

APS President Morton Ann Gernsbacher
University of Wisconsin-Madison



On Not Being Human

Around the time I took office as president of the Association for Psychological Science, Wray Herbert, Public Affairs Director of APS, began e-publishing his now syndicated blog, “We’re Only Human.” Although I won’t pretend to be privy to the inner workings of Wray’s mind, I’m guessing that Wray chose his blog’s moniker to allow wide berth for our diverse curiosities, eccentricities, and proclivities. We might do this, we might even do that, because, well, after all, we are human.

But are we? Do we all agree that all humans are indeed, human?

The anonymous tract, *Disputatio Nova Contra Mulieres, Qua Probatur Eas Homines Non Esse* (A New Argument Against Women, in Which it Is Demonstrated That They Are not Human Beings), first published in 1595, was reprinted prolifically during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 1860s, British anthropologists espoused that Blacks were an inferior species, more comparable to apes than to Caucasians, and therefore well suited for slavery. At the Nuremberg Trial, one SS general explained his allegiance to genocide by the simple contention that “Jews are not even human.”

Sixteenth-century theologians, Victorian anthropologists, and 20th-century Nazis are not the only ones who have deemed various groups of humans ape-like or nonhuman; some current-day American psychological scientists are just as guilty of this crime.

A few years ago, I was at a conference on language and evolution when an audience member questioned a prominent child language researcher’s thesis by raising a counterexample: One aspect of the development of children with Williams syndrome didn’t quite fit the researcher’s theory. The prominent child language researcher quickly retorted, “Oh, I’ve seen children with Williams syndrome. They don’t count. They’re not even human. They must belong to some other species entirely.”

With the wave of a hand, an entire group of people was erased from the human race. Without a contesting word, members of the human species were sacrificed — but a theory

was saved. And what was the distinctly nonhuman behavior demonstrated by some children with Williams syndrome? It was their ability to develop a prodigious vocabulary, prior to developing the ability to extend an index finger to point.

Admittedly, this psychological scientist’s dehumanizing pronouncement occurred during a relatively free-flowing discussion at a relatively small, invitation-only conference. The outrageous comment wasn’t even illuminated on a PowerPoint slide. But similar pronouncements have been typeset on the pages of other psychological scientists’ best-selling books and bound into our field’s most prestigious scholarly journals.

For example, in a recent *New York Times* “notable book of the year,” an internationally acclaimed psychological scientist segregated autistic¹ people from other humans and placed them “together with robots and chimpanzees.” The distinguishing feature, according to this psychological scientist, is humans’ “innate equipment to discern other people’s beliefs and intentions,” which he proposed that robots, chimpanzees, and autistic people inherently lack.

However, laboratory tasks that probe people’s understanding of the intentionality of other humans’ intentions fail to distinguish autistic from nonautistic people (Aldridge, Stone, Sweeney, & Bower, 2000; Carpenter, Pennington, & Rogers, 2001; Russell & Hill, 2001; Sebanz, Knoblich, Stumpf, & Prinz, 2005) and failure on laboratory tasks that probe people’s understanding of other humans’ beliefs is neither universal among autistic people (Happé, 1995; Kleinman, Marciano, & Ault, 2001; Ozonoff, Rogers, & Pennington, 1991; Peterson, 2002) nor unique to autistic people (Benson, Abbeduto, Short, Bibler-Nuccio, & Mass, 1993; Miller, 2001; Peterson & Siegal, 1995; Rowe, Bullock, Polkey, & Morris, 2001; Saltzman, Strauss, Hunter, & Archibald, 2000; Tager-Flusberg, 2001). Nonetheless, such theorizing was recapitulated in the popular press as the claim “it’s as if they [autistic people] do not understand or are missing a core aspect of what it is to be human” (Falcon & Shoop, 2002). If

See **PRESIDENTIAL** on Page 32

MORTON ANN GERNSBACHER is the Vilas Research Professor and Sir Frederic C. Bartlett Professor of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She can be reached via email at mgernsbacher@psychologicalscience.org.

¹ For background on my respectful use of the term “autistic person” rather than “person with autism,” please refer to Sinclair’s (1999) essay “Why I Dislike Person-First Language” (http://web.syr.edu/~jisincla/person_first.htm).

PRESIDENTIAL from Page 5

that *they* referred to members of any other minority group, we'd call the statement hate speech.

