THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHOLOGY AND PAEDOLOGY

by

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SUMMARY

In this article it is argued that an ethologist is not out of place in a paedological institute, granted the assumption that he or she is both interest in child studies as well as in the application of such studies to specialized diagnosis and treatment of children who are retarded or disturbed in their development.

First, the concept of paedology and its history are briefly explored. Then, the relationship between ethology and paedology is discussed. Since child studies have been going on for nearly a century now, whereas ethologists started to study human children only 2 decades ago, an ethologist should be armed with humility. It is unlikely that ethology will uncover new problems. And yet, ethology may contribute by being a new approach to classic problems. One characteristic of this approach is that ethologists follow a biological tradition in attempting to start analyses from a secure base of description. And they describe not only the subject(s) they are studying, but also the environment in which these subjects are living. This is not always taken for granted in other disciplines doing research in the field of children with developmental disturbances.

As an illustration, three classic problems in paedology are described as well as the way in which ethology could contribute. These problems are: direct observations of classroom behaviour, the "other half of intelligence", and learning disorders.

1. INTRODUCTION

If the word ethology still covered the "science of building character" or "the science which corresponds to the act of education", as John Stuart Mill would have it in the nineteenth century (THORPE, 1979: 9), it would nearly be synonymous with paedology. But nowadays the word ethology covers another science which germinated in France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (THORPE, op. cit.). Although early works of biologists studying behaviour did cover human behaviour from time to time (i.e. DARWIN, 1872; LEROY, 1764, from THORPE, op. cit.), generally speaking ethological studies concerned animal behaviour. Only twenty years ago the ethological study of human behaviour gained momentum. At first, these were mainly child studies.

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I am going to argue that an ethologist is not out of place in a paedological institute, granted the assumption that he or she is both interested in child studies as well as in the application of such studies to specialized diagnosis and treatment of children who are retarded or disturbed in their development.

2. THE CONCEPT PAEDOLOGY AND ITS HISTORY

Much of what is presented in this section was taken from an essay of De Wit (1982) on the paedological institutes in the Netherlands. The concept "Paedology" was first introduced by Oskar Chrisman, a student of Stanley Hall, in Chicago in 1893. This concept intended to cover a new interdisciplinary, empirical science that focussed on child studies and that aimed at using the results of such studies for solving educational problems in society.

These ideals reflect three trends which were present around the turn of the century. First, one was impressed by the methods of the natural sciences and the successes of empirical research. Simultaneously, one had grown very critical of the "normative pedagogy" of those days, which was too much based on armchair philosophy and too little on knowledge of child development. Second, this new science was very much meant to be multidisciplinary. Disciplines such as biology (anatomy, physiology), medicine (hygiene), psychology, anthropology (anthropometry, cultural anthropology), pedagogy (educational psychology) and sociology were involved. If contemporary ethology would have existed in those days, it would certainly have contributed. In the beginning of this century one looked upon paedology as the science that integrated the facts gathered by the basic disciplines mentioned above. Third, there was strong emphasis on a science which had strong roots in everyday practice and the application of such newly gained knowledge in everyday life. An article of Barnes (1899) in the first issue of "The Paidologist" (the journal of the British Child Study Association) may serve as an example. He compared the relationship between psychology and paedology with the relationship between botany and farming: a botanist can learn a great deal from a farmer and a farmer can be well off by applying new techniques developed by botanists on experimental fields and farms. As a consequence of this emphasis on application, naturalistic observations and descriptions have played an important role in paedology from the beginning. This contrasted strongly with mainstream psychology of the beginning of this century, which was very experimental-physical. This attitude in paedology is very much in line with Tinbergen’s (1963) warning against premature experiments.