

eScholarship

International Journal of Comparative Psychology

Title

RESPONSE -- A Positive Response to "The Inevitable Bond" was not Inevitable

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mt805ch>

Journal

International Journal of Comparative Psychology, 7(2)

ISSN

0889-3675

Authors

Balfour, Dianne
Davis, Hank

Publication Date

1994

DOI

10.46867/C4N01S

Copyright Information

Copyright 1994 by the author(s). 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

A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO 'THE INEVITABLE BOND' WAS NOT INEVITABLE

Dianne Balfour
Hank Davis
*Ministry of Health and
University of Guelph*

The consistently positive tone of the reviews of *The Inevitable Bond* suggests that the timing of our book could not have been better. Obviously, *The Inevitable Bond* addresses issues that many of our reviewers feel were hitherto neglected. However, the fact that there are relatively few substantive disagreements with the book's content could suggest that we are simply preaching to the converted. If this is indeed the case, it would seem that the conversion occurred at a rather well attended and secret ceremony. Given the controversial nature of some of the chapters, we expected to see some significant rebuttals. But the lack of conceptual or logical opposition has occurred not only in the reviews published to date here, in *PSYCOLOQUY*, and elsewhere, but also in the response to colloquia presented by one of the authors (Davis). Prior to the publication of *The Inevitable Bond*, there was a palpable resistance to a number of the book's fundamental premises. What has happened to this opposition? Among the kinder adjectives previously heard were "heretical" and "trouble-making". No one to date has carried such opposition into print. This validation has taken us by surprise. In essence, the strongest criticism in these reviews has been technical in nature; e.g. our lack of an author index (guilty as charged). No one has come forward to say things like "Scientists do NOT - by virtue of their repeated interactions with animals - affect the nature of the data they collect." Moreover, at no point in any review published to date, has there been a cry of "Much ado about nothing." Rather, the message

Address correspondence to Dianne Balfour, Ministry of Health, 1515
Blanshard St., Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, V8W 3C8. E-mail:
adbalfou@bcsc02.gov.bc.ca.

seems to be "Yes, these are legitimate concerns and it's about time we formalized the treatment of this issue." This is what we hoped *The Inevitable Bond* would accomplish. If critical reaction to date is typical, we will have more allies than we expected in the battle.

The structure of the book has been both praised and criticized. Faulkes compliments us on the coherence we provide to the book's 24 chapters, organizing them into "powerful motifs." Zentall, on the other hand, suggests that we might have grouped the chapters along more explicitly defined themes.

We hope Bekoff is correct in his belief that *The Inevitable Bond* will "force scientists to come to terms with how they interact with the nonhuman animals they study." Bekoff himself reiterates many of the points addressed in *The Inevitable Bond*. For example, the idea that not allowing bonds to form with certain animals may in and of itself represent a significant stress which may in turn influence research is a theme which several authors addressed (e.g. Kostarczyk, Lehman). Such potential stress should be a source of concern for any scientist dealing with domestic species or primates.

Bekoff discusses anthropomorphism at length and emerges as a clear advocate for the use of anthropomorphic terms. As such, he takes issue with Estep and Hett's admonition that "Scientists must keep a constant vigil against anthropomorphic thinking and interpretation when performing animal research." Bekoff also criticizes Estep and Hett's "confused conception of anthropomorphism." In fact, their discussion of anthropomorphism occurs as part of a review of Hediger's concept of assimilation tendency and his use of the terms anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. The topic of anthropomorphism is clearly a difficult one. Most of us learned early in our training to regard "anthropomorphism" as an obvious taboo for the rational, objective scientist. Any hint of anthropomorphism was tantamount to identifying oneself as uneducated or unsophisticated. Shifting from this traditional perspective to the "critical anthropomorphism" advocated by Burghardt will not be easy. How do we train young scientists to avoid the sort of uncritical anthropomorphism which leads to interpreting the dolphin's gape as a smile, yet encourage them to form bonds with their research animals and recognize when anthropomorphic explanations are appropriate? At the very least, we must recognize that "critical anthropomorphism" requires a sophisticated understanding of species-specific communication systems and how signals are used in intraspecific social relationships.

We hope that Bekoff's comments on anecdotes do not give readers the impression that *The Inevitable Bond* gives "bad press" to anecdotes. In fact, the viewpoint espoused by Bekoff is expressed throughout the

book, but most notably in the chapter by Fentress. Again, we have shunned the categorical rejection of anecdotes for a more open-minded, yet critical use of the strategy. It is virtually impossible to work closely with animal subjects and not come away with anecdotal data. However, these anecdotes are not an end in themselves. The use to which they are put within the scientific process is a major theme of our book.

