



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE 'FERAL FAMILY': ITS EVOLUTION, EXISTENCE, REWARDS, AND THREATS TO WESTERN CIVILIZATION

MARROW, SHERILYN R.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION

BOULTER, STEPHEN K.

FARNSWORTH, BOULTER, BURKE & STAMPER, LLC.

Dr. Sherilyn R. Marrow
School of Communication
University of Northern Colorado.

Mr. Stephen K. Boulter
Farnsworth, Boulter, Burke & Stamper, LLC.

Toward an Understanding of the 'Feral Family': Its Evolution, Existence, Rewards, and Threats to Western Civilization

Synopsis:

The authors reveal their original social construct and profile known as the 'feral family.' Its morphology is discussed in terms of structure, interactional patterns, dialectics, safety, rewards, challenges, and possible family species extinction. The review features data of the feral families' 20th century inception through speculation of its 21st century impacts on contemporary western civilization.

**Toward a Conceptualization of the 'Feral Family':
Its Evolution and Characteristics**

Sherilyn Marrow, Ph.D.
School of Communication
University of Northern Colorado
Box 99 Candelaria Hall
Greeley, CO 80639

Stephen Boulter, CLA.
Farnsworth, Boulter, Burke & Stamper, Llc.
Box 66, La Salle, CO 80645

Toward a Conceptualization of the ‘Feral Family’: Its Evolution and Characteristics

The authors reveal their original familial construct and identifying characteristics known as the *‘feral family.’* The discussion chronicles the ontology of the new system and its emergence. Its morphology is explained in structure, interactional patterns, and communication behaviors.

Introduction

Lead by the nomenclature and some scientific (Candland, 1993), as well as some curious cultural artifacts we queried whether defined characteristics of human behavior could be observed and potentially quantified for comparison with feral animal societies. This inquiry began as a conversation, grew through numerous hours of discussion, and then evolved into a definable pursuit with an ultimate challenge. The question was: Are there, or have there ever have been ‘feral’ human families? If so, how could one better understand these subsystems of the contemporary human family, and what are the implications of their existence?

We started with the nomenclature ‘feral’ and then set off to discover what the characteristics of feral societies were in animals. From there, we hoped we could derive, and perhaps, improvise measuring criteria for identifying feral traits in humans and families.

Would this be possible? Can the term ‘feral’ be meaningfully extended, adapted, and applied to humans after centuries of using the moniker as a descriptive for behavior within the animal kingdom? If so, could human ‘feral families’ be defined within a hierarchy, grouped or subdivided, according to differences and similarities? Overall, would it be meaningful to frame by comparatives wild animal behaviors over contemporary and evolving families?

To better understand ‘the feral concept,’ we set out to investigate the structure, interactional patterns, relational dialectics, safety concerns, societal rewards, detriments, challenges, and possible extinction outcomes associated with feralism. Thereby, the scope of this

preliminary paper will focus only on the evolution and basic characteristics of the new ‘feral family’ concept.

Evolution of the ‘Feral Family’

References to *feral families* were a media rarity until the beginning of the 21st century. Some documentation was relegated to mythical children raised in jungles by lions or elephants. Some performers were showcased as ‘feral’ attractions in sideshows that circulated midways at state fairs.

Perhaps the best and most comprehensive academic survey occurred in 1993 with the publication *Feral Children and Clever Animals* by Douglas Keith Candland. This highly- praised book became a useful launching point for our inquiry, not only because of its thoroughness documenting ‘feral’ fact and fiction, but also because of its futuristic stance and open-mindedness to the nature of the relationship of humans to animals and vice versa. Candland writes: “If we do not know, just now, how to assess our communications with other minds, we should not be discouraged from continuing the attempt” (p. 369).

Candland arrives at the conclusion that compositing the feral definition is a hybrid of observer perceptions. He writes:

“The question itself is part of a more longstanding and more difficult question regarding the roles of nature and nurture, of what is innate and what is acquired through experience. Without speech with which to communicate, how are we to imagine the experiences, the minds, of those silent subjects? The silent minds of feral children, whether human or animal, remain intriguing but awesome to us.” (p. 73).

From Candland’s platform, we chose to traverse from the microscopic to the macroscopic and returned to ask the following questions: Would it be appropriate to adapt the usage of observed wild animal attributes as a comparative framework for understanding some modern

human families? Could such a framework be developed into a working model toward a better understanding of feral families?

Those questions became part of the many challenges that lead us to explore, examine, and document the ‘phenomena’ we suggest is the arrival of the feral human family. Even so, we concluded that while this investigative approach was plausible, the likelihood for long versus short term research would be critical before major results could be expected.

We further postulated as to what responsibilities might be implied by such comparisons and what safeguards would accompany such research. Questions also arose as to what boundaries could or should be imposed upon the scope of examination.

The Animal Model of Feral Families

For centuries, we have used the ‘feral’ moniker exclusively as a descriptive for associative behaviors within the animal kingdom. The animal record is well-recognized and substantial, somewhat seasoned and instructive.

One definition advanced by popular website Alley Cat Allies (2014) purports that a feral animal is one which has escaped captivity or domestication and gone on to survive in the wild without assistance:

...“stray cats and feral cats are also different from each other in a very important way—in their relationship to and interactions with people. Pet and stray cats are socialized to people. Feral cats are not socialized to people. While they are socialized to their colony members and bonded to each other, they do not have that same relationship with people” (p. 1).

