



Perspective Piece 4

Reflections from Ngogo

Sarah Dunphy-Lelii

Department of Psychology, Bard College

*Corresponding author (Email: sdl@bard.edu)

Citation – Dunphy-Lelii, (2020). Reflections from Ngogo. *Animal Behavior and Cognition*, 7(4), 665-666. <https://doi.org/10.26451/abc.07.04.13.2020>

Wild chimpanzees live extraordinarily rich, deeply connected lives, ranging widely through diverse terrain and negotiating complex relationships. Their social ecology is a fascinating one, and they spend hundreds of hours, most of their lives, in amiable and peaceful consort with close others. Considering Povinelli's (this issue) reflection on captive and wild environments, and having witnessed chimpanzees in both, I can say that my first experience in the field had deep impact for the dramatic and sobering view it gave of the many grave challenges they face in wild living.

Young females typically set off alone, just before puberty, on a solitary journey to an unknown community. When they locate a new one, their existence is peripheral, fraught with rejection and uncertainty; adult males show little unsolicited interest, adult females are exclusionary and aggressive. The next year or two is spent much alone. They have no mothers, sisters, or aunts and likely will not for the rest of their lives (it is possible for a sister to happen into the same community). And of course, their own daughters will also depart early. The careful movements and watchful face of a young, unnamed immigrant at the margins is poignant to anyone who remembers their own adolescence.

Sex is often (though not always) coercive, through domination and the threat of violence. Dominant males demand through gesture and vocalization, and stalk, and females usually submit. Even so, females can sustain tearing and biting injuries visible long afterward. Their fear is apparent through the well-documented "fear grin" and screaming. Middle-aged Aretha, her own swollen genitals scarred, climbed a tree in refuge from the fully erect and vocal males staring up from below for hours, before eventually descending from hunger or isolation to succumb. Young Florence studiously ignored the ground-slapping demands of a large male until he grew so frustrated that he started breaking and throwing branches. She crouched and crept backwards toward him, her face set in fear and squealing through her teeth.

Infants, intensively cared for as they are in humans (carried for eight months and born singly), often die. The causes are various and include sickness, accident, and infanticide; this last outcome most commonly by members of their own community. Even other females kill, and sometimes eat, neonates. First-time or socially isolated mothers may face higher rates of victimhood. During my five months in the field, two newborn infants were taken from their mothers' arms and eaten by females well known to them. They are not abandoned easily; Julianne carried her dead infant for weeks after he died from causes unknown, cradling his limp body while she ate, and climbing gingerly with one arm in order to hold his body with the other.

The threat of illness, including human-borne, is ever-present (intestinal parasites, influenza, polio, pneumonia, syphilis, Ebola, anthrax, AIDS). Respiratory illness can be particularly devastating, with a number of well-known chimpanzee communities losing swaths of members at the height of a contagion

season. In the winter of 2017, the Ngogo community alone lost 25 members. Old man Hare died slowly after suffering for many years from what appeared to be syphilis, which swelled and deformed his face before his death so that he could hardly eat or communicate.

The threat of bodily injury, and death from infection or blood loss, is also ever-present. From humans: snares, pits, and traps (including those laid for other animals) cause severe and permanent maiming: loss of hands, feet, and fingers. Both Richmond and Mweya had only one hand - somehow surviving the other being entirely severed at the wrist. Lita had only one foot and limped along on the narrow stump. Garrett, his hand shredded by a nylon snare that would not decompose, lived for twenty years with infection so nasty you could smell it at a distance.

Accidental injury abounds, falls from extreme height, for example. Though they have few natural predators, chimps have been hunted, killed and eaten by leopards and humans. They must be always vigilant for various aggressive species in the shared environment (buffalo, elephants, snakes, wasps, bees). During my time, a sting left the right side of young Emmylou's face so swollen and inflamed that she could not see out of that eye for a week. Chimpanzees are also hunters, a dangerous occupation. Monkeys and pigs fight back aggressively and can inflict serious injury. Basie suffered an appalling wound from a terrified monkey, who tore Basie's face open from the corner of his mouth to his ear. All the teeth of his lower jaw were exposed, back to the molars, and he could not close his mouth; it flapped rawly open.

Intra-community aggression is endemic in chimpanzee communities. Dominance hierarchies are vigorously and perpetually defended. The threat of violence, and actual violence, is directed both at perceived adversaries (challenging males) and bystanders (low-ranking males, females, juveniles). Porkpie emerged from an in-group fight with blood running into his eye from a gash on his forehead – the dull gleam of skull was visible. Fitzgerald had a bleeding puncture over her shoulder blade from somebody's canine tooth. Basie was killed two years after his face healed by those he had grown up with, beaten violently and left to die. Just before him, the adolescent Errol was likewise killed by his own community. Both deaths shocked researchers.

Inter-community violence also happens regularly, particularly in areas large enough (i.e., uninterrupted by human settlement) to support distinct communities. Species-characteristic xenophobia means neighboring groups are always in conflict; large- and small-scale violence along boundary zones results in injury and death of males and occasional attack of females and their young. Males caught alone on contested boundary zones are killed by blunt assault and blood loss after their testicles are torn off. Males also die after large group conflict, in which many members from each side clash. Few bodies are found, as chimps typically remove themselves from the group to die under forest cover, and other creatures consume the remains almost instantaneously.

To know wild chimpanzees individually is to steel yourself for their loss, at any time and in ways sometimes brutal. It is a bracing counterpoint to the joyful gift of witnessing their natural lives.

References

- Povinelli, D.J. (2020). Can comparative psychology crack its toughest nut? *Animal Behavior and Cognition*, 7(4), 589-652. <https://doi.org/10.26451/abc.07.04.09.2020>