Amputation of Vibrissae in Show Dogs

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found uncanny similarities between chimps and humans. For example, the chimp’s brain shows the asymmetry which in the human denotes handedness and a differentiation between speech and nonspeech (nonverbal) areas (Desmond, 1979). Second, according to recent molecular anthropology studies, Homo sapiens and the African apes (the chimpanzees and gorillas) split from a common ancestor no more than 4 to 6 million years ago, not very long in evolutionary time (Zihlman and Lowenstein, 1979). Third, “the fine structure and genetic organization of the chromosomes of man and chimpanzee are so similar that it is difficult to account for their phenotypic differences” (Yunis et al., 1980).

The Piagetian models of human cognitive development are a neutral yardstick for measuring reasoning ability which have been used successfully in a number of areas, including archaeological anthropology (Marshack 1972). In her presentation at the conference, Suzanne Chevalier-Skolnikoff said that she had applied two of the Piagetian models to apes and found that the apes passed all of the cognition tests up to Stage 6 (18 months of age in human terms) regardless of whether they were able to make signs or use a computer keyboard. Since children are beginning to speak at that age, there would seem to be little reason why chimps would not be able to learn signs or words as well, provided that they wanted to and had some mechanism with which to do so. Originally, finding the right mechanism was a problem. The Gardners at the University of Nevada made one of the first breakthroughs in the field when they hit upon using sign language.

Chimps as “Animal Models”

Duane Rumbaugh says that of the nine retarded children in the program at the Georgia Retardation Center in Atlanta who had “essentially no ability to speak intelligibly” before being taught Yerkish, five are now able to communicate to a “very significant degree.”

If it is true that these children were helped, arguments about whether language acquisition by chimps makes them “human” (or makes us chimpanzees) are trivial. If it is also true that the retarded children are successfully manipulating “arbitrary symbols,” as Duane Rumbaugh puts it, this may raise questions about our theories on the brain and on mental retardation. According to an instructor in special education at Southern Connecticut State College, it is now standard practice to teach severely retarded children sign language because they learn signs much more quickly than speech (personal communication). The Bliss system of pictographs* works well too, although no one really knows why. The problem in severe retardation is not with blockages in the communication channels, but with the child’s ability to make sense of what he or she sees and hears. Why should the child be able to understand and use signs or Bliss symbols if he or she cannot handle speech?

Chimps could not learn to speak very well either. Although the simplest explanation is lack of the proper vocal apparatus, it would be enlightening if the apes’ troubles with speech could be found to have more complicated roots. And

References


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Dogs of many different breeds competing in the show-ring are routinely subjected to amputation of the vibrissae, organs that are commonly and incorrectly called “whiskers.” This procedure is thought to give the animal’s head a cleaner look, which in turn supposedly increases its chances of winning. There are several tricks involved in “whisker trimming” since the animals can retract each vibrissae at least one-quarter inch. Furthermore, they often object strenuously to the operation.

Research in the area of animal behavior has shown that we can be terribly ignorant regarding the sensory capacities of animals, capacities that can sometimes far exceed those of our own species. Consider for example the extension of the hearing range of many animals into the “ultrasonic;” the fact that bees can perceive ultraviolet radiation that is beyond our limits; and the remarkable capacity of bats and porpoises to find their way about by means of echo-
location. But beyond the extension of familiar sense modalities, animals possess senses that are completely absent in humans. There are fishes that produce an electric current and then detect objects that alter the electrical field that surrounds their bodies. It has recently been determined that pigeons, and probably other birds, can sense the earth’s magnetic field. New discoveries in the area of animal sensory processes are occurring all the time, but progress is sometimes slow since it is difficult for us to hypothesize and then investigate sources of stimulation that we are incapable of perceiving. It is possible that vibrissae act to detect some as yet unknown stimulus. It seems more probable that they function to extend some aspect of the animal’s tactile sensitivity.

A literature search was undertaken to determine what is known of the functions of vibrissae, organs that humans and most other primates do not possess, but which are universal in the carnivores and several other mammalian orders. Unfortunately, definitive research on the functions of these organs in common domesticated animals appears to be lacking, although many interesting speculations exist. As might be expected, we know considerably more about their functions in the familiar laboratory rodents. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I cite some of the research findings for rodents and certain other species, followed by presumptive evidence as to the importance of these organs in species as yet unstudied, particularly the dog.

Behavioral and neural approaches to the functions of the vibrissae have been summarized in an excellent review article (Psychol Bull 84:477, 1977). Amputation of vibrissae in rats affects locomotor activity, depth perception, swimming ability, shock-induced fighting, emotionality, tactile maze learning, equilibrium, and discrimination of surfaces. Removal of the vibrissae lowers general activity level in cats. The vibrissae of seals are sensitive to vibrations from 50 to 1000 Hz, and it is thought that the animals use these organs to detect prey in dark waters (J Zool 188:443, 1979).

The length of the vibrissae appears to be correlated with the ecology of the animals. Burrowing mice have vibrissae that are shorter than arboreal species. Among carnivores, the vibrissae of bears are considerably shorter than those of the hunting canines and felines. It is also interesting to note that whales, having forsaken the land for an aquatic environment, lost all body hair except the vibrissae.

While firm evidence of the importance of these organs in dogs is lacking, there is presumptive evidence of their potential significance: 1. The very ubiquity of vibrissae in carnivores suggests important sensory functions. Evolutionary theorists agree that nature is conservative and does not expend energy on the maintenance of useless organs. 2. Vibrissae are constructed differently and are much more heavily innervated than other body hair. 3. The vibrissae in dogs are served by the largest of the twelve pairs of cranial nerves. 4. It is generally recognized that the amount of sensory cerebral cortex devoted to a particular body area is in direct proportion to the importance of that area in the sensory world of the animal. In plotting the sensory areas of the cerebral cortex of the dog it has been determined that “face representation clearly accounts for at least 50 percent of somatic area 1 and for a third or more of somatic area 2” (J Neurophysiol 19:485, 1956). The upper jaw occupies a disproportionately large amount of the face area.
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From anatomical data on dogs themselves, and from behavioral and neurophysiological data on other mammalian species which may apply to dogs, one can hypothesize that the vibrissae are sense organs of some importance to the animal. With this possibility in mind, we may question the moral legitimacy of vibrissae amputation. Why is it done? The answer is simply for cosmetic purposes in order to compete; to have one’s dog placed above others in terms of conformation. But since the practice is so common, in effect it is performed to avoid losing an advantage rather than in hopes of gaining one. Many owners and handlers would be happy not to use this particular procedure if others abstained.

No one claims that vibrissae amputation helps the dog in any way. It is simply viewed as a harmless technique that is thought to improve the animal’s appearance. But the research literature suggests that it may not be harmless; instead it may be damaging. At best it is unnecessary, and at worst it may be a form of sensory deprivation, the effects of which are beyond the current state of our knowledge.

The solution to the problem is simple in conception but will doubtless prove difficult in implementation. Ideally, the American Kennel Club and governing bodies in other countries should recognize the potential importance of vibrissae as sense organs and instruct judges to excuse from the ring animals whose vibrissae have been trimmed. Competition would be equalized by the universal prohibition of this entirely unnecessary procedure. At the very least, the national kennel clubs and/or the individual breed clubs should explicitly state that vibrissae amputation is optional, and no dog with these organs intact should be penalized.