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Review

Making sense of behavioral irregularities of great apes

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Abstract

Psychopathology, mental illness, and psychiatric treatment are concepts relevant to modern medicine and medical psychology and replete with cumbersome intellectual and literary baggage. They bear the imprint of suppositions, world views, and general beliefs and values exemplified in the science, history, and general culture of Anglo European societies. The study in higher apes of phenomena addressed by such concepts raises conceptual dilemmas, usually termed speciesism and anthropomorphism, not unlike those encountered in comparative human studies of similar phenomena across cultures and historical periods, namely, ethnocentrism and anachronism. The authors' synthesis of literature and their analysis of the implications of higher ape psychopathology represent an epistemically compelling account that broadens the scope of the comparative study of behavioral irregularities, a topic that provides a different slant for examining challenging questions in evolutionary biology and primatology, such as cognition, self awareness, intentional behavior, culture and behavioral traditions, social intelligence, sickness and healing, and altruism. Theoretical and empirical study of this topic expands formulation and can help provide informative answers about human evolution as well as essential features of human psychiatric syndromes, with potential practical implications. The study of psychopathology of higher apes and other non human primates represents an appropriate focus for neuroscience and bio-behavioral sciences.

Keywords: Psychopathology; Normal/abnormal behavior; Primate psychology; Human evolution; Sickness/healing behaviors; Epistemological quandaries; Clinical/evolutionary; Conceptual distinctions; Speciesism; Anachronism; Cultural relativism; Altruism

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1. Introduction

In their article authors review material about psychopathology in great apes and discuss it comprehensively and critically. A point of departure is their concern over negative consequences of captivity. Their topic has relevance to many areas of theoretical and empirical research in evolutionary biology and bio-behavioral and applied/clinical sciences. This commentary/review discusses them. It also highlights some of the conceptual difficulties of studying "psychopathology" on a comparative basis, not just in apes but in human populations as well.

2. A general perspective for studying behavior of psychiatric interest

Authors examine phenomena of psychiatric interest in higher ape communities. One can conceptualize their focus as "irregularities" of higher ape of behavior which include discernible changes in social adjustment, emotional disposition and behavior, anomalies, aberrations, and/or breakdowns (see Fabrega, 1993 for a similar comparative approach for humans). Such irregularities, as the authors themselves indicate and illustrate, can only be appreciated and set apart descriptively by analysts who are familiar and knowledgeable of statistical, normative patterns of ape behavior based on careful, empirically grounded, long-term observational study (Goodall, 1977, 1986, 1988; Dunbar, 1988; Nishida, 1990; Kano, 1992; Wrangham et al., 1994; Kummer, 1971, 1995; de Waal, 1989, 1996; McGrew et al., 1996; Boesch and Boesch-Achermann, 2000; Whiten et al., 1999; Boesch et al., 2002; McGrew, 2004; Hunt and McGrew, 2002; Byrne et al., 2004).

The study of chimpanzee behavior considered in terms of personality differences has a solid history in comparative psychology as exemplified in the work of James King and co-workers who rely on first hand ratings by attendants of zoos with long history of involvement with their subjects (discussed in Fabrega (2002a). Thus, content, style and pattern of chimpanzee behavior can serve as a baseline one can use to delineate and measure individual differences in social adjustment and function and go from there to delineation of irregularity provided criteria for this were defined clearly. Authors show that there exist good data on a selected set of ape irregularities of behavior, evident mainly under captivity conditions.

An advantage of a comprehensive frame of reference is that it then enables one to examine phenomena of psychiatric interest or "behavioral irregularities" from different standpoints. This is undertaken in subsequent sections of this commentary and review.

3. Ontological and epistemological questions: comparative animal studies

"Psychopathology" is a somewhat problematic construct when applied to human communities across historical and cultural territories as it is with respect to great apes and the territory in between, namely, behavior of psychiatric interest during human biological and cultural evolution. It is problematic for two reasons. First, psychopathology, like its cognate mental illness, is not a neutral construct but value laden: it implies negative valorization. The construct is also replete with sociological and philosophical baggage (discussed later). Second, "psychopathology" is problematic because it implies material pertaining to the "psyche," a construct that is culture bound and whose meaning has fuzzy boundaries that is contested not only in animal studies generally but especially in primate studies.

A world history of phenomena of psychiatric interest discloses that mind/body dualism, which supports emphasis on "psyche," is largely a Western conception. Thus, so is the idea of "psychopathology" a Western conception. When one uses the construct to explain phenomena in contexts where academic disciplines have vested interests and their exponents assert the construct "doesn't belong," this causes tensions. They argue against the appropriateness or frank illogicality of attributing something like "mental illness" to animals or pan culturally to non-modern human populations. In the former, such a negative posture is formulated as anthropomorphism, the "wrongness" of attributing human traits to animals and the latter as speciesism, the "wrongness" of uncritically crossing species lines with respect to some aspect of phenotype found in another species (Corbey, 2005). In their article authors make as good a case as can be made that the construct "psychopathology" is relevant to higher apes in a number of ways. (Problems of studying psychopathology cross culturally are taken up later.)

Authors adopt a "realist" or "physicalist" point of view and assume on the basis of their expertise about primate normal behavior that a construct of "psychopathology" denotes a phenomenon that is found in great apes and merits study. The authors' directness in borrowing the concept from clinical psychiatry is understandable since there is where it arose in the first place and the phenomena they address resemble it. However, in taking for granted the applicability of the construct to higher apes the authors bypass important philosophical issues (i.e., ontology and epistemology) that might pre-occupy and restrain some comparative psychologists and evolutionary biologists. These issues are brought out by the following queries. At what point in evolutionary line of animate forms is it intellectually, philosophically "safe" to think of psychopathology? Is some form of mind or consciousness (Griffin, 1992; Donald, 2001) a relevant consideration, and if so what does such minding entail? Must a species display high level of (a certain type?) of sociality for one to comfortably assign psychopathology to it? If high level of sociality is an important consideration, then, how is one to distinguish between psychopathology, behavioral eccentricity, social incompetence, deficient "intellectual" resourcefulness, temperamental deviations, personality idiosyncrasies, or simply general run of the mill "sickliness"? Is psychopathology