

## Humans are superhuman animals: A reply to commentaries by J. Birtchnell and P. Gilbert

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With Paul Gilbert we have little quarrel, because he shares our evolutionary approach, albeit from a psychological rather than psychiatric perspective. We thank him for his detailed discussion of our paper, both during its writing and in the preceding essay. We also thank three anonymous referees whose comments were helpful.

John Birtchnell is asking questions (and providing answers) about the nuts and bolts of relating. We are asking questions (many would say unanswerable questions) about the evolution of the mechanisms of relationships. That is one reason why our models differ. Evolution is about competition, and this mainly means social competition (intra-sexual selection). This is why our thinking is mainly concerned with the competitive aspects of relating.

We would argue that close and affiliative relationships have evolved in order to help those who engage in them to compete with outsiders, but this ultimate (or evolutionary) reason is not apparent or even relevant to the day-to-day management of such relationships. We have found Birtchnell's exploration of the dimensions of upperness/lowerness and closeness/distance to be enormously illuminating. If our ideas appear to conflict with his, then an examination of the areas of agreement and disagreement should be rewarding.

### Is depression alerting?

Let us take the disagreements first. We would contest the view that depression has an 'alerting' function, and serves to signal to the individual that one of their needs is not being met. Our experience of depression is that it has a 'non-alerting' function, and tends to obfuscate its causes. Sensations and emotions such as pain, grief and humiliation have an alerting function, and are 'other-focused' onto the source of discomfort; but depressed mood as we encounter it in depressed patients tends to be self-focused, and attention is withdrawn from specific problems with relationships. The kind of relationship problem which depressives ruminate about, such as being

unlovable, is not something that can be addressed or remedied in a constructive way, and these depressive attitudes need reformulating in cognitive therapy before they can be tackled. On the whole depressed patients do not know why they are depressed, and if they think they know, they are usually wrong. Often depressed patients attribute the depression to some aspect of the depression, such as feeling bad or not sleeping. We think that the evolved function of depression is to maintain a relationship, and this function occurs without active help from the depressive, whose role is passively to accept whatever is thrust on him or her by the other party. We think that the function of depression is impossible to understand in terms of the individual alone.

### Importance of closeness for the pursuit of power

Ranking theory cannot ignore affiliation because in most primates, and most of all in human beings, rank depends on alliances with other group members. Concerning non-human primates, Bernstein & Gordon (1974) wrote:

... animals living in a society depend more on alliances and coalitions rather than on individual fighting skills to maintain their social position. Thus a scrawny old female supported by many generations of offspring and long associations with other females and adult males may maintain a position of unquestioned superiority over young males of much greater fighting ability. So, too, may an old male retain his high rank, eventually losing to a challenger not because of his failing fighting abilities but because of the successful recruitment of support from group members by the challenger. After such a defeat, a new order is established incorporating all animals into a society that recognizes the new relationships.

This dependence of rank on alliances has been amply confirmed by more recent primate studies. Bernard Chapais (1992) sums up his review of ranking behaviour in female *Cercopithecine* monkeys as follows:

Perhaps the most general principle emerging from the present review is perhaps that any female seeks to outrank any other female against whom she is given sufficient alliance power.

In their introduction to their book on alliances, De Waal & Harcourt (1992) sum up their view of alliance formation and agonistic behaviour in humans and other primates:

If we view the dominance hierarchy as the vertical component of social organisation, the network of affiliative and kinship ties can be viewed as the horizontal component. In many species these two components exist side by side without much interplay. The remarkable social complexity of human and non-human primates is brought about by their capacity to (1) alter competitive outcomes and dominance positions through collaboration, and especially (2) establish social bonds for this very reason. Alliance formation links the vertical and horizontal components of social organisation by making an individual's dominance position dependent on its place in the affiliative network. Consequently, this network becomes an arena of dominance-related strategy.

