

Joint attention in apes and humans

David Leavens
University of Sussex, UK

Abstract

Joint attention is foundational to the acquisition of language in humans. Numerous theorists have concluded that joint attention is therefore a human species-specific biological adaptation for establishing co-reference. However, the well-documented emergence of humanlike joint attentional skills in our nearest living relatives, the great apes, without any explicit training, poses a challenge for this theoretical perspective. One reaction to these emerging findings from great apes has been the claim that although there is surface similarity in joint attention, there are, nevertheless, deep psychological differences between humans and apes in the display of joint attention. An alternative account emphasises psychological continuity between humans and apes. I will argue for the latter view, in a review of the empirical data on joint attention in humans and great apes.

Short bio

Dr. Leavens earned a B.S. in anthropology (with honours, Phi Beta Kappa) from the University of California at Riverside, in 1990, an M.A. in anthropology from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, in 1993, and a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Georgia at Athens, in 2001. He is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex, near Brighton, United Kingdom. Since 1994, he has studied communication in chimpanzees, in collaboration with Dr. William D. Hopkins at the Yerkes National Primate Center, in Atlanta, Georgia, and Prof. Kim A. Bard, at Portsmouth University, United Kingdom.