decides who will play what role. Her oldest son, a tall blond-haired youth, seems to represent everything that is good, bright, strong, and noble. In one flashback scene, the mother gazes rapturously at this son, laughing and applauding and swooning at his every word. When this son accidently drowns while boating with his younger brother, the mother is overcome with grief and bitterness and blames her youngest son for his death. Long after the oldest son’s death, the mother continues to keep his room, with its many athletic trophies, intact, and visits it as one would visit a shrine. He is clearly her holy cow.

The youngest son, the focus of the book and film, is apparently viewed by this same mother as representing everything that is bad, ugly, weak, and ignoble. He stutters when he speaks. He starts and quits things. He has problems academically and socially. He attempts suicide and has to be hospitalized much to the mother's mortification. In one scene in both the book and movie, his mother blames him for all the problems of their family, and when the son notes that she had not visited him when he was in the hospital and blurts out, "If Bucky had been in the hospital you would have visited Bucky!" she retorts, "Bucky would never have been in the hospital!" Clearly, this younger son is her scapegoat.

Scapegoats and holy cows are a recurring theme in many families. Some families, with several children, have one of each. Others, with only one child, will have one or the other. A combination of constitutional and environmental factors combine in shaping scapegoat and holy cow personalities. However, the most significant factor in their formation seems to be the parents' narcissism.

The Formation of Scapegoats

The Scapegoat is an old Jewish concept. The Bible tells how long ago people who experienced plagues, famines or droughts believed that God was punishing them for a sin. Since they did not know who among them had

committed the sin, they performed a ritual. A goat was brought into the center of the community and the whole community gathered around. One by one, members of the community dumped their individual sins upon the goat. The goat was then driven out into the desert, away from the community. The hope was that the goat would take on the sins of the community and put the community back into God's favor.

Early psychoanalysts hinted at how scapegoats could emerge in family life. Although Freud did not mention scapegoats in particular, he described scapegoating behavior connected with the Oedipal triangle, noting how a boy may become too close to the mother during this stage, becoming an Oedipal conqueror. Sometimes such a child is seen as an Oedipal threat to the father (Freud, 1939), and then the father scorns the child as a way of assuaging his own unconscious castration fears. Sometimes the chosen child actually has some kind of mental or physical defect which the parents then magnify and see as a sign not only of the child's, but also of their own, inferiority (Adler, 1927).

Vogel and Bell (1981), in a study of disturbed families, noted a correlation between the emotionally disturbed child and the scapegoat. In their view, scapegoated children became emotionally disturbed as a result of the state of tension that arises inside of them due to the role they are forced to play. The more they are treated liked scapegoats, the more the stress chemicals accumulate and linger inside their bodies, and the more disturbed they

become. In effect, they are elected to be the object upon which the tensions produced by unresolved conflicts of parents are displaced. They are seen as the cause of all discord, the family's "problem," and are therefore punished, usually by being physically, verbally, or sexually abused (or all three). Vogel and Bell note that in families in which a child is scapegoated, the main task is to help the parents regulate marital tension. Indeed, the scapegoat is "chosen to symbolize the conflicts and draw off the tension" (p. 212).

Scapegoats serve as a conduit of all that is disowned by parents; the parents deny their own aggression, and they are quick to project it onto the scapegoat. The person who scapegoats, according to Landes (1992), is either an emotional or physical bully. Scapegoating is a defense mechanism involving projection—the scapegoat, not the parent—is to blame for everything wrong with the family. It allows perpetrators to eliminate negative feelings about themselves and provides a sense of gratification. Furthermore, it justifies the self-righteous discharge of aggression. Scapegoats not only serve as the person whom the family most hates, but also suffer from abuse on account of it. In addition, they also must be a container of all the family's guilt, anger, and anxiety.

