

eScholarship

International Journal of Comparative Psychology

Title

Crying in the Wilderness

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jt8k11x>

Journal

International Journal of Comparative Psychology, 20(1)

ISSN

0889-3675

Author

Galef, Bennett G., Jr.

Publication Date

2007-12-31

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Crying in the Wilderness

Bennett G. Galef, Jr.
McMaster University, Canada

Publish in high visibility journals. Acknowledge connection with comparative psychology. Stress positive features of comparative psychology rather than weaknesses of alternative approaches.

In a world where more people read any one of a dozen women's magazines than all of the popular-science magazines taken together, getting out the message about the existence, let alone the value, of comparative psychology poses a tremendous challenge. Comparative psychologists are competing not only with the practitioners of other life sciences, but with social and physical scientists for the attention of a small, sophisticated audience already suffering serious information overload. The remaining 90+ percent of the population, even of developed countries, are unlikely ever to learn of the existence of comparative psychology regardless of what is done.

The community of comparative psychologists is small. It cannot support press agents or lobbyists; it cannot exert meaningful political pressure on its representatives in government. The only realistic possibility of bringing the field above the horizon, even of the scientifically literate, is to increase the visibility of comparative psychology in a few scientific journals of very high prestige (i.e. *Science*, *Nature*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* and of the *Royal Society*).

One might well question whether the reputation and power of these four journals is deserved. However, deservedly or not, such journals provide a disproportionate source of articles in the lay press, and the scientific community treats publication in them as validating the type of work reported. If, unlikely though it may be, a comparative psychologist were to have the opportunity to serve as an editor at one of these journals, making the all-important decisions as to which submissions are even sent out for peer review, it would be a major step forward. More important, although work in comparative psychology does appear in *Nature* and in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* (less often in *Science* and the *Proceedings of the National Academy*), none of this work is identified with the field of comparative psychology.

Obviously, work published in high visibility journals will improve the visibility and impact of comparative psychology, only if the work is identified with the field. Behavioral ecologists publish as behavioral ecologists, evolutionary psychologists as evolutionary psychologists, primatologists as primatologists, etc. I know of no highly visible behavioral scientist who trumpets his or her affiliation with comparative psychology. Even the *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, the flagship journal in the field, has lost its distinctiveness as a journal where comparative psychologists (rather than animal behaviorists, primatologists or behavioral ecologists) publish.

I am as guilty as anyone in failing to acknowledge my roots in comparative psychology. Early in my career, sometime in the 1970s, I made the decision to stop labeling myself a comparative psychologist and, instead, to call myself an animal behaviorist. My change in label reflected my sense (and some may argue that it was a delusion) that comparative psychology was widely perceived as a discipline of the past. Its image (deserved or not) was of a field whose practitioners were reluctant to embrace the insights into behavior provided first by ethology, then by sociobiology and behavioral ecology. The positive message of comparative psychology had been lost in an apparently futile attempt to hold back what rapidly became an irresistible tide.

So, my message is: Publish in high visibility journals. Acknowledge association with comparative psychology. If the opportunity arises, serve on editorial boards of high visibility journals. Stress positive features of comparative psychology, its attention to levels of analysis of behavior and development that fall between those of behavioral ecology and evo-devo, its search for general mechanisms of behavior, etc. and forget about belittling ecological and evolutionary approaches to the study of behavior. Those battles were lost many years ago.

The future of comparative psychology depends, on a willingness of comparative psychologists to use their special expertise to answer questions of interest to the larger community of life scientists (Galef, 1987). Many of the about-to-retire generation of outstanding contributors to study of the behavior of non-human animals were trained as comparative psychologists; Sara Shettleworth, Al Kamil, Meredith West, Mike Beecher, and Charles Snowdon, are but a few, whom I happen to know personally, who have succeeded in using the tools with which an education in comparative psychology equipped them to address issues of importance not only to their fellow comparative psychologists, but also to those trained in other disciplines. Many in the coming generation of comparative psychologists will surely follow their compelling example. Still, comparative psychologists will need to acknowledge publicly their association with the field, if the public profile of comparative psychology is to rise above the intellectual horizon.

References

- Galef, B. G., Jr. (1987). Comparative psychology is dead! Long live comparative psychology. *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, **101**, 259-261.