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"UNIVERSITY REPORT"

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GWYNETH HENDERSON: This week's "University Report" we have a discussion I've been saving especially for this Christmas week. Why? Well it hasn't got anything to do with Christmas at all, but I think you'll see why I've saved it for this week of sitting back with time to discuss things! It concerns apes, monkeys and how we can learn about ourselves from them - communication - and how the zoologist could teach the psychologist, psychiatrist and sociologist a thing or two about how to understand people! Well yes I admit the discussion is with a zoologist! Professor Neils Bolwig is currently head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria - he is by birth Danish and has worked in South Africa and America as well. His interest in the comparisons and correlations of our behaviour with primate monkeys began over fifteen years ago. Incidentally, I'd better just make it clear that although the term 'primate' means the highest order of mammals including man, monkeys and apes, we'll be using it today mostly in its more colloquial sense - meaning just monkeys and apes. Well Professor Bolwig came into the 'University Report' studio when he was on leave here recently, and I asked him first to explain what his studies are all about.

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: The reason why I'm becoming so interested in the behaviour of primates is that although the primates behaviour doesn't directly explain why humans do this or that, at least it gives some trends, and what I hope through the study is to find general trends in all primate behaviour, and I have particularly become interested in the behaviour of the child, although I've done relatively little work there.

Now at the moment, out in Nigeria, we've got a small zoo and I've got, for example, a baboon troupe there in a very big enclosure, and in the past year I mainly studies the methods of communication and it's interesting to see that the male, the leading male baboon of the troupe, he can just sit in one place in that large enclosure and direct all movements of all the other baboons withing the enclosure. That's quite amazing.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: You mentioned child behaviour - in what sense can primates tell you, specifically say, about presumably the development of a child in its early years?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: Well we've really got to get back to Harlow's work in America on captive rhesus monkeys, where he studied the child and found that the contact with the mother is extremely important and that a child learns almost right from birth, and what he learns as a child - that means also sexual behaviour - is important later on in life. And a young monkey that hasn't learned how to make love as a child will not be able to make love when it gets older, so it all really amounts very much to learning, socialisation, those things.

Now an interesting thing they observed first in Japan, and we shall observe now in Makaboum, south of Nigeria, is that the child takes from its mother. Now the mother is a dominant, arrogant mother, high-ranking mother, the child learns that behaviour. On the other hand if the child is a low-ranking child or the child of a low-ranking mother, the child will learn the low-ranking behaviour, the submissive behaviour. Now when the monkeys are about eighteen months old then they begin to fight for status within the community, or rather among themselves at first, and if the child now has learned to be dominant and behave as a dominant animal, then he will also in that fight behave like a dominant animal, while the submissive child will submit very quickly so the fights really never become very serious, and it's what they learn from the mother that to a large extent decides their position in the social hierarchy.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: So you're really saying that you can directly correlate, say, the class system amongst humans - that the upper class, middle class are going to be better off continually than the lower class, is completely repeated amongst monkeys and that we can learn a lot from this?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: We can learn a lot from it and, yes I say that, but of course if a child starts low-ranking it doesn't mean that he cannot work himself up through the rank. But it's much more difficult of course for a low-ranking child to reach a dominant position, and I think we too have got a parallel with a human society.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: If we can get this down, if you like, to a rather more practical level than just sort of general correlations between them, how could this sort of research be applied say to the educational process of the child in the first two years?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: Well there you're asking a difficult question, but I should say that the early socialisation of the child means a tremendous lot, and one of the things that interests me in Nigeria is really the, not only monkey child's position in society and I've got some very amusing observations there already, but also in a human society.

When I was over in America I was rather horrified by what was happening there. The homes often tend to be dissolved, there's not the same interaction between mother and child as there was in the olden days. The father works the mother works, the children are looking after themselves and very often work too, and it really creates a difficulty because the child may not then have a proper father figure to take after. And to have someone to take after is something that is very common among the primates. Now in America they will then associate with peers and learn from peers, but as they've got no real moral codes to mould from they are lacking respect of the parents and things tend to go wrong. And one of the things that interests me in Africa is that a child socialises much earlier than a Western child. It is carried very much by the mother, and when she begins to get tired of carrying the child, then she hands it over to aunts and sisters and they look after the child, so the child gets a mother and some mother-substitutes and learns very early to socialise.

