



A BRIEF ESSAY ON HOW COMPARATIVE PSYCHOLOGY BECAME AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

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ABSTRACT

Several previous scholars have noted the decline in the field of comparative psychology in so far as fewer students are obtaining an advanced degree in the field and fewer courses are being offered in universities. However, the real cause for the decline occurred decades prior and although the problem was acknowledged at the time, no significant corrections were made and those same scholars have skirted the issue. Presently, it is bureaucratic obstacles that impede a resurgence of the discipline.

Keywords

comparative psychology, ethology

RESUMEN

Varios eruditos anteriores han señalado la disminución en el campo de la psicología comparativa en la medida en que menos estudiantes están obteniendo un título avanzado en el campo y menos cursos se ofrecen en las universidades. Sin embargo, la verdadera causa de la disminución se produjo décadas anteriores y aunque el problema se reconoció en el momento, correcciones significativas no fueron hechas y esos mismos eruditos han evadido el tema. En la actualidad, es obstáculos burocráticos que impiden un resurgimiento de la disciplina.

Palabras clave

Psicología comparada, etología

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BREVES ENSAYOS SOBRE CÓMO LA PSICOLOGÍA COMPARATIVA SE CONVIRTIÓ EN ESPECIES EN PELIGRO

Abramson (2015) is the latest comparative psychologist to spotlight the steady decline of the comparative psychology specialty. There have been other doomsayers before him, e.g., Galef (1987), Ardila (1986), Tolman (1989), and Greenberg, Partridge, Weiss & Pisula (2003). If the present trend continues, then it may truly not be long before the obituary is written.

In such accounts, there is a glaring omission as to why this state of affairs originally came about which I would like to herein correct, so that if extinction of the division is going to ultimately occur, it is not right that it should happen without documenting as to why it happened, no matter how unpleasant. It is no secret as to why, but comparative psychologists have been reluctant to acknowledge and voice it, out of embarrassment in airing dirty linen (indeed, Dewsbury (1992), in writing on ethology and comparative psychology, attempted to whitewash the matter and glaringly omitted numerous important details over the vital events, especially during the crucial 1960s and 1970s). Before doing so, I would like to warn the reader that my evaluation is harsh, if not downright caustic. Obviously, such observations as I make here are subjective, although I believe accurate.

Simply put, comparative psychologists brought it upon themselves.

Comparative psychologists cannot claim that they had no advance warning. The writing on the wall was always there, they just chose to ignore it. Whereas in the beginning, comparative psychology lived up to its name by studying different types of behaviors in different species (*e.g.*, Kuo, 1921), by the 1950s it had become fossilized into focusing almost exclusively on the ersatz white lab rat and only on the behaviors of learning and maze running. In his well-known paper, Beach (1950) pointed out that the emperor had no clothes on and although Beach's assertion was widely discussed and almost uniformly agreed upon, there was surprisingly little change in the practices by comparative psychologists, although a handful of comparative psychologists did abandon the lab white rat---for other rodents: gerbils and voles. A decade later (Beach, 1960), he returned to elaborate on some of the work done by the European ethologists, but it seems to again have had no practical effect on American comparative psychologists. Meanwhile, the ethologists in Europe looked upon the latter's work with undisguised, open contempt (Ardila, 1986; Tolman, 1989). Yet, ironically, according to Tinbergen (1963), ethology arose as a reaction against comparative psychology (p.411):

In a sense this "return to nature" was a reaction against a tendency prevalent at that time in Psychology to concentrate on a few phenomena observed in a handful of species which were kept in impoverished environments, to formulate theories claimed to be general, and to proceed deductively by testing these theories experimentally. It has been said that, in its haste to step into the twentieth century and to become a respectable science, psychology skipped the preliminary descriptive state that other natural sciences had gone through, and so was soon losing touch with the natural phenomena.

To be sure, to a large degree this state of affairs was due to the overall influence of the radical behaviorists. They would routinely assert that biology had no influence whatsoever on behavior (one of my biology professors of ethology related that after a debate with a behaviorist on whether or not behaviors had a basis in genetics afterwards asked him the significance of the notation F_1 , such was the ignorance of elementary biological terms and principles by many psychologists---and this ignorance still exists with many psychologists of every division). Those of us who lived through this period will attest that it is no exaggeration that radical behaviorists had such a stranglehold of the field that the departments of psychology in many universities in the United States became arenas of a bitter academic civil war which reached such a point that at times splits occurred and a university would have two or even three departments of psychology independent from each other, with the faculty of each department not even talking to the other.