According to my research, there is often a projective identification. A chosen child reminds the parents of some quality about themselves which they unconsciously loath. They project that it is the child who possesses this quality

and they devalue the child and punish him or her. Sometimes the child represents, in the transference, a parent or sibling for whom the child's parents have unresolved feelings. For example, if a mother always resented her older sister, she may in the transference scapegoat her oldest daughter. Similarly, if a mother was always in the shadows of a sister who was more attractive and felt disfavored by her father because of it, she may scapegoat her most attractive daughter and try to prevent her and her husband from forming a father-daughter bond. At other times a child may be scapegoated because he or she deviates from the family norm, as when a child acts independently when dependence is the norm, or has musical talent when athleticism is stressed.

Scapegoating may begin from earliest infancy, or it may start at a later time, due to some special circumstance, such as a new pregnancy or a father being fired from a job. Since children are in a powerless position, they can be molded to take on the scapegoat role. Designated children are seen as a problem and treated accordingly; they then act the role and actually become a problem. The problem during infancy may be bedwetting, thumb-sucking, refusing to go to the potty, or soiling; later on it might be stealing, fire-setting, using foul language, taking drugs, fighting with parents and siblings, rebelliousness, and other expressions of hostility. Over the years of childhood, their identity is formed around this role, and their self-esteem reflects it; they take this role and the lowered self-esteem into the adult world.

The scapegoat may be said to serve as the parents' externalized "ego-reject." The child somehow does not live up to the parents' narcissistic expectations. Hence scapegoats are both the products and the manifestations of narcissism. While playing their designated devalued role, they are secret holy cows, forming an ego-ideal in which they cast themselves as long-suffering martyrs whose worth will someday be recognized.

The Formation of Holy Cows

There is no study in the literature about the development of holy cows, per se. Kohut (1971) observed various developmental lines in which narcissistic personalities may emerge. One such line has to do with a parent's making their children into narcissistic extensions of themselves, that is, into "idealized selfobjects"—which is another way of stating what Freud called externalized ego-ideals (1914). In this line, a parent with feelings of low self esteem chooses one of her children to be an idealized selfobject. The child is a selfobject because it is idealized not for its own sake or because the child is necessarily superior and deserving of such idealization; rather the child is idealized so that it can serve as a bright light that will then reflect upon the parent, who can bask in the child's glory. Hence the child serves as an object that bolsters the parent's deficient self. Similarly, Seinfeld (1991) and Shengold (1972) explored "goodness" as a defense mechanism in narcissists. Parents' narcissistic need to see themselves as all-good requires that they split off the

“bad” sides of themselves and identify one or more of their children as representing all that is bad. In this case the child is made into a bad selfobject.

It is this line of development that results in the formation of what I am calling a holy cow. The holy cow is one of the extreme kinds of externalized ego-ideal personalities. Such individuals are treated as if they are sacred, as if they can do no wrong. While the scapegoat is designated as the emotionally disturbed child and actually becomes so in an obvious way, the holy cow is designated as the emotionally healthy child and seems, on the surface, to be perfectly healthy. Actually, the holy cow’s emotional health is superficial and fragile, and can easily break down. While the scapegoat is elected to be the object upon which the tensions of marital conflicts are displaced, the holy cow is elected to be the object upon which the parents’ ego ideals are projected. Hence, while the scapegoat is degraded and abused, the holy cow is overvalued, sanctified, and pampered.

Just as the scapegoat serves as a conduit of all that is disowned by the parents, the holy cow serves as a reflection of all the family’s narcissistic grandiosity. In either case, as mentioned previously, there is a projective identification. In the case of the holy cow, one or both parents’ ego ideals are extended onto the designated child and he or she is accorded special treatment. The holy cow is identified as the ideal individual that the parents unconsciously believe they themselves are or could have been. Hence, a

parent's frustrated ambitions can be channeled through the child.

