

Minds of Their Own

The exciting new field of trans-species psychology

By Gay Bradshaw and Lori Marino

It's late afternoon, the end of a long week, and the weary psychiatrist turns to the last case report of the day. She leans back in her chair and opens the file. It is a tragic and bewildering story.

Seemingly out of the blue, three teenagers went on a killing spree, in a community that had never seen that kind of violence. But only a few years earlier, the young killers had witnessed the massacre of their families.

In another case, a psychologist is asked to visit a 31-year-old female in a halfway house who has had a nervous breakdown. Before coming to live there, she was held prisoner, isolated and subjected to experiments by her captors for nearly a decade. Her symptoms classically fit the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

At another facility, a social worker visits an infant who cries inconsolably for his absent mother. The distressed infant is a victim of genocide, one of the few survivors of a mass killing that occurred only a few days before, in which his mother and most other family members were brutally slaughtered.

Unfortunately, these stories are told far too many times throughout the world. But these reports differ from the typical nightly news in one important way: All the victims are animals. The teenage killers are in fact young bull elephants, the prison survivor is a chimpanzee, and the heartbroken infant is a young dolphin. Based on hundreds of

studies, scientists have now established that animals, like humans, fall victim to the trauma of violence and develop the same types of psychological symptoms as humans.

The violent behavior of the teenage bull elephants is unprecedented, however. Despite their immense size, elephants are known for their peaceful ways. But trauma-induced symptoms – aggression, antisocial behavior, poor mothering – are now showing up in places where elephants are poached for ivory, culled and forced out of their ancient habitats. The sounds of gunfire, the shocking deaths of loved ones and the disintegration of elephant culture have taken their toll, causing psychological breakdown in these long-lived beings. Fewer and fewer young elephants are raised in the closely knit families that have traditionally protected them and taught them proper social rules. The result is disturbed elephant youth.

The female chimpanzee with PTSD was a victim of the biomedical research industry. After being raised like a human child, she was sold at the age of six to a laboratory and endured years of intensive and invasive biomedical studies while living in a 5x5x7-foot cage. She was finally released to a sanctuary, but her traumatic experiences were indelibly etched, and she never recovered.

The orphaned baby dolphin is a victim of the annual Japanese dolphin hunts. Each year, several thousand dolphins and small whales are driven into coves by fishing boats and either killed for their meat or captured by would-be trainers. This infant, along with many others, was taken into captivity to be groomed for the marine-park



entertainment industry. His trials are not over. The stress of captive life causes severe mental and physical problems, and many dolphins perish well before their natural time.

From what to who

Are these descriptions anthropomorphic exaggeration, dramatizing animal lives with the language of human experience?

Only a few years back, the answer might have been yes. But today, a bounty of scientific discoveries has erased many (some argue all) of the differences that have seemed to separate humans from everyone else. Whales have culture, apes have a sense of art and aesthetics, elephants mourn their departed loved ones, snakes play, and the list goes on.

We are coming to realize that we share fundamental emotional, cognitive and social characteristics with our fellow animals. Along with humans, other animals play tricks, have memories and self-awareness, help each other when in danger, suffer, and experience the other emotions and abilities that make life so rich. This would be no surprise to Charles Darwin. He maintained that animals even share a sense of morals and ethics because of our common ancestry. Evolution guides body and mind.

Today, with the ability to “see” into the brain using advanced imaging technology, neuroscience has confirmed Darwin’s ideas. We may look different on the outside, but we all function pretty much the same. This is why when we see an orangutan looking back at us through the zoo exhibit window, or watch the loving caresses that elephants bestow on their young, we feel a spark of recognition and empathize with them.

These discoveries have led to a new field of science: trans-species psychology. The understanding that humans and animals share similar brains, emotions and minds means that the same theories can be used to study – and help – all of us. Psychology, the study of human behavior, and ethology, the study of animal behavior, are merging into a single field. The question has changed from *what* elephants, chimpanzees, dolphins and other animals are to *who* they are.

A new way of thinking

Trans-species psychology is part of a new area of science committed to the idea that animals have minds of their own just like we do. It marks a formal turning point in what we know and, even more significantly, what we do.

Trans-species psychology erases the conceptual walls that have held humans apart from other species. Our differences are more like those we might see between human cultures. How each culture eats, lives, mourns, celebrates and works may be somewhat different, but all have the same feelings inside: joy, sadness, grief, pride, love.

So when we look at how an elephant acts and interacts, we are not just looking at the largest land mammal with a long trunk who lives in African savannahs; we are seeing someone from an ancient culture who is family-centered, who takes a long time to forge a bond and keeps it. These are elephant values. This is how an elephant views the world. And when we see animals and ourselves as part of the same community, we begin to think about ourselves differently. As author Gary Kowalski writes in *The Souls of Animals*:

“Animals are not our property or chattel, therefore, but our peers and fellow travelers. Like us, they have their own likes and dislikes, fears and fixations. They have plans and purposes as important to

them as our plans are to us. Animals not only have biologies; they also have biographies. We can appreciate the lives of animals, but not appropriate them, for they have their own lives to lead.”

Equality in mind and heart means equality in how we live. If we are serious about our kinship with other beings, we must adopt nothing less than the Golden Rule in our dealings with them. This sounds simple but it has profound implications for everyday life. For instance, current laws affecting humans and animals reveal a wealth of inconsistencies. Kidnapping a baby elephant, beating her as part of circus training and making her live a lifetime alone in chains is routine and legal.