Bekoff, along with a number of our contributors, wonders whether humans form bonds with some species more readily than others. Most researchers assume that humans are more likely to bond to similar species in part because we are more likely to recognize similarities in signals used for intraspecific and interspecific communication. Bekoff's own research experience with both canids and birds suggests that this assumption may be overly simplistic. Clearly, the answers to such questions will remain speculative until they have been subjected to more rigorous scrutiny.

One intriguing topic which Bekoff discusses, but which our book dealt with only in passing, is the correlation between the type of research and attitudes towards animals. Many ethologists are quick to assure people that the research they do has little in common with that of scientists whose research requires restraint, surgical intervention, and "sacrificing." There is an implicit assumption that people who really like animals simply don't do certain types of research. Needless to say, such feelings are rarely expressed without eliciting emotional rebuttals. Clearly, this is an area worthy of investigation by those interested in the psychology/sociology of science.

We agree completely with Bekoff's call for more detailed study of the bonds (and effects thereof) that develop between field researchers and the animals they study. One of the more frustrating aspects of editing this book was a reluctance to contribute by a number of field researchers. Over and over, we talked to field researchers who insisted that they didn't have anything to contribute, but then regaled us with anecdotes on the subject. Caine's results will no doubt make many a field researcher reevaluate just how "habituated" their subjects are to the presence of a human observer. One of us (Balfour) remembers only too well her apprehension when some of her ground squirrel subjects (usually yearlings) appeared to be going out of their way to forage in her vicinity. She also remembers the reluctance of her colleagues to explore such a possibility.

In his praise of Estep and Hett's chapter, Zentall refers to their observation that the more knowledge scientists have about the natural behaviour and behavioral capacities of the animal, the less likely they will be to anthropomorphize. As with many of the observations based

primarily on anecdote in *The Inevitable Bond*, this hypothesis has yet to be rigorously tested. Zentall also emphasizes one of the more radical suggestions of our book - that it be a phyrnic victory to hide behind automation in order to avoid bonding effects. In some situations, it is plainly worth the risk to interact with the animals in order to expand our understanding of the animal as well as our subject matter. Zentall has provided an excellent summary of the risks and rewards of this approach, which is typified in the chapters by Burghardt and Fentress.

Faulkes raises an important issue which, in retrospect, might have been addressed more directly in the book: the problem of what constitutes acceptable scientific evidence when working with animals. The complexities of relationships between scientists and animals may mean that certain results are unlikely to be repeatable without a specific relationship between scientist and animal. There are numerous examples of this possibility in our book (e.g. research by Burghardt, Pepperberg, Boysen). The fact that details about a relationship between scientist and animal are rarely included in published papers makes repeatability that much more unlikely. If nothing else, we would hope that our book encourages scientists to describe their interactions and relationships with their subjects as honestly as possible. Such descriptions should be considered an important component of any paper's methods section.

Faulkes also emphasizes the importance of understanding what our animals are attending to. As several of the examples in the book illustrate, human assumptions about animal perceptions are often misguided. Here is a prime example of the fine line between critical and naive anthropomorphism: most humans would undoubtedly assume that being caught by a machine would be more stressful to a chicken than being caught by human hands, but, as Duncan points out, they would be wrong. We hope the ideas presented in *The Inevitable Bond* will provide a stimulus for future work and provide a counterbalance to the prevailing reluctance to acknowledge the importance of scientist-animal interactions.

In sum, we are pleased, if a bit surprised, at the consistently positive peer review our book has evoked. Many of our contributors took professional risks in providing the information that appears in *The Inevitable Bond*. As Bekoff notes in his review, the message of our book is a topic about which many scientists would rather think than talk. In truth, our experience was even more conservative. It appeared that thinking about these issues was itself not a comfortable mode for some colleagues. We believed the time for reenacting the emperor's new clothes was past. It was for this reason that we wrote *The Inevitable Bond*: to stimulate discussion and promote further research. The

responses of our colleagues suggest that our perception was not unique. Indeed, it appears that a number of commentators have picked up the torch and run with it even further in their reviews that we did in our book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This is an abridged version of the response published in 1993 in *PSYCHOLOQUY* 4(54): human-animal-bond.7.davis.