The designation of the holy cow child depends on several factors. A particularly beautiful, talented, intelligent, or athletic child may be chosen by parents who value beauty, talent, intelligence, or athletic gifts. At other times, the child represents, in the transference relationship to the child, a parent or sibling with whom the parent experienced a similar idealizing selfobject relationship while growing up. For example, a daughter may have been a father's idealizing selfobject (her role being to reflect the father's conceit by becoming his sycophant); she in turn will unconsciously choose one of her sons to serve as an idealized object—that is, he will be projectively identified as a stand-in for the idealized father. Or if a parent was the oldest sister and was hence an idealized selfobject and had a younger sister who was the scapegoat, she may replicate that situation in her own family by idealizing her own oldest daughter and scapegoating the younger daughter. In this way, the two daughters continue to play out the original sibling rivalry, with the mother always taking the side of the oldest.

A holy cow may become a parent's symbolic lover during the Oedipal phase; hence he or she is often an Oedipal conqueror (Freud, 1939), as mentioned previously. The son actually usurps the father's place in the mother's heart, and the daughter usurps the mother's place in the father's heart, and there is often an emotionally and sometimes even a physically

incestuous relationship between them. Freud (1914) believed that when a son becomes his mother's holy cow and his father's scapegoat, he may later develop a homosexual sexual orientation.

Like scapegoating, the formation of the holy cow personality may begin from earliest infancy, or it may start at a later time, due to some special circumstance. In the case of a fragmented family, where a father has appropriated a daughter and formed an alliance with her against the mother, the mother may, upon the birth of a son, immediately form an alliance with the son. In such a case, both daughter and son serve as externalized ego-ideals of a sponsoring parent, and each is touted not only to reflect the sponsoring parent's grandiosity, but also to do battle against the opposing team (mother and son vs. father and daughter). At special times, such as following a divorce, a particular child may be thrown into a role of holy cow or that role may become more significant over the years as parental difficulties mount.

Scapegoats and Holy Cows in Group Therapy

Throughout childhood the holy cow forms an identity around this role and begins to expect this kind of treatment from others, just as the scapegoat forms an identify with and expects scapegoating. Thus both scapegoat and holy cow end up inducing the same treatment they received in their families, which results in their playing these roles all their lives.

A therapy group becomes a symbolic family and in such a group each patient brings a particular forcefield (Langs, 1973-1974). This forcefield becomes contagious and thereby induces an urge to respond in a certain way (Spotnitz and Meadow, 1976). Each group member brings to the group a particular identity formed in their families. Thus without saying a word a scapegoat may join a group and immediately become subject to attack. He or she through words or body language will emit a forcefield and present a particular identity that says, “I’m no good so kick me!” or “You’d better not kick me or I’ll get angry!” or “Everybody's always thought it was my fault so you'll probably always think its my fault, too!” and thereby induce a rejecting response. Similarly, a holy cow will join a group and immediately be viewed as an exalted and sacred object. He or she will bring a forcefield and present an identity that says, “I know what I’m talking about!” or “I’m beyond reproach!” or “I’m a superior, entitled person!” and thereby induce an idealizing response from other members. The scapegoat becomes the group’s externalized ego-reject; the holy cow becomes it’s externalized ego-ideal.

For example, on the first meeting of a newly formed group, a young man began to introduce himself in a self-depreciating, halting tone: “My name’s Mr. A, and…I just want to say I’ve never felt comfortable in groups….I guess that’s why I’m here, so I can, you know, get some honest feedback….” Before he had gotten two sentences out a woman in the group, Ms. B, began to laugh derisively and blurted out to the rest of the group, “He wants honest feedback

about as much as I want a hole in the head." The rest of the group laughed with her, and the young man, as was his custom, internalized his anger and went silent. From there, other people began to speak. The young man's scapegoat role was already set.

In this same group, the woman who had laughed at and put down the scapegoat established herself immediately as a holy cow. Whereas the young man's body language had been self-depreciating and provocative (he sat slumped in his chair, hung his head, and spoke in a halting, fearful tone), the woman's body language was self-exalting and inspiring (she sat up in her chair, held her head high, and spoke with an attitude of entitlement, and with a slight tone of sarcasm in her voice). It was apparent that she considered herself beyond reproach and felt entitled to attack others in the group, such as the young man, whom she decided were deserving of such an attack. The group rallied behind her, reacting to her forcefield, responding to her air of authority, and fearful of her sarcasm.

