

GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE THE NEW FIELD OF TRANS-SPECIES PSYCHOLOGY AND THE ROLE OF SANCTUARIES

by G.A. Bradshaw

Hmmm. This is an interesting puzzle. I wonder how it works. Let's try opening from this side. No. That didn't work. How about this side? Okay, made some progress here. Let's see what happens when I turn it over. Is there another way in from this side?

We all love puzzles. That is why crosswords, Sudoku, Rubik's cubes, and a thousand other brain twisters were invented. Not only are they fun, but puzzles help revitalize tired and aging neurons. Humans are not the only ones who use sharpened wits to manipulate the world. Take tool making. Once thought to distinguish *Homo sapiens* from all other species, all sorts of animals craft tools. Elephants fashion branches to scratch hard-to-reach spots, gorillas use a rod to gauge water depth as they venture across a river, and magpies twist wires into hooks to pull out delectable morsels. Of course, parrots are renowned for their puzzle-solving prowess. As if by magic, parrots like Woodstock, a macaw rescued and living in sanctuary at Foster Parrots, Ltd, team foot and beak to find just the right hairline crack that opens, exposing a tasty treat.

Some find it surprising that animals think like humans but not neuroscientists who have established that all vertebrates possess similar brain structures and processes responsible for thought, consciousness, and emotions. After centuries of being labeled instinct-driven, animals are finally being understood for who they really are: individuals who think and puzzle much the way we do. Discoveries on the inside match what is observed on the outside. Mental states and behavior also correlate across species.

A fox stands vigil in helpless grief as his spouse lies dead on the pavement, victim of a speeding driver. Octopi kept in aquaria plot playful tricks on their human caregivers, and dolphin elders patiently pass on cultural wisdom by teaching their young to use sponges for flushing out tiny fish hidden in the ocean's sandy bottom.

Science's recognition of cross-species

commonality has done away with traditional disciplinary barriers and brought human and animal studies together under one conceptual umbrella in the new field of trans-species-psychology. There is no need to segregate the study of human minds from those of other species, and what we learn about octopi and foxes can be applied to humans and vice versa.

Half of this equation has been around for a long time in the form of "animal models." Mice, cats, chimpanzees, and other animals are routinely subjected to biomedical experiments and testing for the very reason that they are so much like us psychologically, emotionally, and physically. However, despite this understanding, nonhuman species are denied comparable ethical and legal protection.

Anthropomorphism, making inferences from humans to animals, is claimed to be a dangerous projection. Dangerous indeed when one realizes how much of modern living and economics relies on defining animals as "less than" humans. Admitting to animal sentience implies radical changes in how animals are treated and how humans live. It might be said that animal oppression is the core organizing principle of modern western society. Nonetheless, today's science has brought us to this paradigmatic tipping point.

But does this mean that orangutans, rabbits, and people are all the same? No, no more than we would claim that two people are identical. Trans-species psychology merely levels species variations to cultural variations. Just as we are careful not to make assumptions about another person with different individual and cultural experiences, so goes making assumptions about someone who happens to wear fur, feathers, or scales.

Scientific evidence has dispelled other myths. Take, for example, the nature of modern human warfare. Organized violence has been observed in chimpanzees and even ants; however, unlike modern humanity, animals have not devised weapons of mass destruction. Trans-species psychology demonstrates that the reason is not for want of brainpower but rather derives from a difference in culture. Animals have not cultivated values and belief systems that lead to the development of large-scale, anonymous violence. Trans-species psychology shows that arguments used to justify modern warfare on the basis that "our genes make us do it" are not supported by science. Human violence is not a natural extension of animals who kill for food or in defense. On the contrary, when viewed in context of the entire animal kingdom, humanity's

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present asociality (and according to some social psychologists, sociopathy) emerges as a disturbing exception to the rule. One does not even need to step outside species bounds to appreciate how statistically unusual the current human state is.