Consider the theorizing of another internationally acclaimed psychological scientist, presented in a widely circulated scholarly journal. After proposing the thesis that "cultural learning" is "a uniquely human form of social learning that allows for a fidelity of transition of behaviors and information among conspecifics," the authors argued that, like chimpanzees, "autistic children show little or no evidence of cultural learning." However, the authors ran into a similar deficit of empirical proof, best captured by their admission: "It can be stated with confidence that the vast majority of autistic children do not engage in [a specific type of cultural] learning. Although we are aware of no studies that specifically test for [this type of cultural] learning per se..." In this case, the authors salvaged their thesis by observing that "one robust and recurrent finding is that throughout their development autistic children show significant deficits in their ability to interact with and relate to peers."

The authors are right; difficulty developing "peer relationships appropriate to developmental level" is a bona fide DSM-IV diagnostic criterion for autism. But by this logic, any DSM-IV diagnostic criterion for any DSM-IV diagnosis could be used as a basis for segregating humans who fit the diagnosis from humans who don't. And if the diagnostic criterion (e.g., reading disorder, written expression disorder, or erectile disorder) is also met by any nonhuman species, it can become the basis for dehumanization.

In a more recent scholarly article, also written with the aim of delineating "the crucial difference between human cognition and that of other species," autistic people were again segregated from other humans and placed with great apes. After acknowledging that the empirical literature demonstrates that "great apes and children with autism are clearly not blind to all aspects of intentional action," the authors raised the bar ("understanding the intentional actions and perceptions of others is not by itself sufficient to produce humanlike social and cultural activities"), and continued to pound home their belief that autistic children do not "engage socially and culturally with others in the ways that human children do;" they do not "interact with other persons in the species-typical manner." Their social behavior is just not human.

Why are humans dehumanized? According to Morton Deutsch, this year's APS James McKeen Cattell award recipient, humans are dehumanized when they are perceived as a threat. What threat do humans with Williams syndrome and autistic humans pose to psychological scientists? A threat to the universality of the scientists' theories, a threat to their ability to accept human diversity?

Last fall, a Duquesne University sophomore violated his Catholic university's code of conduct by posting on Facebook his opinion that homosexual behavior was "subhuman."

Shouldn't psychological scientists be held to an equally high code of conduct? In addition to being required to remove his offensive comment from the Web, the Duquesne sophomore had to write a 10-page essay on respect for human dignity. I wish some psychological scientists would at least read, if not write, a similar essay.

References

- Aldridge, M. A., Stone, K. R., Sweeney, M. H., & Bower, T. G. R. (2000). Preverbal children with autism understand the intentions of others. *Developmental Science*, 3, 294-301.
- Benson, G., Abbeduto, L., Short, K., Bibler-Nuccio, J., & Mass, F. (1993). Development of theory of mind in individuals with MR. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, 98, 427-433.
- Carpenter, M., Pennington, B. F., & Rogers, S. J. (2001). Understanding of others' intentions in children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31, 589-599.
- Falcon, M., & Shoop, S. A. (2002, April 10). Stars 'CAN-do' about defeating autism. *USA Today*. Retrieved May 1, 2005 from <http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/spotlight/2002/04/10-autism.htm>
- Happe, F. G. (1995). The role of age and verbal ability in the theory of mind task performance of subjects with autism. *Child Development*, 66, 843-855.
- Kleinman, J., Marciano, P. L., & Ault, R. L. (2001). Advanced theory of mind in high-functioning adults with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31, 29-36.
- Miller, C. (2001). False belief understanding in children with specific language impairment. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 34, 73-86.
- Ozonoff, S., Rogers, S. J., & Pennington, B. F. (1991). Asperger's syndrome: Evidence of an empirical distinction from high-functioning autism. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 32, 1107-1022.
- Peterson, C. C. (2002). Drawing insight from pictures: The development of concepts of false drawing and false belief in children with deafness, normal hearing, and autism. *Child Development*, 73, 1442-1459.
- Peterson, C. C., & Siegal, M. (1995). Deafness, conversation and theory of mind. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36, 459-474.
- Rowe, A. D., Bullock, P. R., Polkey, C. E., & Morris, R. G. (2001). "Theory of mind" impairments and the relationship to executive functioning following frontal lobe excisions. *Brain*, 124, 600-616.
- Russell, J., & Hill, E. (2001). Action-monitoring and intention reporting in children with autism. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 42, 1105-1113.
- Saltzman, J., Strauss, E., Hunter, M., & Archibald, S. (2000). Theory of mind and executive functions in normal human aging and Parkinson's disease. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, 6, 781-788.
- Sebanz, N., Knoblich, G., Stumpf, L., & Prinz, W. (2005). Far from action-blind: Representation of others' actions in individuals with autism. *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, 22, 433-454.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. (2001). A reexamination of the theory of mind hypothesis of autism. In J. A. Burack (Ed.), *The development of autism: Perspectives from theory and research* (pp. 173-193). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.