The task of the group therapist becomes that of providing responses that differ from the ones the scapegoat and holy cow are familiar with and expect. Treating the scapegoat is a bit easier than treating the holy cow for a scapegoat suffers greatly because of this role. Instead of reacting to the scapegoat's induction by rejecting him or her, the group therapist responds by calling the scapegoat's attention to the kinds of messages he or she is sending.

“When you keep putting yourself down that way,” the therapist may say, “it makes me want to put you down as well.” Or, “When you ramble on in that ditsy way, you make me want to interrupt you and reject what you’re saying.” Or, “When you come in with that sulky, defiant glare, it makes me want to attack you.” In working with the scapegoat, the therapist must set the lead in treating the scapegoat with respect, despite the scapegoat’s self-disrespect or self-defeating behavior, and must intercede when members of the group succumb to scapegoating. Other members of the group (particularly the holy cow) will at first be reluctant to give up the scapegoating, and will feel insulted that the leader is implying that the scapegoat is being in any way victimized by them (it may puncture the holy cow’s narcissistic bubble).

Gradually, the therapist begins to use interpretations. "You are inducing people to be mean to you, Mr. A, because this is what you were taught to do in your family and this is the role you're accustomed to." The group has become your symbolic family and you expect this symbolic family to be the same as your real family of origin; and what you expect, you get. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy." Thus the whole group dynamic has to be analyzed and worked through. In such atmosphere of respect, the scapegoat will be able to engage in self-analysis, resolve conflicts related to self-assertion and self-esteem, and find his or her real self.

Treating holy cows presents just as much of a challenge. While

scapegoats are eventually willing to give up their role, due to its painful and unpleasant nature, holy cows are reluctant—even stubborn—about doing so. If the therapist attempts to interpret or call attention to the kinds of messages the holy cow is sending to the group, he is likely to arouse the holy cow's rage and bring about a hasty, indignant exit from the group. Instead, the therapist must first serve as an idealizing selfobject in order to establish a bond of trust. "Ms. B, you really do have an uncanny insight into things," the leader may say, and he may even call on her for "authoritative" assistance at times. "Tell me, Ms. B, why do you think Mr. A doesn't really want honest feedback?" Gradually the therapist wins the trust of the holy cow, and only then may start to use other interventions. Spotnitz (1985) has demonstrated the use of emotional communication with narcissistic patients. If Ms. B uses a tone of sarcasm toward the therapist, the therapist might respond not with an interpretation, but with an emotional reaction. "Ouch!" The holy cow must be made aware of his or her unconscious sadism. This awareness will come first through this emotional communication, and later by analyzing the scapegoat and how he induces the holy cow to abuse him.

Thus, when the holy cow's relationship to the therapist changes from a narcissistic to an object transference, the leader will gradually relinquish the idealizing selfobject role and begin more and more to address the holy cow's particular form of resistance, first through emotional communication and ego-dystonic (paradoxical) joining, then through indirect interpretations via the

scapegoat, then through direct interpretations of the holy cow's process. The leader may communicate an emotional response to the way the holy cow addresses the scapegoat: "You know, when you talk to Mr. A in that sarcastic tone of voice, it makes me so fearful of you that I want to agree with anything you say."

Paradoxical (exaggerated) joining prods the holy cow into seeing the other side of things. It helps her to see that she is denying her own rage and compensating for a deficient self through the erection of a grandiose self and the projective identification of her deficient self onto the scapegoat.

"Sometimes I think I ought to be a lawyer or a judge," Ms. B said during a later session. "I have this bullshit meter, and it just goes off whenever I encounter bullshit."

The therapist used paradoxical joining. "I think that's a wonderful idea. I think you ought to be a judge. But why stop there? Why not go for the Supreme Court?"

