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978-0-521-34844-7 - Individuals, Relationships and Culture: Links between Ethology and the Social Sciences

Robert A. Hinde

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Individuals, relationships & culture

Both biologists and social scientists have much to say about human behaviour. Yet attempts to combine their approaches to provide a deeper understanding of human nature have not so far been generally successful. This book offers a new and original way of bridging the gap between them.

The key to bringing the two approaches together is, Professor Hinde suggests, to recognise crucial distinctions between levels of social complexity (individuals, interactions, relationships and groups), whilst at the same time bearing in mind that all are processes in dialectical relations with each other and with the socio-cultural structure of institutions, beliefs, values, and so on. Professor Hinde argues that principles derived from ethology are essential for understanding some aspects of behaviour at the lower levels of social complexity, but has severe limitations at higher ones. This innovative approach will interest research workers, lecturers and students of psychology, biology, anthropology and sociology, as well as other readers seeking a comprehensive understanding of the nature of human social behaviour.

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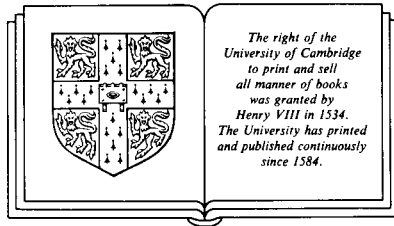
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Links between ethology and the social sciences

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in the University of Cambridge*



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Preface

The current division between the biological and social sciences has the unfortunate consequence of implying a clear distinction between the biological and social sides of human nature. Yet attempts to understand the relations between biological and social factors in human behaviour, attempts that go back at least to Darwin (1871, 1872), have certainly not met with general acceptance. Indeed, as knowledge accumulated and opinions became entrenched, for a long while it seemed increasingly improbable that any general agreement could be reached. Recently, however, the possibilities for progress have appeared brighter. This book is intended as a further step, or rather two simultaneous and inter-related steps, towards that distant goal.

One involves the recognition that the study of social behaviour requires distinctions between successive levels of social complexity – interactions, relationships, and group and socio-cultural structure – and at the same time a willingness to see them not as entities but as processes, with dynamic and dialectical relations between them. There is now a growing sub-discipline involving the study of interpersonal relationships which is helping to close the hiatus that social scientists had left between their studies of individual attitudes, etc., and those concerned with group dynamics. It is becoming apparent that a ‘relationships’ approach is crucial for many issues in the social sciences, including the understanding of how individuals affect and are affected by the societies in which they live. This approach is even more important for attempts to build bridges between the biological and social sciences. Whilst it would certainly be unfair to caricature biologists as talking about individual behaviour and culture-wide religious beliefs in the same breath, as if they were equally ‘close’ to their biological determinants, there would be an element of truth in it. Any attempt to apply biological principles to human social behaviour must respect the dialectical relations between successive layers of social complexity.

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That brings us to the second step. To discover new territory scientists must set out from a known home base. Partly for that reason, biologists are prone to focus on biological factors affecting human behaviour, whilst many social scientists point to the social ones. Both are one-sided views, and the emphasis here is on the two-way influences between them acting through the successive levels of social complexity.

There is a related reason why biologists and social scientists tend to look at the same phenomena from different directions. Many biologists become interested in what is general about human behaviour, and particularly in how it differs from that of other species, whilst many social scientists are concerned with differences between individuals, groups or cultures. Perhaps, then, liaison can be established through the study of 'human universals'? 'Oh no', says the social scientist, 'there are no human universals, at least only at a very simple level that does not greatly interest us.' But, as we shall see, resolution of that issue brings us again to the dialectical relations between individual behaviour and the successive levels of social complexity.

Biologists interested in human behaviour are not concerned only with its evolution, but they do tend to see the theory of evolution by natural selection as one of their most powerful integrating tools. This has led to a heated controversy; and whilst this book is not about the sociobiology debate, it inevitably intrudes. In brief, whilst I agree with Wilson (e.g. 1978, 1984) that an evolutionary perspective provides important insights, I agree also with Gould and Lewontin (1979) that such an approach is easily over-used, and that it readily lends itself to after-dinner flights of fancy. The crucial task is to define the limits of its usefulness. In brief, I suggest that it may be valuable when applied to basic human propensities, that it can be revealing when applied to relationships, but is of much more limited value when applied to the sociocultural structure.

Discussion of human behaviour in terms of biological evolution is often criticized because it is open to political interpretation or misinterpretation: it is implied that we should not discuss issues if misinterpretation of the discussion might have socially undesirable consequences. This is a view with which I disagree. If a given perspective has social implications we must pursue it: if there are biological factors mitigating against our building the sort of world we would like to build, it is urgent for us to know about them, understand them and learn how to circumvent them. We must bear the paucity of the evidence constantly in mind, and at the same time be continuously ready to grapple with the possibilities that are revealed.

