

PSYCHOLOGY 3131 – Human Emotion
Professor June Gruber

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS 3.1 – SAMPLE RESPONSE

Example 1: Of the different examples of emotional expression documented in animals during today’s lecture, which did you find most compelling and why?

Of the different studies on animal emotion expression documented in today’s lecture, I found the example of love in the prairie vole to be most interesting. Considering only 3% of mammals engage in “pair-bonding” and form long-term, exclusive attachments, prairie voles provide a unique opportunity for researchers to examine the neurobiological underpinnings of love and attachment. I was fascinated by the important role of vasopressin in this process – when these receptors are blocked, prairie voles seem to almost “fall out of love” with their mate, and then the re-administration of this hormone leads them to engage in all of their typical attachment behaviors again. This highlights the critical role that biology plays in this emotional experience of love and attachment across humans and other mammals like the prairie vole. I think looking at specific hormones in these animals allows us to get a better sense of the emotions they might be experiencing since, as we discussed in lecture, we cannot gain this information from methods commonly used in humans (like self-report) in which we ask them about their subjective internal state.

Example 2: How would you follow up on Parr’s (2003) work on emotion in chimpanzees? Briefly describe a research prediction you think might be interesting to test in order to extend this field of research and advance our understanding of emotion in nonhuman primates (e.g. “I would like to test if chimpanzees can experience jealousy”) and thoughts on how this prediction could be examined by researchers.

If I were to design a research question regarding emotion in chimpanzees, I would be interested in looking at the experience of Schadenfreude or pleasure at the misfortune of others. This is a rather odd emotional process that humans experience from time to time, and I wonder if any nonhuman primates might experience this state as well. This question could be studied by having chimpanzee participants watch videos of other chimps in a slightly embarrassing or unfortunate situation. Researchers could then code the chimp participants’ faces using Chimp FACS to examine if the chimpanzee participants showed any signs of amusement or pleasure while watching these videos. From other findings covered in lecture, we learned that chimpanzees do seem to respond with sadness or fear (as indicated by a drop in body temperature) while watching other chimps receive an injection on video, but I wonder what type of response might be evoked by watching less serious misfortune (such as watching a chimp trip and fall in some sort of funny way). This could help us to better understand how and why this intriguing emotional state of Schadenfreude might have evolved, and get us closer to answering the question of if humans are the only species to experience such an emotion.