

EHBEA CONFERENCE 2015 REPORT

Report written by Elliot Aguilar. Video recordings arranged by Ilmari Määttänen and the University of Helsinki.

Watch: [People of the EHBEA 2015 conference](#)

Day 1

The 10th annual meeting of the European Human Behaviour and Evolution Society at the University of Helsinki turned out, in the end, to be an occasion for dancing. The opening ceremonies in the university's Great Hall commenced with a group of young circus performers in white leotards who flipped, tumbled, shimmied and constructed a human pyramid or two. At one point, they stood herd-like with their hands outstretched above their heads to evoke the antlers of Finland's reindeer. Melissa Hines followed on the heels of that exciting introduction with fascinating results from experiments on the effects of testosterone on gender-related behaviours in humans (and other primates). After the rousing plenary, we headed for the opening wine reception in the next room. The more prudent among us headed for dinner and a good night's sleep, while some others continued the opening ceremonies somewhat later into the night.

Watch: [Opening day EHBEA 2015](#)

Day 2

A cold, wet snow fell in the early morning—a reminder that this year's conference was being held in the European Union's northernmost capital city. In the lecture hall we warmed up listening to the first plenary speaker of the day, Oliver Schülke, describe the physiological aspects of how and why male macaques form friendships. We continued with nonhuman primates in the following session. Sofia Forss reported her experiments testing the differences in the capacity for cultural intelligence in two orangutan species in European zoos; next Alejandro Sanchez showed that captive chimpanzees can successfully cooperate in a snowdrift game.

The first speed session of the conference focused on the human family and maturation. Lisa DeBruine offered us intriguing experimental evidence that parent's influence on preference for a partner's eye colour is not caused by sex-linked heritability; Peeter Hõrak drew on an extensive dataset of Estonian school girls to show that pathogen reduction had an effect on pubertal growth. Overall, the speed sessions were an efficient way to accommodate more talks, and were also well placed just before the lunch break. As sleet streaked the windows and wet snow congealed on the pavements outside, we returned from lunch to hear the next plenary speaker, Beverly Strassmann, present evidence that religion can help increase paternity certainty among the Dogon of Mali. This talk ushered in a session on religion. Nicolas Baumard presented a hypothesis that conflict between differing life strategies can explain the rise of

moralizing religions, while Susanne Shultz used data from British monasteries to make the case that the greater the benefits of a religious organization the more costly its membership. These talks generated a predictable amount of hushed but animated discussion outside the lecture hall.

The final talks of the day were held in two parallel sessions. In the large lecture hall Jamie Tehrani showed us how phylogenetic methods revealed the oldest European fairytale motif (“the smith”). The Small hall saw Elena Miu demonstrate the emergence of conformity in cumulative culture from a data set on Matlab coding competitions.

Watch: [EHBEA 2015 conference day 2](#)

The poster session had already begun when suddenly, we were all asked to direct our attention to one end of the hall. A woman in dark eyeglass frames with a wilful resemblance to Frida Kahlo drew her own impromptu posters to the amusement of the crowd. After the performance, we returned to browsing the posters—but it would not be the last we’d see of her. The poster session ended and we headed for a reception held by the rector of the University of Helsinki. We had dinner in a room decked with the portraits of illustrious Finnish intellectuals (including the compiler of the Kalevala), as the rector exhorted us all to remember that, as scholars, we also had a duty to the public. Whether it was the stirring speech or the wine, the conference-goers were in high spirits, despite the dismal weather. The evening rounded out with a colossal post-conference session at Molly Malone’s Irish pub on Kaisaniemenkatu.

Watch: [Poster session of EHBEA 2015](#)

Day 3

Yesterday’s snow had melted by the start of the morning plenary. Chris Kuzawa showed how the metabolic costs of brain growth are perhaps the reason for humans’ remarkably slow development. In the day’s first session Julien Barthes proposed kin selection as an explanation for male homosexual preference. Next, after a coffee break, was a daytime poster session.

After lunch, Wil Roebroeks used his plenary talk to demonstrate the difficulty of finding evidence for the use of fire in the archaeological record, and the clever ways archaeologists have found of identifying those faint traces. We then broke up for parallel speed sessions. Highlights were Matthew Thomas’s experiments among Norwegian Saami that showed a propensity to cooperate with members of social groups, not necessarily kin groups. In the other session, Vanessa Ferdinand showed how a cognitive model for cultural copying can produce different patterns of neutral evolution than previously assumed in cultural evolution models. Another coffee and tea break passed before the day’s final round of parallel sessions.

The evolution of art and language was featured in the large lecture hall. Terhi Honkola showed that environmental differences, not geographic distance, were most strongly correlated with dialect differences in Finland. In the family dynamics session in the

Small hall, David Lawson presented evidence that statistical confounds draw into question the idea that polygyny is harmful. The day's talks ended and a student contingent headed for the piney wilds of Seurasaari, an island park in the Helsinki archipelago. Later in the evening, the deputy mayor of Helsinki greeted conference attendees amidst the Corinthian columns of the grand banquet hall of Helsinki's City hall.

Watch: [EHBEA 2015 conference day 3](#)

Day 4

Gert Stulp opened the day with a stirring call for evolutionary psychologists to question the adaptationist perspective that can obscure the ways in which human psychology has evolved. Stulp was also the recipient of this year's Young Investigator's Award. His plenary talk inaugurated a session on evolution and cognition. Louise Barrett argued that computational models of cognition ignore the fact that cognition incorporates both mental representations, external material artifacts, and a social context.

In the second morning session, Roberto Foa presented a study showing that the presence of pre-colonial states in the Indian subcontinent predicts behavioral differences in legal compliance and public contributions. Paul Rauwolf described theoretical results that indicate that impact bias, the tendency to exaggerate the emotional impact of an event prior to its occurrence, may be a way to navigate noisy environments.

After we retired for lunch, the final parallel sessions of the conference were held. In the large lecture hall, Judith Burkart discussed findings that allomaternal care, rather than phylogeny, predicts proactive prosociality in primates. In the small hall, Marjolijn Das asked whether Dutch women were attracted to cities to find higher quality mates. The final joint session of the conference was held in the large lecture hall. For the final talk of the day, Bronwyn Tarr and Andrew Clark, roused the crowd of conference goers by asking us to clap our hands and tap our fingers. Soon we were up out of our seats as music pumped from the hall's loudspeakers. All this was by way of our two speakers demonstrating how the physical synchrony induced by dancing led to bonding. According to Tarr, "to not dance is to deny being human."

The conference dinner followed in the elegantly appointed dining hall of the Pörssitalo restaurant, in downtown Helsinki. Our performer from the poster session made a return appearance, tapping one of our own—or so we thought—to join her at the stage in front of the room. The two performed a series of gymnastic and aerobic feats before the start of dinner. By the end of the evening, most of us decided to heed Tarr's wise words from the final talk. We headed out to Navy Jerry's for drinks, dancing, and of course discussing the many talks that made the 10th annual EHBEA conference, the first hosted by a Nordic country, an unmitigated success. Helsinki has certainly set a high standard for EHBEA 2016 in London.

Watch: [EHBEA conference day 4](#)

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Circus and acrobatic performances by Circus Helsinki, Kristiina Janhunen and Osmo Tammissalo.

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