Alliance formation could have evolved in man and monkeys by convergent evolution, but it seems more likely that it was present in the common simian human ancestor some 50 million years ago. Therefore there has been much time for the mechanisms underlying alliances and the loss of them to be integrated into the pre-existing mechanisms for the maintenance of rank and the loss of it. Also, the usual

method of competition in humans is no longer ritual agonistic behaviour. Gilbert (1992) has pointed out that competition by attraction has to a large extent replaced competition by intimidation. Humans compete for prestige, which is allocated by the group because they respect and admire the prestigious person. Pugnacious, aggressive people are usually not given prestige, so the criteria for being successful in social competition have changed. This and other changes in competitive strategies have enormously complicated the task of analysing the mechanisms which subserves losing, and it does seem that the same basic depressive mechanism underlies both loss of dominance rank and loss of prestige, although in the latter case shame and guilt have been added to the inferiority and anxiety which mediate agonistic defeat.

### Relationships can be equal

We agree with Birtchnell that relationships can be equal and reciprocal, and in this way humans differ from most animal species, which are unable to sustain equal relationships between members of the same sex. We do not say 'up is good and down is bad', although the up position is often more rewarding, and on average is associated with increased fitness (reproductive success); we would prefer to say that symmetrical relationships are good, whereas coercive asymmetrical relationships are bad; but this is a moral judgement and is not science.

Humans have a unique capacity for symmetry in relationships, but they also have strong urges to dominate, and this makes equal relationships very difficult to sustain, particularly if contentious decisions have to be made. Most British and Americans might agree that it is desirable for husband and wife to be equal; and yet they recognize that a marriage is like any organization that requires executive decisions to be made. The British did not vote for a political party that had two equal leaders, nor would they buy shares in a company that had two equal managing directors, in the unlikely event that such a company were to get into the position of offering shares to the public. Symmetry in marriage is sometimes only achieved in the context of paradoxical power relationships, such as those in which 'The husband thinks he is in charge, and the wife knows she is in charge'.

Making equal marriage work is one of the most pressing problems confronting our society; and yet those who advocate it do not seem to realize the difficulties it faces, nor the pinnacle it represents in the evolution of relationships.

### Depression as a reaction to loss of lowerness

Our theory sees depression as a reaction to loss of what Birtchnell (1993) calls 'upperness'. Therefore we may seem to be in conflict with his scheme in which depression is a reaction to the frustration of all relating needs: not only the loss of upperness, but also the loss of closeness and distance, and even of lowerness. In fact there is no conflict here, and to explain why not may help to elucidate the complex interactions of variables in the two dimensional space of upperness/lowerness and closeness/distance.

Our theory deals with depression as an *involuntary* subordinate strategy, in which an individual is coerced or manipulated into a one-down position, from which there is

no escape. Birtchnell rightly points out that there are needs for lowerness, and that lowerness may be sought freely and even joyfully. For instance, there is security and comfort to be obtained from lowerness to the Queen and to God, to whom most people are willing to bend the knee.

We may like support, but we also like to get our own way. We may use support from A to get our own way with B. And even with A, if it is a choice between support and own way, we may well jettison the support.

If security from an important patron is not forthcoming, and therefore the need for lowerness is frustrated, depression may follow. In our scheme, this is because the individual wants security, and is not getting his or her own way in this regard, and the depression assists him or her in 'not getting his or her own way'; it prevents the individual from rebelling against the patron for not providing the desired security. To put it in different terms, there has been a conflict between the individual and the patron about the amount of security to be provided by the patron—they have offered different definitions of the relationship, the individual defining the relationship as one providing more security, the patron defining it as one providing less. The individual is forced to accept the patron's definition, and being forced into the acceptance of an unacceptable definition of a relationship is one way of defining the proximate trigger of depression (Price, 1992).

#### **Depression as a reaction to loss of closeness or distance**

The same applies to conflicts over the closeness/distance dimension. If X defines the relationship as having  $p$  units of closeness and Y defines it as having  $q$  units of closeness, one of the two is likely to be forced into accepting the other's definition and therefore may get depressed. There may also be a coercive quality over the definition of distance: one partner may take the view, 'I will not tolerate you having so much distance'. This is especially true when a request for distance is a denial of exclusivity, rejecting, say, the definition, 'Our love excludes either of us loving another'. For the individual caught between the demands of two others demanding exclusivity, it does not much matter whether the demands relate to the horizontal or the vertical dimension; the demand, 'Love me and not her (or him)' can cause as much distress as the command, 'Obey me and not her (or him)'.