In another session, Ms. A said to the scapegoat, "You're such an idiot. I really resent your wasting the group's time with your whining."

"That's right, Mr. A, stop being such an idiot right now!" the leader echoes.

“Well, he is!”

“That’s absolutely true! Mr, A, please stop being such an idiot!”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Why would I mock you?”

“Because you think I’m being too harsh on Mr. A.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

Down the road, the leader can bring in an interpretation. “Who does Mr. A remind you of?”

“My brother.”

So you’re transferring your idiotic brother onto Mr. A.”

“But he asks for it.”

“So did your brother.”

“Oh, right.”

“Just because somebody asks for it, does that mean you have to give it to them?”

“I guess not.”

When the holy cow’s externalized ego-ideal (the therapist) exaggerates the holy cow’s grandiosity and sadism, and when this grandiosity and sadism does not get its usual supportive response, the holy cow begins to question this mode of operation. At the same time, an emotional communication is a direct demonstration of the effect she is having on another person. It provides living, nonjudgmental, undeniable “evidence” to the holy cow about how she is acting out, by responding to her unconscious sadism rather than interpreting it. When this is done repeatedly, her ego becomes insulated and able to tolerate more direct interpretations.

Over time—perhaps years—the holy cow may be able to work through relevant material and realize how this role, while according the secondary gratification of being idealized, nevertheless prevents any genuine relationship from developing. The role also sets the player up for a fall. Like “Humpty-Dumpty,” the holy cow’s narcissistic shell is brittle. Holy cows demand and expect to be idealized by everyone, and if they do not get it—or if those they have been scapegoating get more praise then they do—they can easily crash. Their ego-strength is dependent upon their being allowed (entitled) to freely

conduct themselves sadistically without reproach, and on their grandiose assumption of superiority, especially over the scapegoat. This narcissistic overvaluation, dependent on maintaining a certain hierarchy, will be disturbed if the hierarchy is disturbed. Gradually, the therapist demonstrates to the holy cow the satisfaction of genuine and respectful relationships. But this new relationship comes, if it comes at all, only after years of work, for a holy cow does not easily give up the satisfaction and power of the holy cow role.

Countertransference

Scapegoats and holy cows each induce particular kinds of countertransference problems. Aside from the fact that both provoke strong emotional responses and impulses to act out counterresistance, each also poses problems for therapists who have themselves come from backgrounds in which they were scapegoated or holy cowed. A therapist who was the family scapegoat may tend to protect (rather than analyze) a scapegoat patient, or become somewhat fanatical in trying to help, while reacting angrily to a holy cow. Such a therapist may at the same time give in to the impulse to attack a holy cow patient through an ego-dystonic interpretation. A therapist who was the family holy cow may unwittingly attack a scapegoat patient in the same way, while forming a twinship countertransference with a holy cow patient.

Previously (1993) I wrote about a group therapist whose narcissism made

him susceptible to countertransference and counteresistance. He had both a holy cow and a scapegoat in his group. He may have been the holy cow of his own family, for he showed himself to the group and to the world as a superior, witty, and cultured man and for the most part lived up to this ego-ideal. He had established himself through theatrical presentations at numerous conferences as a wise and witty therapist, and he had an unflappable confidence in his own perceptions.

He and his holy cow patient, another man whose ego-ideal was that of a superior, witty, and cultured man, would often engage in repartee during group therapy sessions. They each served as the other's alter ego-ideal; or, in other words, they had formed a twinship transference and countertransference. In the patient's eyes, the therapist could do no wrong, and in the therapist's eyes the patient could do no wrong. They each supported and enabled one another's narcissism.

