

HUMAN ETHOLOGY BULLETIN - SPECIAL ISSUE

WHY BEHAVIOUR OBSERVATION?

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This edition of the Human Ethology Bulletin is about Direct Observation. There could not be a more central and vital part of human behavioural science, and yet one which psychology and the other social sciences does so little. To state the obvious, like the little boy in Hans Christian Andersen's story pointing out that the Emperor had no clothes, if the natural phenomena, human behaviour and its contexts, are not described in objective ways, what are these disciplines about?

The papers in this edition describe the difficulties which direct observation present, how to try and overcome them, how to apply the fruits of direct observation, and how to help students acquire this discipline.

There is a wider context. There is a disturbing trend in parts of developed parts of the world to substitute fantasy for reality, fake news for honest objective reporting, ready acceptance of self serving delusions over genuine beliefs and aspirations based on critical examination of the facts. The inevitable accompaniment of this is that the strength of the perpetrator of this fakery takes precedence over the strength of the ideas and their coherent connection to reality. This is the world of the bully, the authoritarian rather than the authoritative person.

Human societies have been here many times before. As the European Enlightenment was developing, similar oppositions occurred. The Royal Society of London first met in 1660, just after the end of the English civil war (1642-51), at the end of which the monarch, Charles I, lost his throne and his head. The Royal Society was one of the first to promote the scientific method where facts, not brute authority, held sway. Its motto is, "nullius in verba" (Take nobody's word for it).

Two major English speaking countries are both now engaged in civil conflicts, over issues not entirely dissimilar from those of the mid seventeenth century in England. Many European countries have recent and tragic experience of similar conflicts.

Does this seem to place Direct Observation in too grand a context? I think not. Open minded curiosity about the real world gets dampened by authoritarian regimes and

authoritarian ways of thinking, whether these exist in a country or a research department. But something else is dampened too, and that is playfulness and creativity. Science is about the facts, but it is more than the facts. As Medawar (1967) has argued, science is about creating stories, but stories which are about the natural world, which are internally coherent and which fit with the facts. Playfulness and creativity are necessary in direct observation, as in science generally.

The reader will, I hope, forgive me for ending on a clinical and child development note. John Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 73, 80) is probably the most influential, fertile and useful set of ideas in the study of child development and has been very helpful in clinical studies too. Mary Ainsworth's development of ideas of secure and insecure attachment (Ainsworth et al, 1978), which were further developed by many researchers such as Mary Main (e.g. Main et al, 1985) and Patricia Crittenden (e.g. Crittenden, 2008), has relevance to the conduct of research. To simplify greatly, people who are usually secure are able to balance their own needs with the needs of others, and are better able to be both objective and creative. Some people predominantly use the ambivalent strategy of being attention seeking by demanding or whinging (as children, their underlying strategy is, "if I can keep my caregiver's attention, I shall be safe and not die"). Such people tend to over focus on their own needs and less on those of others. Their perception of others is distorted by their own emotional needs. They try and ram through their ideas by force. They are often seen as egotistical, selfish, bullies. This insecurity-driven approach trumps their ability of face reality or cooperate with others. We can all recognise these traits in others, including many in public life. In scientists it gets in the way of direct observation which is both disciplined and creative.

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