Since differences of definition and their resolution are the material of the upperness/lowerness or vertical dimension, we may speak of a 'reversion to the vertical dimension' when needs in other areas of relating are not met; this reversion, or 'switch from the hedonic mode into the agonistic mode' (Price, 1992) has been recognized as 'disassuagement' by Heard & Lake (1986):

Psychological distancing which is uncomfortable and distressing arises; firstly, when a companion or support-giver fails to recognise or acknowledge a request for supportive or companionable interaction, or having recognised it, devalues or rejects it; and secondly, when someone assumed to be either a support-giver or -seeker refuses to accept the expected role. In contrast, uncomfortable and distressing closeness arises when individuals, as seekers, are pressurised to accept unsolicited support and/or support they construe to be inappropriate or inadequate; or as support-givers, are subjected to intense demands which they cannot satisfy. In each instance, giver and seeker put each other under painful pressure to accept the meaning and point of view of

the other. Giving in to such pressure is frequently experienced as submission, with loss of autonomy which increases the experience of disassuagement (p. 435).

We agree with these authors, and think that they are describing an important phenomenon—the breakdown of agreement about closeness. We would just add that the 'giving in' can be experienced at two different levels of consciousness: there can be a conscious giving in which may be painful but over which the individual has some control; or there may be unconscious giving in which takes the form of clinical depression. Elsewhere we have given the name 'involuntary subordinate strategy' to this unconscious form of giving in (Gilbert, Price & Allan, 1995; Sloman, Price, Gilbert & Gardner, 1994).

It is a common clinical observation that coercive relationships may cause depression while they continue, whereas non-coercive relationships may cause depression when they are discontinued. It does not matter all that much whether the discontinuation is by separation, rejection or death. One way of accommodating all this to our theoretical scheme is to say that the definition of a relationship normally contains the unspoken requirement that it continue. Therefore to leave a relationship or to die is to offer an alternative and unacceptable definition, and to be forced to accept this unacceptable definition puts us in the situation in which the depressive response is triggered. The unconscious mental mechanisms which have evolved to reconcile different definitions of relationships may not be sufficiently fine-tuned to recognize the difference between wilful rejection and death; or perhaps in evolutionary terms the difference is not important.

As might be expected, given that we are dealing with the same phenomena, there is a lot of common ground between Birchnell's scheme and our own. In particular, we both recognize certain factors which we predict are prophylactic against depression. These include: the resolution of differences in definition *by negotiation and compromise* (thus avoiding a switch from the hedonic to the agonistic mode), the freedom to escape from disputed definitions, and the readiness to accommodate to other people's needs with voluntary subordination if necessary.

### Summary

Maybe the difference between us is one of levels. We think Birchnell is right to say that depression follows the failure to satisfy relating needs, whether these be for closeness, distance, upperness or lowerness. The problem for us is that we cannot see the adaptive function of depression in this role, except in the case of the need for upperness, in which case depression accommodates the person to unwanted lowerness. We can get round this problem by postulating an overriding relating need: the need to get one's own way. This evolved in the context of intra-sexual selection, and depression is an adaptive response to the frustration of this need, as we have argued in the preceding pages and elsewhere (e.g. Gilbert *et al.*, 1995; Sloman *et al.*, 1994). If one does not get one's own way in terms of closeness, distance or lowerness, in spite of using all the negotiating and manipulating devices at one's command, and if one cannot leave the relationship, one has to accommodate to not getting one's own way. This can be done at a conscious, rational, voluntary level in terms of willing self-

sacrifice, or it can be done at a far more primitive level through the incapacity of depression. If one does not wish to shiver, one can turn on the central heating; likewise, if one does not wish to be depressed, one can accept and come to terms with being thwarted.

The reason we appear obsessed with the vertical dimension is that this dimension reflects 300 million years of evolution during which our ancestors got their own way *vis-à-vis* their peers. No amount of religion or philosophy can banish in a few thousand years the battle cry which echoes down the generations: 'My will be done!'

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