



Research Review

Insights from the animal kingdom

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Received 1 August 2013; received in revised form 25 January 2014; accepted 28 January 2014
Available online 6 February 2014

Abstract

Just as we have learned a great deal in consumer psychology by focusing on understanding how different sub-groups of humans think, this paper suggests that we can also learn from examining how different types of animals think. To that end, this manuscript offers a review of literature on topics in animal cognition that have also been investigated by consumer researchers. It first reviews research that has identified ways in which animals and humans are similar and then reviews research that has identified ways in which animals differ from humans, with a focus on ways in which some animals have been shown to outperform humans. The manuscript concludes with a discussion of opportunities for future research. © 2014 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Animal cognition; Comparative psychology; Ani006Dal

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¹ The author gratefully acknowledges helpful comments from Amitav Chakravarti, Anna Greenleaf, Eric Greenleaf, Leo Greenleaf, Geeta Menon, Sankar Sen, and the JCP reviewers and Research Review Area Editor. The author also thanks the Wildlife Conservation Society and her fellow volunteers and the staff at the Central Park zoo. This paper is based on the author's Presidential address given at the 2012 Society for Consumer Psychology Conference.

Introduction

The theories and knowledge that consumer psychologists have developed and drawn from to increase our understanding of consumers concern how humans process information, think, and make decisions. In addition to enriching our understanding, this research has provided much help to humans—humans who consume, humans who make decisions for nonprofit and for profit businesses, and those who make decisions for government agencies. This same research can also be used to help non-humans. For example, we can use our theories to develop best practices on how to explain and communicate complex issues like climate change that greatly impact both humans and non-humans (Shome & Marx, 2009). Similarly, we can use psychological theories to determine which methods will work best to persuade humans that they can do things to help save wildlife and wild places (e.g., Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Smith, Faro, & Burson, 2013).

Is the converse true? Can knowing how non-human animals² think help us to better understand how consumers think and make decisions? Can we even know how animals think? People who work with animals need to understand how animals think in order to do their jobs well. For example at most modern zoos, the animals receive behavior enrichment (Mellen & MacPhee, 2001) which entails giving animals activities to keep their minds active and cognitive tasks that mimic those they would normally do in the wild. For example, zoo keepers sometimes hide an animal's food in a novel spot to simulate foraging for food in the wild (Shepherdson, Carlstead, Mellen, & Seidensticker, 1993). To create good enrichment tasks, the zoo keepers have to think a lot about what it must be like to be each type of animal. How do they perceive the world? How do they think?

Lay and professional philosophers also ponder how animals think. Many pet owners wonder how the world looks from their pet's perspective (Bradshaw, 2012, 2013; Hill, Gaines, & Wilson, 2008; Holbrook, 2008). In a highly cited article in philosophy, and one of the most influential papers on consciousness, Nagel (1974) wondered how the world must seem to a bat, who perceives the world in a way we cannot, using echolocation to perceive space. Views have ranged from those who believe that animals lack consciousness, especially higher order consciousness (Carruthers, 2005; Descartes, 1637/1994), to those who approach the question with an anthropocentrism perspective and view animals as little humans (Wynne, 2001, pp. 1–3).

Recently there has also been growing popular (for example, *National Geographic*, Inside Animal Minds, March 2008; *Time*, What Animals Think, August 16, 2010) and academic interest (for example, Gorman, 2012; Griffin, 2001; Shettleworth, 2010; Wynne, 2001) in how animals think and a growing perspective that different species think differently and that we can learn from their similarities and differences. Many new insights have been obtained from scientific research that examines how animals

think. This field, which some call animal cognition, and others call comparative psychology, is a branch of psychology that emphasizes cross-species comparisons—including human-to-animal comparisons (Wasserman, 1981, 1993).

The basic premise of this article is to argue that just as we have learned a lot in consumer psychology by focusing on understanding how different sub-groups of humans think, we can also learn from examining how different types of animals think. Specifically, consumer psychology has been enriched by examining within the human species, comparisons across people based on their sex or gender identity (Dahl, Sengupta, & Vohs, 2009; Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Fisher & Dubé, 2005; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993; Lee & Schumann, 2009; Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2010; Sengupta & Dahl, 2008; Winterich, Mittal, & Ross, 2009), age (Cole & Balasubramanian, 1993; John & Cole, 1986; Yoon, Cole, & Lee, 2009), and culture (Aaker & Sengupta, 2000; Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000; Chan, Wan, & Sin, 2009; Kacen & Lee, 2002; Maheswaran & Shavitt, 2000; McCracken, 1986; Shavitt, Lalwani, Zhang, & Torelli, 2006). While we tend to focus on differences across groups in the literature, we learn both from when we discover similarities across people and when we observe differences. I argue here that we can further enrich our understanding of human consumers by examining similarities and differences between how humans and other animals think.

It is important to note that many consumer and psychology researchers have studied various aspects of animals and consumption, including humans' choice of animals, and new breeds of animals, as pets (e.g., Hirschman, 1994; Moore & Holbrook, 1982), how and why they welcome animals into their homes (e.g., Hickrod, Huang, & Schmitt, 1982; Holbrook, 2008; Meer, 1984), and their purchase behavior for products and services for their pets (e.g., Holbrook, 2008; Holbrook & Woodside, 2008; Meer, 1984; Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, Monroe, & Chamberlin, 2008). While we have learned much from this prior work about how humans and animals interact and jointly engage in consumption activities, I examine a more narrowly defined set of issues related to implications to human consumers from formal studies of animal cognition.

Even within this narrower domain, I follow other consumer research scholars who have already made the case that animal behavior is relevant for improving our understanding of human consumption (Holbrook, 1987). For example Alba (2000) in his ACR Presidential address, argues that simple models from animal cognition and animal self-control research that don't rely on mindfulness may parsimoniously explain much consumer behavior. van Osselaer (2004) makes a similar point when he discusses how the seemingly complex ways in which consumers evaluate products and make choices between branded goods can be explained by very simple processes of associative learning that have been examined in depth in rats, dogs, and other animals.

For the remainder of this article, I review relevant literature on animal cognition and thus build from the work of Alba, Holbrook, van Osselaer, and others to further the argument that we can learn from cross species research in the same way we have learned from gender studies, studies of age differences,

² For the remainder of this article, for convenience, I will use the term "animals" to refer to non-human animals, though humans are a type of animal.

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