

Death in the family

Commentary on [King](#) on *Animal Grief*

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Abstract: Barbara King presents grief as the result of the capacity of human and non-human animals for social and affectionate bonds. This is a novel approach that provides a context for interpreting behavioral evidence of grief. The book also offers thought-provoking insights into the relationship between emotion and the expression of emotion. The most surprising element of King's approach is that, throughout the book, her account of non-human animal grief forces us to reassess the way we treat them.

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One of the most surprising things about *How Animals Grieve* (King, 2013) is that on several occasions I found myself putting the book away after reading just a few pages. My reaction puzzled me; Barbara King's research explores the compelling question of whether animals experience grief and does so in a clear and engaging way. Only at the end of the book did the reason for my discomfort become clear. King conveys an embodied feeling of how human and non-human animals are intertwined through grief and love. What I was experiencing was grief. As King so eloquently puts it: "We grieve as primates, and we have company" (p. 133). Her book emphasizes that the question of animal grief is fundamental, that it pertains not only to which animals experience grief and to how we can identify grief in animals, but also to an understanding of ourselves as grieving humans.

There are many interesting elements in King's treatment of this question, but I will focus here on two aspects of her approach to the question of grief. One of the novel aspects of her research is the way she defines grief. Her starting point is that grief is born out of the capacity for love, or, in her own words, "The love drives the grief as the wind drives the ocean waves" (p. 161).

This approach to grief is novel because instead of following the traditional approach of focusing on the cognitive skills that are the basis for grief, King chooses emotions as the context that enables the appearance of grief. Moreover, this approach is beneficial in helping us understand the similarities and differences of social capabilities in a comparative context.

Anthropologists face the challenge of understanding social relations that are not directly observable in the remains they discover. One of King's examples illustrates this difficulty. She describes how difficult it is to interpret the meaning of a pile of human bones that seem to have been deliberately thrown down a pitch. Is this a form of burial? A form of malice? Research in animal cognition faces a similar challenge. Two researchers can observe the same phenomenon but disagree on the meaning of what they observed. For example, they can watch the same videotape of apes surrounding the dead body of a member of their community and arrive at completely opposite interpretations of what is going through the animals' minds.

King provides a way to interpret behavioral evidence of grief. She argues for first focusing on the ability of a species to create strong social bonds and then on using this as a context that allows us to interpret mourning behavior. If the species is capable of engaging in affectionate feelings or love, then we have the appropriate context in which we can interpret behavioral examples of grief. She is offering an alternative starting point that guides us through our observation when searching for evidence of grief across cultures, in diverse groups of human and non-human animals, and across species.

This leads me to what I think is the only limitation of this book. King offers a series of thought-provoking insights but does not fully explore the implications of some of those insights. Two examples of this are her commentary on the differences and limitations of quantitative and qualitative research and her argument, indeed, her warning, that there is a difference between feeling an emotion and expressing an emotion. The latter example underscores an important distinction often overlooked in the field of psychology, where there is a long tradition of linking facial expressions to emotions (see for example, Ekman, 2003). However, the connection of this distinction with an overall argument for grief is not fully explored.

The argument for the separation between an emotion and its expression (or lack of expression) ties in with King's claim that not all human and non-human animals will express grief in the same manner or express it at all. This is part of a larger point that King makes about falling into what she calls "the trap of making a universality criterion," that is, generalizing from the evidence that one member of a species does not perform a behavior to the conclusion that no member of the species can. It is implied in her argument that the converse is also true, that, just because one member of the species does something, we cannot generalize that this is a species-typical behavior or, in her own words, that it is human nature or orangutan nature or chimpanzee nature.

I believe that her point is that, when we attempt to provide an evolutionary account of grief by focusing on the emotion of love, we need to acknowledge the diversity of individuals. Given the importance of this point, King could have explored it in more detail, for example, presenting more evidence to support the separation between an emotion and its expression, explaining the factors that affect the expression of an emotion (or absence of an expression), and explaining how we can define an emotion if it is not accompanied by an expression. To contribute to our understanding of emotions in a comparative context, it would have been important for her to

explore in more detail the consequences of starting from a perspective that separates an emotion from an expression of an emotion.

Finally, I would like to touch on one of the most surprising topics in this book. I was expecting an account of human and non-human grief; however, I was not expecting a discussion of the ethical implications of our human research into grief. King emphasizes how we, as humans, cause grief in many different ways — ways found in our eating, medical and research practices. Accepting that animals grieve as the result of social bonds such as love forces us to reassess how we treat animals. Other authors, such as Peter Singer (1990), have urged us to include animals in our moral considerations based on their sentience, that is, their capacity to suffer. However, what is distinctive in King's argument is that, when she acknowledges that social, non-human animals are capable of grieving, she helps us recognize in non-human animals a form of subjectivity that is shared by members of our moral community. King's research on grief provokes us to inquire into the morally right ways of treating these non-human animals.

References

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