

## THE ETHOLOGIST'S CORNER

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*A Review of the Book*

### ***Evolutionary Science of Human Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Approach***

*Edited by* Peter LaFreniere & Glenn Weisfeld. 2014.

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Who owns evolutionary scholarship? The biologists will often stand up quickly when they hear this question - followed immediately by paleontologists - and then you've got your primatologists and biological anthropologists waiting in the wings.

The beauty of the evolutionary perspective (see Wilson, Geher, & Waldo, 2009) is that evolution is an all-encompassing, interdisciplinary idea from the outset. Among the many who lay claim to Darwin's big idea are the ethologists. Ethology is an academic field steeped in a rich history - including such academic pugilists as Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, and Richard Dawkins. Perhaps the longest-standing academic area to take Darwin's ideas seriously in terms of understanding behavior is ethology, which focuses on both the ultimate (phylogenetic) evolutionary antecedents of behavior as well as the proximate (immediate) antecedents of behavior.

The human ethology movement, with roots tied strongly to Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, renowned alumnus of Konrad Lorenz, has been a primary player in the modern evolutionary behavioral sciences. Eibesfeldt's intellectual descendants, Peter LaFreniere and Glenn Weisfeld, have managed to capture the richness of that ethological tradition in their new book, *Evolutionary Science of Human Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. As an edited volume, this book includes chapters on many topics that have been studied

from the ethological perspectives, topics include behavioral genetics, ecological psychology, social behavior, aggression, religion, mental illness, and warfare - running the gamut of human behavioral domains.

Human ethology and evolutionary psychology are siblings of a sort in the modern world of intellectual thought. From our vantage points, distinctions between these areas are often simply distinctions in methodological approaches as opposed to distinctions in ideology. Given its roots and the great tradition of animal behavior, human ethology tends to focus more on behavioral outcomes. This discipline also examines phylogenetic history along with environmental context that underlies evolved behaviors. While evolutionary psychologists often focus also on these factors, they are perhaps more likely to focus on internal states and perhaps less likely to focus on phylogenetic antecedents of behavior. As such, advances in the field of human ethology, as presented in LaFreniere and Weisfeld's book, provide welcome complements to work in modern evolutionary psychology.

The contributors of this book represent some of the brightest stars in the field of the evolutionary behavioral sciences, including president of the NorthEastern Evolutionary Psychology Society (NEEPS), Dan Kruger, as well as Susanne Schmehl, Elisabeth Oberzaucher, and other bright members of the human ethology community. Further, this book has a great chapter on behavioral genetics authored by Nancy Segal. This chapter helps set the stage for the rest of the book while providing a great summary of this field.

In following ethological tradition, this book endorses the following claim: learning how we as organisms, in addition to members of other species, and the world as a whole interact can provide insight into how we can approach the future. Moreover, this book operates under the implicit logic that to answer particular questions one must ask oneself not only *how* a phenomenon came to be, but *why* it came to be. For example, when attempting to understand emotions and the nervous system, Weisfeld and Nowak (2014) describe the need to understand the functionality of one's emotions and nervous system including the natural context in which one lives. When analyzing an effect that helps one pursue an act that facilitates fitness we must examine its purpose. Psychological processes that exist today have come a long way, and remain for one reason or another. Weisfeld and Nowak (2014) provide examples of how adaptations evolved for a specific purpose. "...an animal cannot afford to eat if it is thirsty or flee when it is angry" (p. 125). As a result, the ways in which we feel and act have a strong historical lineage. By putting into context behavioral phenomena, we can best illuminate their ultimate causes.

Across 18 thorough and well-written chapters, this book provides a great overview of this field and it has the capacity to be beneficial for advanced scholars as well as students at multiple levels. While presenting facts and figures, as most textbooks do, this work also walks the reader through the logic required to ask research questions and utilize critical thinking to find an answer. Being presented with a premise, and addressing the evidence to challenge or support the subsequent premise or conclusion is a massive part of the research process. For example, in the chapter discussing ethology and primatology, LaFreniere and Weisfeld (2014) pose the question that if members of a

particular species can form a strong bond with a parent in the absence of learning to do so, then is it possible for members of another species to do the same? They then go on to present the research relevant to answering this question. This thought process is a large trend throughout this book.

Further, this book works great as an introduction to the field of evolution itself. It draws on evidence from decades of research to paint a detailed picture that those unfamiliar with evolution can clearly grasp. This book breaks down phenomena from a neurological level to a social level, covering areas of insight from neuroscience to attachment theory. Weisfeld and Nowak (2014) discuss the parts of the brain, and how these parts contribute to cognitive, emotional and overall physical functioning. Chapters by LaFreniere and Weisfeld (2014), and LaFreniere (2014) cover attachment theory, displaying its strength when put into the context of research by both Konrad Lorenz and Harry Harlow. Other areas discussed in the book include ethology and mental illness, communication, marriage, and male coalitionary violence. For readers who wish to gain a fundamental level of knowledge regarding concepts related to evolution, this book can certainly provide a great service.

From the perspective of an evolutionary psychologist, this book may be a bit surprising; it does not include extensive sections on the work of star evolutionary psychologists (e.g. David Buss, Robert Trivers). Additionally, mating behavior is not as prominently featured in this book as it often is in works by some evolutionary psychologists. However, this does not detract from the book, but is just a note on the distinction between these two related areas.

In conclusion, we believe that LaFreniere and Weisfeld have put together a great collection of chapters that walk the reader through the field of human ethology - from the basics of behavior genetics - to the many behavioral domains studied in this area - to applications regarding such important issues as society and health. Serious readers of this work will learn a great deal about evolution and how behavior is studied from an evolutionary context. Folks from the tradition of evolutionary psychology would be wise to read this book to develop a broader take on the evolution/behavior interface.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Andrew Shimkus** is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Hartford. **Glenn Geher** is chair and professor of psychology at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Both Andrew and Glenn are interested in broad applications of evolutionary principles to human social behavior.

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