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An Interview with Susan Friedman.

Dr. Susan Friedman has been a behaviourist for 25 years; she is currently with the Department of Psychology at Utah State University. Her pioneering efforts to apply to animals the philosophy and teaching technology from the field of Applied Behaviour Analysis has resulted in an extremely effective method for instructing parrots. Flock Talk, WPT's monthly eNewsletter, interviewed her for the October 2007 issue.

When and why did you first become interested in working with animals, in particular, parrots?

Like so many people in our community of animal lovers, I was "that" kid too. I could find an animal in need, real or imagined, anywhere any time. In fact, the first of many exiles to the principal's office resulted from sneaking out of the classroom back to the playground to nurse a woolly caterpillar. As a child, I enjoyed living with small parrots, among the rest of our menagerie. I welcomed parrots back into my life in 1992, when I returned to the USA after 5 years living in Africa. From my current perspective, I find myself rethinking the practice of keeping exotic animals as pets. It is a difficult dilemma, among many of life's dilemmas; but it also presents an exciting opportunity to consider how we live on this planet and the many ways in which we may be able to do it better. I'm comfortable not having all the answers this minute. In the meantime, I feel fortunate to contribute to the lives of those parrots currently in our care.

What is the basis of your work with parrots? How is it similar to work with children?

The behavior-change technology called applied behavior analysis (ABA) forms the basis of my work with parrots and children. The first law of ABA, called the law of effect, describes the relation we experience every day between what we do and the environment in which we do it. That is, behavior is a function of its consequences, a purposeful tool. We behave to produce outcomes of value to us. Observing the immediate outcomes produced by our parrots' behavior provides a lot of information about why an individual behaves as it does.

Was it difficult, at first, to get people to accept that using positive reinforcement (rewarding and positive outcomes) instead of negative (discipline) is best in teaching parrots?

Some people are skeptical due to our cultural fog which has us more comfortable punishing the "wrong" behavior than rewarding the "right" behavior. Showing people first-hand the differences in a learner's enthusiasm, acquisition speed, generalizability, and maintenance of skills learned with positive reinforcement quickly turns initial skepticism into interest and advocacy. Giving people the big picture is pivotal to understanding behavior too. Behavior change is our genetic imperative because the environments in which we live are never fixed or static. Positive reinforcement is a natural process in the wild and in our homes. When we teach our parrots new behaviors, we harness that natural process and can improve the quality of life for all learners.

When was it first determined that understanding an animal's natural behaviour is vital to properly caring for it in captivity?

I think of ethology and behavior analysis the science sisters, both of which have been investigated systematically for about 100 years. However, the study of behavior has many science "siblings" including neuroscience, veterinary medicine and nutrition, just to name a few. Each science focuses on a different level of analysis and each level of analysis contributes an important part of the behavior puzzle. Ethology focuses mainly on species-wide, inherited behaviors that have evolved over generations to fit the wild habitat. Behavior analysis focuses mainly on general laws of learning that cross all species. As it applies to each individual's repertoire, behavior analysis describes the "evolution" of behavior within a single lifetime to fit personal conditions. This is why we say behavior analysis is a study of one. Both biology and environment are required and inseparable for all behavior. Therefore, a sound knowledge of both sciences of behavior makes a fuller toolbox.

How important is it for parrots to have power (control) over their environments?

Scientific studies verify that control over one's own outcomes is as fundamental to behavioral health as is air, food and warmth. Behavior is a tool used to change our environment so that we get desired outcomes and avoid aversive outcomes. By giving parrots choices, to the greatest extent possible, we allow them to use their behavior exactly as nature intended -- for an effect. If we deliver more reinforcement for the "right" behaviors than the "wrong" ones, animals will choose the right behaviors more often. This is called the matching law: Given a choice between two behaviors, animals tend to do the behavior that produces the most reinforcement. We should not be persuaded to use force or coercion by simplistic "either-or" solutions such as this: Either make parrots submit to our needs or accept birdy bedlam. A win-win situation is one in which the animal chooses to behave in ways that

keeps them thriving in our care because doing so produces valued outcomes for the animal. Before asking any animal to do something, ask yourself first, "Why should he choose to do so?"

In your experience, what are some of the more common mistakes people make when trying to modify the behaviour of their pet parrots?

Perhaps the overriding mistake we make is viewing behavior as something a parrot has rather than something it does given certain conditions. When we view behavior as something a parrot has, we look for defects inside the parrot. We refer to them with fixed, diagnostic labels like dominant, aggressive, and psychotic. This results in a false sense of understanding behavior when all we've done is given it a name. Labels create self-fulfilling prophecies and provide people with excuses to give up on their birds. Alternately, when we view behavior more scientifically as something a parrot does given certain conditions, we look for defects in the conditions, i.e., the environment that we arrange. We change behavior by changing the environment. This is a hopeful perspective because the environment is one component of our parrots behavior we can actually do something about.

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