Killing an animal is not only permissible but also part of everyday culture. Deer, elk, bear, cougars, ducks, turkeys and other wildlife are routinely killed, as are countless cows, pigs, chickens and fish. And, with a few exceptions, killing a dog or cat does not count as a serious crime. In all these cases, were the victim human, it would be called murder. Acknowledging that animals have minds and feelings like us compels a radical change in laws to make what we know about other animals consistent with how we treat other animals.

Trans-species psychology also affects how research and education are conducted. Middle and high schools regularly use frogs and cats in biology classes. For centuries, animals have been used

“We are members of a shared community
– a trans-species community – that gives
us a common identity”

as research tools because they resemble humans so closely. Yet, to perform such experiments on humans is considered unethical and is not allowed.

Trans-species psychology rejects this double standard. It calls for a science that serves humans and other animals alike without making one suffer at the expense of the other.

A new science also raises new questions. For example, much research is devoted to investigating how and why so many species – whales, birds, fish – are going extinct, and how to conserve them. But little attention is given to the most obvious problem: human behavior. Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich has been making this point for years. Finding solutions to human overpopulation and consumerism are politically uncomfortable subjects. As a result, conservation hasn’t stopped the landslide of extinctions.

Now that we know animals have the same attributes that have permitted people to dominate other species, a new egalitarian, trans-species ethic is emerging. Instead of demanding that animals continue to change their lives to suit people, humans are asked to take responsibility for changing how they live, and science is charged with helping people to do this.

A science and practice of the heart

How is trans-species psychology being applied? The basic principles are already being practiced every day at many sanctuaries, where all animals are treated with respect as individuals and receive care aligned with their unique physical and emotional needs. And every individual is given a chance at a meaningful life, despite his or her physical or emotional problems.

For example, at Serenity Park Sanctuary in California, Dr. Lorin

Lindner, a clinical psychologist, tends to Amazon parrots, macaws, cockatoos and other birds rescued from severe abuse and neglect. But that's not all. In the true spirit of trans-species psychology, kindness is extended to all living beings, including humans. The parrot sanctuary is located on the grounds of the Veterans Administration in Los Angeles, and Lindner facilitates reciprocal recovery of both war veterans and parrots, who work to heal each other.

Another example is the Fauna Foundation in Canada, where director Gloria Grow creates a safe and secure place for rescued chimpanzees. This means providing each resident with nourishing food of their choosing, access to the outdoors, the opportunity to bond again with other chimpanzees and, most important, the ability to be a chimpanzee when and how they want to.

At the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, the lead African elephant caregiver, Sandra de Rek, is engaged in similar trauma recovery. She's currently working with 25-year-old Flora. After her family was killed, Flora was brought to the U.S. as an infant to work in a circus. Raised under total human control with no guiding matriarchs and allomothers (female elephant "aunts"), Flora must now learn what she would have learned years before if reared in the wild: who she is.

Like Lindner and Grow, de Rek provides consistency and safety, which encourages Flora to explore and feel assured in her new world. De Rek is not only caregiver and friend, but also a skilled therapist attentive to the details of Flora's process of recovery and transformation.

To effectively help a traumatized elephant like Flora or a psychologically wounded Amazon parrot, a sanctuary caregiver must find a way to see through their eyes. In a sense, it means becoming part elephant, chimpanzee, parrot, dog, cat or other species. Being "part elephant" brings us past skin-deep differences to the heart of empathy. Empathy is a feeling that brings recognition of differences and similarities alike. Trans-species psychotherapists listen in and speak with animals much the way you might with another human: hearing with the heart.

Join the trans-species community

Sanctuaries like these represent the seeds of the growing trans-species cultural movement. In the process of caring for distressed animals, places like Best Friends and the new Oregon Animal Sanctuary at Double Oak Farm envision animal healing and human healing as mutual processes of life and spirit. In every sense of the word, a new culture is taking root.

Though many people are opening their doors and hearts to such empathetic caring, the number of animals in need is great. There

are no sanctuaries for dolphins rescued from the captivity industry. Several countries have sanctuaries for the protection of wild populations or rehabilitation facilities for returning stranded dolphins to the wild, but none address the severe emotional problems of individuals at marine parks and dolphin swim facilities. Most of these unfortunate animals, along with other marine mammals like the famous orca of "Free Willy" fame, lack the necessary skills for survival in the wild, and so are left to languish in marine parks and must continue to "sing for their supper."

This situation must change. Wild and domestic animals are under siege. As human life becomes more stressful, so do the lives of other species. More and more cats, dogs, parrots, rabbits, liz-

ards, turtles and other pets are neglected, abused and abandoned. Millions of parrots live impoverished lives in small cages and perish simply from lack of love and care. Elephants, gorillas, bears, tigers and other free-ranging wildlife continue to fall victim to civil wars, habitat destruction and hunting.

There is a pressing need to create and support sanctuaries that are able to treat trauma recovery in a diversity of species with trans-species psychotherapy.

Also, training in trans-species psychotherapy provided by facilities such as the Kerulos Centre for Animal Relations and Trauma Recovery in Jacksonvill, Oregon, is essential to provide sources of

expertise as the demand grows.

An ounce of prevention, though, is worth a pound of cure. The need for treatment for these trauma victims can be diminished by changing how we treat other animals to begin with and by becoming members of the trans-species community. To be sure, this requires big changes in how we live and how we view ourselves and other animals, but the result will be a kinder world for everyone.

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Lori Marino, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in neuroscience and behavioral biology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She has published over 60 papers on the evolution of intelligence and co-authored the first scientific evidence for mirror self-recognition in dolphins. She is one of the founders of the Act for Dolphins campaign (www.theoceanproject.org/actfordolphins) to end dolphin-drive hunting and exploitation.



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