

Conference briefing

Ethological psychiatry in the Crimea

J. S. PRICE, Consultant Psychiatrist (retired)

In May of this year I attended an international conference on 'Ethology and the Evolution of Human Behaviour' in the Crimea, sponsored by the Crimean-German Center for Human Ethology and the Crimean Association of Psychiatrists and Psychologists. It was the first international psychiatric conference to be held in the former Soviet Union since the republics gained their independence; and it was the first conference in the world to be jointly sponsored by organisations devoted to ethology and psychiatry.

Ethology was formally banned in the Soviet Union until 1987 because of its links with sociobiology, which was considered anti-Marxist. In spite of this, Crimeans have been having secret joint psychiatric and ethological meetings for ten years. They hike into the mountains, sleep in tents, and present their papers under the trees. Their ethology is technically called neurophysiology. Guests at previous meetings have included Irenaeus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, the current president of the International Society for Human Ethology, and William Hamilton from Oxford who is well known for his mathematical solution to the problem of the evolution of altruism.

Although ethology and ethological psychiatry are now perfectly legal in the Crimea, the secrecy of the meetings has not been entirely lost. On arrival at Simferopol, the capital of the Crimea, the guests were taken to the history department of the university and entertained by ethologists disguised as physiologists. Then, although the conference was advertised to take place in Simferopol, we were taken by bus for 50 miles to a dacha on the Black Sea coast, where the conference was in fact held, in surroundings of outstanding natural beauty. A conference room (and refreshment) were provided by the village champagne factory (which exports two million bottles a year to Germany); and on the last day the old habits reasserted themselves as the whole conference hiked up into the mountains, hearing the first paper on a ledge overlooking the sea, and then, after another half hour hike, the second paper beside a mountain stream, the third under a clump of juniper trees, and so on until the weary throng stumbled back to the dacha for the final banquet.

For many years the Crimean Department of Psychiatry under the leadership of Professor Alexey

Nikolaevich Kornetov (accent on the second syllable, pronounced "yet") has been opposed to the Moscow school with its "delusions of social reform". Its interest in ethology as a basic science for psychiatry owes something to Detlev Ploog of Munich, who unfortunately could not get to the conference because of a strike on German airlines (but see his contribution to the *festschrift* for Sir Martin Roth [Ploog, 1989]). There are quite a few differences in diagnosis and other matters from Western psychiatry, and I was fortunate to receive from the publisher, only a week before the conference, Paul Calloway's excellent monograph on *Soviet and Western Psychiatry*. This book, which is virtually a joint Russian and Western textbook of psychiatry, greatly helped in avoiding confusion over labels and diagnostic systems. That I left the book with my Crimean hosts in an exchange of gifts on departure is a source of both gratification and regret.

The book of conference abstracts contained 30 papers from departments of psychiatry in the former Soviet Union, mostly from the Crimea, but others from Moscow and as far away as Latvia and Tomsk in Siberia. Other contributions came from departments of zoology and anthropology. The interest is partly in applying ethological methods in the study of psychiatric patients, and partly in conceptualising psychiatric disorders in the context of evolutionary biology. The early work of the Crimean department is summed up in the monograph by Kornetov *et al* (1990).

Professor Kornetov gave a fascinating paper on 'The Problem of Totalitarian Socialism in an Ethological Context'. Professor Victor Pavlovitch Samohvalov described the Crimean Project which is an ethological study of patients taking particular note of cultural differences (there are 100 national groups in the Crimea), sex differences (both biological sex and sexual orientation) and age differences (there are, of course, no official social classes in the former Soviet Union). One paper of particular interest to me was by Tyge Schelde of Frederiksberg Hospital in Copenhagen, who summed up his eight year ethological study of depressed patients (Pedersen *et al*, 1988). Asking whether depression could be a form of submissive behaviour, as suggested by Gilbert (1992), he divided the actions, postures, gestures and

facial expressions of the patients into those of active submission and those of passive submission. During the depressed phase, passive submission was greatly increased, but active submission was reduced; even the routine "submissive" act of deference of saying good morning to the doctor as he passed through the ward tended to be omitted by the severely depressed patients, and there was no initiative towards submitting to any one individual. So if depression is anything to do with submission, it is a very passive form of submissive behaviour.