There is also the question about punishment - the Africans are really great disciplinarians with their children, and the experience is that a child that is punished corporally will tend to become more aggressive. A child that has been punished psychologically will, on the other hand, tend to be submissive.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well how does this tie in with the work that you're doing in Ibadan in the Department of Zoology and with the zoo?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: Well in the zoo of course I can make a lot of observations and what I've found interesting there is that for example our low-ranking female baboon she has been over-protective at first with her child which has caused her retardation because the child wasn't allowed to socialise. Later on she began to get a bit tired of the child and was trying to socialise it, but doing it by force, which came as a shock to the child it became further retarded, and it has taken a long long time for that infant to socialise. When I compare that with, for example, the leading female, the female has been much less protective and the child has socialised much earlier and much better and behaves very much like a dominant animal, but there are things I want to make further observations on and see how it fits into the whole picture.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well you are a zoologist, now how do you take this work, if you like, into the human field with presumably psychiatrists, psychologists and so on. Where can you get the point that the theories or the observations that you make can really be worked out and applied and advance our knowledge of human society?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: Well I hope to have a very close co-operation with the Department of Psychiatry and particularly the new Institute of Human Behaviour. Now the future of this Institute is at the moment a bit in the air but I hope we'll soon find some solution for it because I would like to get studies going on human behaviour and I think our students that are keen are getting on to it and get them out in the field, use the etymological methods, not so much interviewing as psychologists and sociologists often like to do, but rather just observe, see what people are doing, make notes on the quiet, and then make similar notes on our primates and see how these things compare, and I think that may help us to a deeper understanding of what happens to the human child.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Do you think there is a virtue in this, in fact, not asking people direct to explain themselves, but doing it by observation?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: I would have thought so, because the human languages, although it's alledged to be a way of communication, its most important function is probably rather to cover up and as I have always told my students, the main function of the human language is probably to hide the truth - they become the supreme liars - while our small movements, small acts, it is very difficult to hide them, and I think the psychologist and sociologist has got to use both methods. But I think the ethmological method of observing will contribute a lot. It is used already but I think it should probably be used more than it is used, and I know that in Africa for example that if you ask people questions they they very often tell you, or usually prefer to tell you what they think you would like to hear and not rely what is the truth, and that's why I think the use of the etymological methods is important because as I said the small movements, small actsm the movement of a hand or foot, the way you sit, all these many many things, you can't lie there.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: And is it really possible to use this, if you like, as scientific data in that way - analyse it and come up with actual standards of performance or whatever it may be?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: Yes you certainly can. One makes notes all the time and has got a code system so one can make quick notes and what I've used a lot is also filming, but that's of course a rather expensive way of starting. But you can't observe everything so at least I take samples on film and take the films home and go over the same bit of film many times, analysing every little movement - we take them on millimetre papers occasionally and things like that, so I can really trace the movements, and see how these movements now go together with other things. There is also the rhythm in which we speak and move, the synchronisation of rhythm between the speaker and the listener that all means a lot, and we are not aware of these many types of communication.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: So it's a question of if there is a particular group you want to study - first you have to find out how they as a group exist, co-exist, communicate and so on, and then withing that, once you've analysed all this you can then make studies of individual behaviour within that context?

PROFESSOR BOLWIG: Yes, I think the mode of communication is one of the great obstacles of contact between people of different races, of different cultures, and unless you learn a little about the communication between the people of other cultures with which you are going to deal, you'll never really be able to make contact with them. I find it very very difficult myself. Quite interesting, I had some seminars with my final year students during the past year and I always found it difficult really to communicate with them and to get proper contact. I could much easier with English students, American students or Danish students. But they have always found it difficult, but I explained to them some of the differences in our methods of communication, and the result was actually quite amazing, that when I explained and said we've got to forget about these differences in our communication, our understandings, our methods of communication, if we learn to understand those differences then we'll find it easier to communicate and there was a much better contact after that moment with the whole class.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Professor Neils Bolwig of the Department of Zoology, the University of Ibadan. Fascinating stuff isn't it? And obviously there are several areas here which really cry out for detailed study by people from all sorts of disciplines! Anyway, time for me to go now but I'll be back next year and next week so join me then!

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