Meanwhile, there was a young woman in the group whoserved as the group's scapegoat. She presented herself as a daffy person who would ask "stupid" questions and provoke ridicule. The therapist would generally make a show of treating this woman with respect and interpret her daffiness. However, on occasion his narcissistic need to be witty and to entertain would cause him to play off of this patient's questions the way a wise-cracking comedian might play off of the comments of a straight man. The woman might ask a question

such as, “Are therapist’s human?” What she meant to say was that she did not feel the therapist was giving her the emotionally corrective responses she needed. However, instead of picking up on that, the therapist would look at his holy cow patient and quip, “Let me see, are therapist’s human?...James, help me out here. Daphne wants to know if therapists are human.”

“You know what T. S. Eliot says about that, don’t you?” James would reply, tongue in cheek.

“I wasn’t aware that T. S. Eliot said anything about therapists,” the therapist would say, his eyes twinkling with impish mischief.

“You’re quite mistaken.”

“What, sir, did he say, pray tell?”

The two lofty buddies would engage in a comical bit of repartee at the expense of Daphne. The group, although excluded from this repartee, would nevertheless get a big laugh out of it, for it would afford them a chance to release any free-floating anxiety and sadism they might be nursing (much as a comedy movie does for an audience). Hence the therapist would unwittingly encourage a group resistance. Such moments were only occasional and lasted only minutes, but they were of much impact on the group and on the holy cow and scapegoat, serving to reinforce rather than resolve their character

disturbances.

As time went on, Daphne became the person people would take out their aggression on and target as the group's "problem." She was generally treated with contempt by the group, particularly James. Since James enjoyed a holy cow "immunity" he could come to the group in a state of distress and safely displace his anger onto Daphne, knowing that the leader would never criticize him but would instead support his acting out. Daphne would ramble and he would interrupt her, saying something sarcastic to her. Others would then join in the attack, and the leader would spend time analyzing why Daphne induced this response in the group. Daphne was blamed for any problems happening in the group, and served as the container for group tension. For example, if any of the members of the group were jealous of the therapist's favoritism of the holy cow, they would displace the tension produced by this jealousy by attacking Daphne at opportune moments.

At first Daphne continued to play her role due to its secondary gratification of getting attention from the leader and the group. However, eventually the anger built up insider her and she left the group, announcing that she had entered another group where people treated her differently. The members of the first group were derisive about her leaving and suspicious about the new group. "Wait until they get to know her," they said. And, they added, "Good riddance! She was disruptive anyway." For a while they seemed genuinely

happy that she was gone, but after a while the tensions that had been contained by her erupted and the long simmering conflicts between the holy cow and other members became more apparent.

This therapist, by the way, had had many years of supervision and training, and had done quite a lot of analyzing of his own childhood, as all therapists must do. Yet his narcissism had apparently not been adequately analyzed because it was in many ways a charming aspect of his personality and seen as a plus rather than a detriment.

Summary and Conclusions

Scapegoats and holy cows each represent a kind of narcissistic personality. The former symbolizes what the narcissistic parent disowns and then, through projective identification, attaches onto a chosen child. Even though the chosen child is devaluated, he or she nevertheless feels special and important, as though secretly thinking, “I am being picked on because they are jealous of my superiority.” The latter stands for what the narcissistic parent aspires to and projects onto and identifies with in another chosen child. In their adult lives scapegoats and holy cows induce their environment to treat them as their families did, and so they continue to play their roles in society. Scapegoats may end up as criminals, junkies, prostitutes, battered women, religious martyrs, or presidents of sinking corporations. Holy cows may end up

as priests, housewives, political activists, talk show hosts, movie stars, or sports heroes.

Nearly all groups—from the smallest families to the largest societies—have both holy cows and scapegoats (one feeding off the other). In societies, one racial, religious or ethnic group may be seen as a holy cow while another represents the scapegoat. Sometimes the scapegoated group, on the basis of its long suffering, may then exalt and sanctify itself as a holy cow; it then turns around and scapegoats the former holy cow. This constitutes one of the most prominent themes in history.

A therapy group represents a symbolic family as well as a laboratory in which the scapegoat and holy cow can be studied and transformed. One of the biggest challenges of the group therapist is to deal with such characters effectively.

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