Since I am hoping to make only a few specific points about links between biological and social sciences, I have not attempted to provide a

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comprehensive review of relevant material: the discussion covers rather a wide span, and it seemed preferable to illustrate each issue with just one or two examples.

In coming to terms with the determinants of human behaviour, biologists maintain that the study of animal behaviour can be of some use. This question is discussed in Chapter 1, where it is argued that direct comparisons between animal and human behaviour are dangerous, but principles drawn from the study of animals can be valuable. This does not mean that studies of animals play a major part in what follows: I have drawn also on developmental and social psychology, anthropology and psychiatry. But because principles derived from studies of animals are sometimes dismissed out of hand by social scientists, the matter merits special consideration.

The relationships approach, and the levels of social complexity, are introduced in Chapter 2. Some principles throwing light on the causation and development of social behaviour are discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5: many of the principles discussed are drawn from studies of animals, but emphasis is placed on the social and culture-specific environmental influences affecting human development. Chapters 6 and 7 take up the question of so-called human universals at the levels of individual behaviour and inter-individual relationships respectively: the examples are selected to show the value of integrating the approaches of the biologist and the social scientist. Some aspects of the higher levels of social complexity are discussed in Chapter 8, where an attempt is made to show that understanding of phenomena at each level requires an appreciation of the dialectics between levels. Finally, the extent to which the biologist's functional approach can and cannot be useful at the higher levels of social complexity is discussed in Chapter 9.

The description of this book as involving but two steps towards a distant goal was a deliberate one. There would be no difficulty in pointing to tasks yet to be tackled. But a better description would have been two faltering steps. As an erstwhile biologist and aspiring social scientist, I am conscious of shortcomings on both sides of the gap I am trying to bridge. Furthermore, in trying to write for two groups of readers, I am only too aware that much of what I have written will seem like naïve truisms to one or other. Any attempt to build a bridge requires firm foundations and my debt to a number of other authors will be abundantly apparent in the text. Beyond that, whilst all deficiencies are my own, I have been helped by the critical and constructive comments of Patrick Bateson, Monique Borgerhoff-Mulder, Tim Caro, Jack Goody and Joan Stevenson-Hinde.

Finally, some of the material in Chapter 6 has been amended and

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updated from *Biological Bases of Human Social Behaviour* (1974, McGraw-Hill); and some of that in Chapter 7 from articles in *Frontiers of Infant Psychiatry*, Vol. 2, eds. J. D. Call, E. Galenson & R. L. Tyson, M. D. (Copyright © 1985 by Basic Books Inc., Publishers. Reprinted by permission of the publishers) and in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Vol. 1 (1984, Sage).

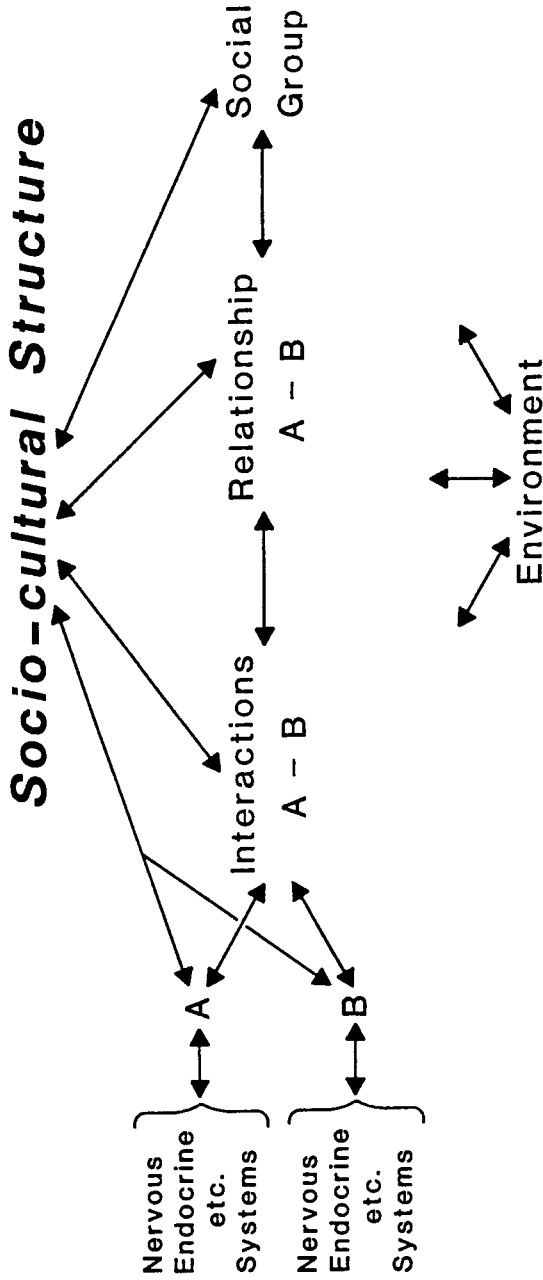


Fig. 1 The dialectics between successive levels of social complexity