

Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us about Humanity,

published by Yale University Press. An in-depth study of elephants in captivity and in the wild and a theory of Trans-species Psychology.

Review by Patricia C. Prada Jimenez

I find Bradshaw's theory of trans-species psychology quite fascinating. Curious (and careful) I continue to research on the life of elephants-both in the wild and in captivity-with particular interest in their cultural and behavioural similarities with humans.

The trans-species theory of psychology focuses on commonalities in cognition (thinking) and emotions (feelings) in both human and non-human animals. Elephants also have sophisticated cognitive capacities, they mourn their dead, they show problem solving abilities, they feel pain, sadness, confusion, and many other qualities originally only thought of humans.

This theory claims to stand apart from conventional approaches to animal conservation. It is indeed determined to support the wellbeing of animals. However, this does not seem to be a one-way fanatic and extreme manner as often publicised. I myself would like to see a much more balanced view of what we 'should' or shouldn't do when it comes to our co-existence with nature.

Gay Arndt Bradshaw has carried out extensive research on elephants in Africa and other continents. A mathematician with degrees in Ecology and Psychology, Executive Director of The Kerulos Center, and expert on animal trauma, Dr. Bradshaw studies on this book the minds, emotions, and lives of elephants. She explains how interaction with human beings in the way this happens today is affecting their behaviours and leading to the collapse of their communities. This elephant behaviour is comparable to that of humans. Her studies demonstrate how starvation, civil wars, and poaching among other threats have reduced elephant numbers from millions to a few hundred thousand. But this is not all. We hear about criminal poachers and unscrupulous individuals who trade in ivory from many sources. What is most interesting about the study is how elephants who have become aggressive and 'criminal' led the author to believe in and investigate post-traumatic stress disorder in animals.

PTSD or what was originally diagnosed as 'exhaustion' is characterised by extreme anxiety, flashbacks and other recurrent symptoms after a person experiences a traumatic event. Only in the last few decades has this been more thoroughly studied and recognised in individuals during or after wars, violent death, and severe deprivation.

Like humans who have experienced genocide or other types of violence elephants seem to react to trauma and stress in similar ways. *Elephants on the Edge* tells the stories of elephant groups which have been subjected to culling, abrupt loss of habitat and physical abuse. Herds which are 'extraordinarily sensitive and social' find their matriarchal lineage disrupted, their communities separated and often their young orphaned. Herds follow the leadership of their matriarch; they learn everything they need to know in order to survive from her. Young elephants find it extremely difficult to survive alone once separated from their mothers.

Captured elephants also seem to meet the criteria of this psychiatric disorder. Maybe even more so they experience the post-traumatic stress now so commonly seen in humans. In some countries young animals are 'trained' by being pricked with pointed hooks and hit with a variety of objects. They are used in such excruciatingly tiring labour that they often die of real exhaustion and malnourishment. Those which are made to travel long distances undergo the perils of transportation after already having experienced traumatic loss or cruelty.

Bradshaw urges readers to support 'models of elephant recovery' in order to avoid the "breakdown of ancient elephant cultures" and seeks to establish 'positive relationships' between elephants and humans.

Sometimes devastating, with stories of cruelty and mismanagement, but other times heart-warming and definitely insightful, this book is motivating, out of the ordinary. It is not only about the lives of these magnificent giants but also of humans who are often (still!) subjected to horrendous conduct. The analogies between human and animal culture present a disturbing picture of the destruction taking place in elephant societies. It does make one think about how this could (should?) be avoided.

This new way of thinking and behaving towards animals still raises many reservations. Do elephants face a 'psychological' crisis? Believers of 'animal emotions' certainly think so.

Although the author too often applies specific jargon and delves far too deep into the field of psychology-it is after all based on a psychological theory-this book does inform and encourage thinking about us and other animals.

I do believe that there are many who carry out wonderful work to protect these animals. I also commend the work of those like Daphne Sheldrick who devote their lives to saving surviving orphans and giving them the chance to go back into the wild. On the other hand, I understand the purpose of educational programmes within organisations which bring elephants closer to people. I often see the positive results in those who are inspired to do something about these beautiful giant creatures. But, could this be done differently? Maybe it could.

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