As a graduate student, I and my peers were dimly aware that T. C. Schneirla and Frank Beach had worked on different species and studied different behaviors, but somehow, their work always seemed out



of reach. As with the work of the European ethologists, they were rarely, if ever, mentioned by our professors. The work of Maier and Schneirla---certainly for graduate students---was similar to the experiments made in space today by NASA astronauts: we knew that they were out there somewhere, but nobody seems to know exactly what they were or where they could be found. In reality, it was a one way street: although ethologists were aware of the work of comparative psychologists, many of the latter simply ignored the ethologists' work, principally due to the blinders imposed by behaviorism.

At the same time, the field of psychology as a whole was also being transformed, as the fetish in our society for the counseling and clinical specialties began to overshadow other disciplines, so that, slowly, advanced degrees in subspecialties of clinical and counseling psychology began to elbow out and supplant the traditional divisions, a phenomenon which is continuing to this day (I myself was shocked to learn that my alma mater, Wichita State University, dissolved the General-Experimental degree in favor of the trendier Community Psychology and Human Factors Psychology).

At any rate, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of independent events came together that would radically affect the field. Three books on animal behavior (which at the time was a completely novel topic to the public) were published within a year or two of each other and became best sellers: *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris (1967), *On Aggression* by Konrad Lorenz (1966), and *The Territorial Imperative* by Robert Ardrey (1966). Simultaneously, National Geographic television specials (in pre-PBS, pre-cable days) showed a young lady named Jane Goodall living among chimpanzees and studying their behavior in their natural habitat, which was at the time a highly dramatic event (she subsequently published *In The Shadow of Man* (van Lawik-Goodall & Van Lawik, 1971), which was widely available). Here were researchers actually studying the behavior of different species---in the open air, instead of musty rooms filled with rat cages reeking of rat feces---and applying their observation to human behavior! In 1973, the increasing crescendo culminated in the Nobel Prize for Physiology to three European ethologists: Nikolaas Tinbergen (Holland), Karl von Frisch (Austria) and Konrad Lorenz (Austria). It was the *coup de grace*. This was followed in 1974 by the Public Broadcasting Station airing a weekly scientific television series entitled *Nova* which often presented research on circadian rhythms, migration and other behaviors in animals studied by ethologists but ignored by almost all comparative psychologists. When American students and visiting ethologists presented the ethological research to American comparative psychologists and asked them to explain away the results solely in terms of conditioning, the latter were at a loss for words. The end result was that comparative psychology, as it was then, looked utterly ridiculous, especially when confronted by the ethologists' "charisma and missionary zeal" (Dewsbury, 1992).

That was then. A perusal now of papers published in the *Journal of Comparative Psychology* reveals that the lab white rat is no more, extinct, replaced by a plethora of species, primarily primates, and a range of behaviors are being researched (Shettleworth, 2009). There is a consensus that, if ethology did not triumph over comparative psychology, at least a synthesis has occurred (Font, Colmenares & Guillén-Salazar, (1998)). And yet, as Abramson notes, the division is nevertheless on the verge of following the lab white rat into extinction. Since the earlier errors were finally rectified, this state of affairs is a bit perplexing. After all, interest in animal behavior remains as high among the general population (and students) as was the case when the ethologists became prominent in the second half of the century. Why then is this so?

Partly, it is due to the continuing fragmentation which is taking place in each division of psychology, from clinical to comparative psychology. In the latter, subdisciplines such as evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, comparative cognition and behavioral ecology, which should rightfully be categorized as being part of comparative psychology, now stand on their own; the advocates of such subdisciplines are, thereby, big fishes in little ponds. The other cause is bureaucratic obstacles. Abramson (2015) notes that universities now offer fewer courses and advanced degrees in the division, that textbooks on the subject are few and that students need to be recruited to replace the geriatric rank and file (in regards to attracting students, scholarships might be a good inducement; another potential

attraction is to set up an animal lab with terrariums and aquariums instead of the odoriferous rat cages). But to truly arrest the decline, the recourse is for the remaining comparative psychologists to vigorously fight the bureaucracies within universities (and even the APA). This can be daunting. It remains to be seen whether they have the energy to do so, or if they will resign themselves to go the way of the dod

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