

Seeing/Observing Animals Across the Disciplines *Human Ethology* | Professor Bentley-Condit

Human Ethology –Break Assignment

There are four parts to this assignment.

First, you need to acquire and read the Darwin book and the 3 articles/chapters listed in the bibliography at the end of this document. While completing the readings, you should take notes. You don't learn by highlighting; you learn by writing and synthesizing what you've read. The Armstrong article discusses Darwin as an "ethologist", the Browne article is about the book, and the Turner article is an example of an ethological project – in this case, the human-cat relationship. Darwin was actually one of the first really systematic human ethologists. (See text below for a description of what human ethology is.) In fact, should you be desperate for even more reading, you can access some more of Darwin's ethology work in:

Darwin, C.R. 1877. A biographical sketch of an infant. *Mind* 2 (July): 285-294 at <http://darwin-online.org.uk/>. This particular article is based upon his observation of one of his sons – not required reading but could be helpful and it's certainly interesting. What we will be doing next semester IS human ethology. We'll be looking at, and talking about, human behavior from an evolutionary perspective.

Second, after completing the readings, you are to design and conduct a mini ethological project. You may observe any animal for this mini-project. It is entirely up to you how you design the project, on what you choose to focus, and how you collect your data. You should have some ideas after reading Darwin. After collecting your data, you will need to be able to offer an interpretation of those data.

Third, you will need to bring your data and your interpretations, in whatever format you choose, to our first and second classes. We will talk about both the readings and your projects during those meetings. These data/notes/interpretations do not necessarily have to be typed but you will need to submit them and I need to be able to read them. **YOU WILL NOT BE GRADED!** The point is to get you thinking about doing ethology. This can actually be fun if you make it so. So, this is the extent of your instructions for the mini-project; they are intentionally vague. However, I expect you to be able to talk about: 1) your problem/issue/inspiration, 2) the question(s) you addressed, 3) your hypothesis, 4) your subject(s) & site, 5) your methodology, 6) your results, and 7) your interpretation.

Finally, after we have discussed the readings and your projects and so that you might gain a broader perspective on how one might view animals and animal behavior, you will meet in small groups with the members of two other classes – one from the Humanities and one from the Sciences. Your groups will be assigned at the beginning of the semester and you will schedule your small-group meetings for sometime during the weekend of September 7. We will discuss what you learned about your own projects and how others see animals from those meetings when we reconvene the following Tuesday.

So, go forth, read, and ethologize and I'll see you all at the beginning of the semester.

The following is a brief description of human ethology from:
<http://evolution.anthro.univie.ac.at/ishe/ethology.html>

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According to two of its most prominent founders, Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen, the field of ethology can be defined as 'the Biology of Behaviour'. It places emphasis on the notion that the behaviour of animals and its physiological basis has evolved phylogenetically and should be studied as one aspect of evolution. The success of this endeavour led to the further attempt to apply ethological methods and the evolutionary perspective to psychological and sociological phenomena of human behaviour...

... Ethology has contributed in two particular ways to our understanding of the ontogeny of behaviour in man and ape. This has resulted, first, from the application of techniques for the precise observation, description and classification of naturally occurring behaviour and, secondly, from the ethological approach to the study of behaviour, especially the development of behaviour in terms of evolution. Of particular interest to the ethologist are questions relating to the function of a particular kind of behaviour, e.g. attachment behaviour, and its adaptive value. The description of the behavioural repertoire of a species, the recognition of patterns of behavioural development and the classification of established behavioural patterns are prerequisites for any comparison between different species or between organisms of a single species. The ethological approach is to study the interaction between the organism with certain innate species-specific structures and the environment for which the organism is genetically programmed...

... It must be assumed that invariant behaviour patterns - those which remain relatively stable in the presence of variations in environment - have a morphological basis, mainly in neuronal structures, which is common to all members of a species and, depending on the kind of behaviour, may also be common to a genus or family or a whole order, e.g. the primates, or even to a whole class, e.g. the vertebrates. In such structures we can retrace and follow the evolutionary process by which the environment has produced structures, especially nervous systems and brains, which generate adaptive behaviour. In organisms with a high level of organization, the processes in which the ethologist is especially interested are those genetically preprogrammed motor and perceptual processes that facilitate social interaction and communication, such as facial expression and vocalization. If we consider the most highly developed means of communication, language and speech, which is found in man alone, the question arises as to the biological foundation of this species-specific behaviour and perceptual skill. The ethologist examines this question primarily from the point of view of ontogenetic development.

... The main strength of human ethology is that its approach to old problems is a new one; from the basis of theories, concepts and methods that have proved successful in animal ethology, it has looked at man from a new viewpoint. The essence of this is of course the evolutionary perspective; but since ethologists have been relatively unaffected by the long history of the humanities, they have often referred to facts and interpretations, perhaps obvious, but neglected by other social sciences, in an apparently naive but very effective manner. Another strength seems to lie in its integrative power. If we look back at the history of the relationship between the life sciences and the social sciences, we find two prevailing modes of theoretical orientation: on the one hand, reductionism, i.e. attempts to reduce human action to animal-like behaviour; and on the other, attempts to separate human action and human society completely from the animal world. The advent of evolutionism in the nineteenth century brought no easy solution to the traditional nature-nurture problem, since it could still be 'solved' in either a continuous or discontinuous manner. It seems as if human ethology, more perhaps than any other 'discipline', has significantly contributed to the disappearance of such simple dichotomies...

...However, the contributions of human ethology may give rise to certain dangerous fallacies. First, the desire to make a fresh start can easily lead to the neglect of methods and findings of other disciplines, which have their own validity. Consequently, human ethologists may sometimes simply ignore earlier findings about a particular problem, and the methods that have been developed to study it; this can result in the other disciplines concerned overreacting and discarding completely the ethological view-point. The second and major difficulty, which has still to be overcome, is a related problem. After all, human behaviour is specific and cannot be considered without taking into consideration, for example, cognitive and cultural processes. It is, therefore, essential to integrate these specifically human characteristics and the general biological human nature, which will only be possible if both these viewpoints and their findings

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are taken seriously and studied as an integrated system. The emerging descriptions and explanations will be neither truly psychological, sociological, ethnological not ethological, but something new...

Fragments from the introduction to *Human Ethology: Claims and limits of a new discipline* edited by M. von Cranach, K.Foppa, W.Lepenies and D.Ploog. Appeared 1979 in Cambridge University Press.

READINGS BIBLIOGRAPHY

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