While considerable variation exists among traditional indigenous cultures, American Indians cannot be credited for the mass slaughter of wildlife engineered by European occupation. North American tribes hunted bison, beaver, and marine life, but numbers taken were relatively few as attested by the mountains, waters, and skies that teemed with wildlife when colonists arrived. Dr. Dame Daphne Marjorie Sheldrick, DBE, MBS, founder of The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, an elephant and rhinoceros orphanage in Kenya, speaks of similar decimation in Africa. When Anglo-European occupation took root, “the great herds began to dwindle, eroded by the impact of civilization, and with each year that passed, the numbers grew fewer, until people suddenly wondered in astonishment where all the animals had gone.”

Species' declines involve more than numbers. Similar to indigenous human cultures, animals have suffered from genocide and loss of homeland with the result that they are suffering widespread social and psychological breakdown. Guatemalan activist and Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum describes her people as not being “myths of the past, ruins in the jungle, or zoos” but individuals who “want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism.” The same might well be said of, by, and about, wildlife. Roads, farms, and hunters have fragmented habitat, dispersed millions, and fractured animal minds and societies. In South Africa, after witnessing their mothers and family killed in culls, young bulls became killers themselves, responsible for over 100 rhinoceros deaths. Traumatized and left on their own without guiding nurturance of elder society, the young bulls developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

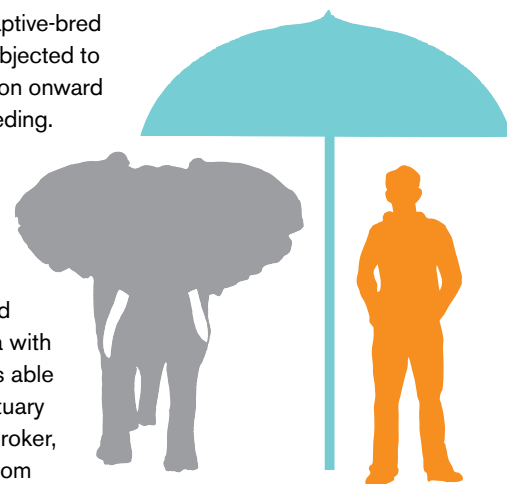
Today, Asian and African elephants are afflicted with trauma-related symptoms at an almost epidemic level. The unrelenting stress that elephants endure is showing its effects in other ways. Reminiscent of India's satyagraha, nonviolent resistance inspired by Mohandas Gandhi, elephants are staging what many call “protest marches” by peaceably occupying Indian towns and organizing blockades to stop trains that have killed so many of their starving compatriots wandering the landscape in search of food.

We are not used to ascribing planned action and emotion to another species. But trans-species psychology informs us that not only are such mental states possible, they are a reality that sadly has taken hold. Since elephants were identified with PTSD, trauma-related symptoms have been found in other free-ranging wildlife, including cougars, wolves, bear, dolphins, mountain goats, and deer. Needless to say, these symptoms are rampant in captive-bred individuals such as parrots, who are subjected to extreme stress sometimes from inception onward because of the practice of captive breeding.

In the trans-species paradigm, sanctuaries take on an expanded role. For those unable to return home, sanctuary workers provide therapeutic support to animals struggling to regain a sense of self and meaning as they integrate past trauma with present recovery. For those individuals able to return to free-ranging society, sanctuary workers take on the role of a culture broker, someone who facilitates the journey from captivity to freedom.

Daphne Sheldrick is one such trans-species broker. For over half a century, she has rescued scores of orphaned elephants and successfully reintroduced them back into free-ranging society. Sheldrick and her keepers are sufficiently fluent in elephant ways and communication so that, despite having human allomothers (a constellation of human, not elephant, caregivers), infant elephants learn how to be elephants: what to eat and how to be and act like elephants. In the process of trauma recovery, human caregivers and animals develop a type of bicultural identity and capacity where human keepers learn to “see through the eyes of an elephant” so that they may rekindle a wounded elephant mind and soul.

Subsequently, similar to the vast libraries of Alexandria and London, sanctuaries such as The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust and Foster Parrots Ltd hold and nurture priceless knowledge of wildlife cultures. The animals and people at a sanctuary are guardians of these traditions. They are all part of a broader trans-species movement of cultural renewal that transforms humanity from a culture of oppression to one supportive of animal self-determination. By modelling trans-species ethics and custom, sanctuaries constitute new universities for the future: not places to study animals but centers of service and wisdom where common hearts and minds build a beautiful future together. **AV**



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