

## THE OWEN ALDIS AWARDS:

### BACKGROUND TO JUDGING CRITERIA

John Richer Chair, Board of Trustees. ISHE

The invitation to apply for an Aldis award on the ISHE website reads as follows:

The Owen F. Aldis Scholarship Fund was established to support graduate studies in human ethology, defined as the biological study of human behaviour.

The goal of the Award is to nurture excellence in human ethology by supporting students who are undertaking empirical research in human behavior, drawing on the repertoire of methods developed in biology and the human behavioral sciences.

Observational studies in natural environments are especially encouraged. Studies involving non-human species may be considered, if their relevance to human behavior is made clear.

The award program is administered by the Board of Trustees of the International Society for Human Ethology (ISHE) in collaboration with the ISHE Board of Officers. Applications for the award are considered annually.

We felt it only fair to all applicants to expand on this to promote further an understanding of what the Aldis awards are trying to promote. But first let me say that in any field of research, problems should be studied in whatever ways seem best to the researchers involved. In their theories, researchers should be incorrigible collectors of ideas from whatever field of human thought seems helpful. But some approaches seem more coherent and fertile than others. For those in ISHE, the ethological approach seems a particularly coherent and fertile set of ideas and methodologies with which to study human behaviour.

#### Human Ethology and other human sciences

Some 30 years ago human ethology could be distinguished from psychology and other human sciences in two key areas:

- (1) its insistence on direct observation of behaviour in the natural environment (homes, schools, workplace, public places, the street, etc.) as a starting point to discover the natural phenomena that needed explanation.
- (2) placing the research within the framework of evolutionary theory.

*Evolutionary theory* The welcome rise of evolutionary psychology meant that the second area no longer distinguished human ethology so clearly. There is always the need to guard against developing “just so” stories in an attempt to give an hypothesis or explanation the (spurious) support of evolutionary theory. Also there is the need to guard against evolutionary theory becoming just another source (albeit usually better than “folk psychology”) of arm chair hypotheses for experiments, rather than what helps guide open minded observation of the real natural phenomena and later experimentation.

Evolutionary theory can be a powerful heuristic guiding what to ask and where to look. In the end it must contribute to a coherent account of the behaviour in question.

*Direct Observation* What still distinguishes the ethological approach from the bulk of other research into human behaviour, is starting with direct observation in the natural environment. This involves more than description in everyday terms. It is the stage at which many basic concepts are

developed, which are used to describe behaviour and the influences on it. In the course of scientific progress those concepts may be revisited and radically altered (no more so than during Kuhn's (paradigm shifts), but deriving them for and from this direct observation increases the chance that they will offer useful ways to begin to understand the natural phenomena.

A paradigm example of this is the work of the Hetty van der Rijt and Frans Plooij (e.g. 2003) on periods of rapid change in infant development. They observed the ages that infants went through periods when their behaviour regressed and/or became more difficult. Many periods coincided with the ages when there were spurts in brain growth. Comparing what the baby could understand before and after such a period, they then saw that the infant had made a developmental leap. These so called regression periods thus became natural markers in development. There are a myriad different ways that researchers can describe developmental change, but investigating how the baby was different before and after each one of real world markers is more likely to yield precise and useful descriptive categories for the infant's changing understanding and the behaviour which expresses that.

Another example is the sadly neglected work of the late Margaret Manning (Manning et al, 1978) in Edinburgh on hostility in young children. She started by asking what behaviour in one child caused upset (operationally defined) in another. She developed three categories of hostility (specific, harrassment and games) which she found each child did with different frequencies and proportions and this related to the way the child was handled at home.

A very well known example is the observations of separation of children from their parents which led John Bowlby to develop attachment theory.

As a field develops and as Niko Tinbergen himself illustrated, an ethological analysis of behaviour may shift from the field to the laboratory or other more controlled settings as questions about causation and function become more precise. Thus, natural experiments and laboratory analysis of behavior come to complement and sometimes to challenge early direct observations.

Direct observation is difficult and time consuming. In the past, too many researchers have thought that they knew about human behaviour such that this stage could be missed out. But as Niko Tinbergen (1963) famously said, the human behavioural sciences skipped the observational stage and were soon losing touch with the natural phenomena. Nick Blurton Jones (1975) put it succinctly when he wrote, "the lateral thinking inductive approach of ethology is to be contrasted with the inductive approach of psychology and its disdain for facts for their own sake". Bill Charlesworth is even more succinct when he asserts,

"Follow the duck, not the theory of the duck"

Many researchers have not fallen to these intellectual traps, but then they meet the financial obstacle that obtaining funding for direct observation studies is difficult.

### Aldis Awards

So the Aldis awards were set up to encourage research which focused on observing and measuring behaviour in natural settings, or proposed experimental studies closely related to that, and where the thinking was set within a framework of evolutionary theory. The preference was for work directly on humans, but work on non humans would be considered if its relevance to human behaviour was made clear. Naturally the work had to be coherent and of a high scientific standard. Work which uses ONLY questionnaires, rating scales, self measurements of subjective states, and does not relate this in some way to behaviour, or which derives hypotheses from everyday ideas

(folk psychology) rather than direct observation of naturally occurring behaviour and/or evolutionary theory, seems to lean more towards traditional psychology rather than towards human ethology.

In judging the proposals we have looked at the proposals in two ways,  
(1) scientific coherence and quality  
(2) relevance to human ethology.

We have tried very hard to look beyond the sometimes unusual English of proposers whose first language is not English and judge the coherence and relevance of the ideas underneath. The judges are the Board of Trustees of ISHE, who are all senior members of their professions, within Universities or clinical establishments, and others whom they ask to assist. The judges have tried to offer constructive comments to all candidates, but especially those who did not receive a reward. After that however no further correspondence can be entered into. The judges' verdict is final.

We should like to thank the authors of proposals and wish you all good fortune in your research.

#### References

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