Other papers covered the non-verbal behaviour of the schizophrenic patient. The facial expression, particularly the smile, and posture and gesture have been subjects of study. Has anyone ever seen a schizophrenic patient shrug his shoulders, or place his finger on the side of his nose? How does psychiatric illness affect what a patient does, and how he relates to important people in his life? How does the patient instruct his stockbroker, his bookmaker, his accountant, his bank manager, his lawyer or his tax accountant? All these things are as important as his reports of his voices, or the fact that he is unable to praise his children. Does the onset of illness change the ratio of smiling while talking to smiling while listening (an index of social dominance)? The answers to some of these questions were reported to the conference, others await future research.

A major current concern of the Crimean delegates was their application to be an independent republic. Another was the rate of inflation and the scarcity of foreign exchange, which makes it difficult for them to obtain Western books and journals, let alone attend conferences in the West. The rouble is now 90 to the dollar in the bank, 120 to the dollar on the street – a year ago it was 40 to the dollar. Living in the Crimea is cheap (in dollar terms) but getting there is not cheap as one has to fly via Moscow and stay overnight there. A cup of coffee in the Intourist Hotel in

Moscow cost £1.50, whereas a three course lunch in the best hotel in Simferopol cost 50p.

Next year's conference will be on 'The Biological Roots of Human Behaviour', 1–4 June 1993, and it is proposed to hold it in a boat cruising the Black Sea coast (total cost \$370 for the four days, including volleyball, ping-pong, swimming pool and book of abstracts). But going by past form, it may all take place in a submarine. The conference language is English, which is the second language in Crimean schools.

No-one knows quite where psychiatry is heading. Molecular biology, neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, biochemistry, pharmacology, psychology, social anthropology and sociology are essential basic sciences for our discipline. But no-one can deny that *Homo sapiens* is the result of natural selection, and both our human triumphs and our psychopathology reflect this fact. Therefore ethology in its context of evolutionary biology cannot be omitted from the list of our basic sciences. And in this field, the Crimeans are leading the way.

References

- CALLOWAY, P. (1992) *Soviet and Western Psychiatry*. Keighley: Moor Press.
- GILBERT, P. (1992) *Depression: The Evolution of Powerlessness*. Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- KORNETOV, A., SAMOHVALOV, V., KOROBV, A. & KORNETOV, N. (1990) *Ethology in Psychiatry*. Kiev: Zdorovic Publishing. (Text in Russian).
- PEDERSEN, J., LIVOIR-PETERSEN, M. F. & SCHELDE, J. T. M. (1988) An ethological description of depression. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, **78**, 320–330.
- PLOOG, D. (1989) Psychopathology of emotions in view of neuroethology. In *Contemporary Themes in Psychiatry: A Tribute to Sir Martin Roth* (eds. K. Davison & A. Kerr). London: Gaskell (Royal College of Psychiatrists). pp. 441–458.

Lundbeck Teaching Fellowship

Fellows and Members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, working overseas, are invited to apply for a Teaching Fellow from the UK to come to their country to provide a course of teaching in a designated specialist psychiatric subject. Overseas Fellows and Members may suggest a named teacher, but more importance will be given to the topic of their choice than to any individual.

A sum of £5,000 per year has been provided by Lundbeck Limited to cover the travel, living and incidental expenses of the Teaching Fellow who, it is envisaged, will complete the course over a period of

2–4 weeks. The host centre overseas will not be expected to provide any financial support.

Applications for 1993 should be sent to the Dean, The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG by 30 April 1993. The Teaching Fellow will be selected by the Overseas Liaison Committee and his/her appointment ratified by the Court of Electors.

Dr FIONA CALDICOTT
Dean
August 1992