

Using anthropocentrism to the benefit of other species

Commentary on [Chapman & Huffman](#) on *Human Difference*

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Abstract: Chapman & Huffman (2018) argue that we should not consider humans as unique or superior to other animals when we have the chance to explore the diversity of the traits of other species. This is a valid and progressive point in our approach to research, but I suggest that an anthropocentric approach can have animal welfare benefits when it helps us perceive other species – especially distantly related ones such as crustaceans – in a human light.

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1. Introduction

Chapman & Huffman (2018) (C & H) argue for a change in the way we view other species, considering them different but equal, rather than considering some inferior to others. This would be another reflection of our own cultural progression over the last century, with increased gender equality and the abandonment of ideas of racial superiority. C & H make the valid point that we should not rank species vertically, with humans at the top; rather, we should consider the diversity of traits across species and address their importance in their own right. This could help researchers broaden their view beyond anthropocentrism, to the benefit of both research and respect for other species. Yet one could argue that those who continue to take an anthropocentric view of the world – believing humans to be unique amongst animals – can also increase respect for other species when they find similarities between humans and those species.

2. Advantages of an anthropocentric approach

Research on great apes over the past fifty years has highlighted strong cognitive and emotional parallels with humans (Clay & de Waal, 2013; Parr, 2001; van Lawick-Goodall, 1973; Wilson, 2018) that have changed the way we treat apes, especially excluding them from medical research for humane reasons (Bennett & Panicker, 2016; “Great ape debate,” 2011). It is not that all species' traits should be compared to humans, or that humans provide the gold standard with which everything else should be compared. But findings like those on apes allow us to view other species in a more humane light and thus change how we relate to them. Knowing that crayfish differentiate between facial features of conspecifics (Van der Velden, Zheng, Patullo, & Macmillan, 2008), that goats show emotion recognition (Bellegarde et al., 2017; Nawroth et al., 2018), that ravens console friends (Fraser & Bugnyar, 2010), and that

apes seem to understand false beliefs in others (Buttelmann, Buttelmann, Carpenter, Call, & Tomasello, 2017; Krupenye, Kano, Hirata, Call, & Tomasello, 2016), humanizes these animals in our minds. This is the current trajectory of animal welfare laws that govern how we treat animals in captivity. The development of our knowledge about the behaviour and cognition of other species has encouraged the adoption of social housing for captive primates in research (National Centre for the Replacement Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, 2017), provided protection for invertebrates such as cephalopods under various European and international legislation (Berry, Vitale, Carere, & Alleva, 2015; Fiorito et al., 2014), and is taking steps towards improved welfare for crustaceans sold for consumption (Carder, 2017).

3. Removing the species hierarchy

If we continue to realise that, like us, other species feel pain, can empathize and have awareness of others, does this not benefit the rights and protection that we accord to those species? As Juergens (2018) notes, the uniqueness of our species is that we have a responsibility for the impact of our actions on other species. Perhaps a more generous approach is to grant all species the same protection – a benefit-of-the-doubt approach (Bekoff, 2007). However, as long as we rely on other species for our daily needs – food, medical research, and even companionship – it is unlikely that the needs of humans will be subordinated to the needs of other species. Until they are, what harm is there in drawing comparisons between humans and other species when it is for the benefit of those species?

C & H are right that we do not need to do this in a vertical manner. Humans do not need to be the pinnacle of a trait hierarchy. Yet I think it will take a very different mind-set, not to mention culture, to stop giving humans the moral high ground over other species.

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