Our interest was further catalyzed (if you accept the pun) by quantification of behaviors defined for feline populations. Included in the website were graphic depictions of a series of criteria differentiating between stray (domestic) and feral felines. These graphs proved helpful in

delineating the characteristics between domestic and feral cats and possible application to human families

Postulated Feral-like Behaviors in Humans

Further considerations from Wikipedia website entry (2014) *Feral organism* lead to the comparative quantifications and seemed a good starting point for observation and later interpolation. Transposing the language of several of these possible criteria for comparison with humans, we derived this thematic list:

- Susceptibility to detachment from other humans; certain individuals go feral easily and successfully, while others are much less inclined to wander and usually fail promptly outside domestication.
- Degree or distance of detachment from other humans; some will detach readily and some will not.
- Others leave the family system and search for new environments; some passively and some actively invade new locations.
- Persistence; the ability for individuals/families to sustain their identities and survive in new venues.
- Unique survival tactics; Feral humans, like other organisms, may increase the diversity of an area by being able to survive in ways other residents cannot.

Clearly some of the evaluation criteria do not readily transfer from the animal evaluation model. Some of these are without a human equivalency or are outside the scope of conventional propositions concerning human grouping transformations.

Definition of Feral Families

Working toward a definition of the feral family can be complicated due to the myriad of current definitions of family. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary a family is defined as “the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children; any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/family>). Also, the term ‘family’ can be arbitrarily defined; however, for this paper, the term “family” will be defined as a group of people who are related to one another through blood, choice, circumstances, or need. More recently, Marrow & Leoutsakas’ (2013) treatment of the “evotypical” family is defined as “kinship ties bound together by the desire of caring for one another with a common goal of surviving as a single small group unit” (p. 10). While these two sample definitions reflect changing family dynamics, neither accurately portrayed the uniqueness of feral families as came to understand them. Therefore, we offer the following definition that distinguishes the characteristics of a feral family from other published definitions of family:

Feral family: A network of bonded voluntary or non-voluntary individuals, uniquely resilient, that typically displays signs of societal autonomy and/or detachment, practices distinctive interactional patterns and communication behaviors, embraces hyper-individualism and non-hierarchical beliefs, and, collectively, share a primary goal of basic survival in their natural environment. (Marrow & Boulter, 2015)

The working definition lends itself to an expansive inquiry regarding compatible behaviors and interactions of feral families. The following grid depicts specific information that pertains to the feral family in terms of their structure, interactive patterns, and communication behaviors. Several behavioral items have been listed on the grid; however, it is not essential for any feral family form to exhibit all of the behaviors to qualify for membership.

FERAL FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

The following items represent a spectrum of possible behaviors displayed by feral families.

Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • proclivity for autonomy and/or detachment from family members and society • little to no deference to hierarchy • history of loss or alienation • inadequacy of available resources • multi-generations of survivors • ill-defined and/or loose boundaries • adaptive to environment • sparse family role models or heroes • focus on basic survival needs • unique exemplars of resilience
Interactional Patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unclear roles • few expectations of others • wildly creative/ strategic exchanges • unmanaged chaos • display of hyper-individualism • groupthink or herd-like mentality • reactive and altered decision making • regular performances of outrageous behaviors • often depressed or anxiety-ridden • negotiates tensions of “carefree vs. competitive” lifestyles • driven by ‘spirit of anti-defeatism’
Communication Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minimal communication expressed within/out of system • heavy reliance on non-verbals and paralanguage • lack of visionary or futuristic expression • prevalence of negativity and criticism • limited use of expansive thought • engagement of either/or thinking • defensiveness • circular and indirect rhetoric with self and others
	<p>Marrow & Boulter (Copyright 2015)</p>

Conclusion

At the end of a year of examination, we concluded that *yes, there are feral human families among us* insofar as particular facts can be obtained about them and particular properties can be ascribed to them. We further conclude that we can expect expanded popularity of the term “feral family.” In practice, the term can span families exhibiting the most benign behaviors which could be described as ‘free spirit-like’, creative, and/or unstructured; or, alternately, range to the far opposite end of the spectrum where some iterations are demonstratively harsh and pose a potentially fatal impact on other societies with whom they have contact.

We conclude that this thinkpiece is also a cautionary tale. By whatever descriptive, there are now some ‘families’ that are ferociously feral with intensity that cannot be denied. For example, some social affiliations are now becoming ‘global,’ ever increasing in numbers and barbarity, with escalating inhumane tendencies and behaviors. As such, the feral model may be of assistance to quantify, understand, and perhaps, contain the expansion of such behavior and its destructive outcomes.

While preliminary, this conceptualization of the ‘human feral family’ has been designed to provoke discussion and inspire dialogue among family scholars, social researchers, and family practitioners. Undoubtedly, elaboration of the feral family construct, and further examination of its rewards and challenges to society is warranted.

References (preliminary)

Candland, Douglas K (1993). *Feral children and clever animals: Reflections on human nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hays, C. (1951) *The Ape in our House*, New York: Harper

Marrow, S. & Leoutsakas, D.(2013). *More than blood: Rethinking identities, interactions, and the future of contemporary families*. In S. Marrow and D. Leoutsakas (Eds.), *More than blood: Today's reality and tomorrow's vision of family*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishers.

Marrow, S. R. (2009, March 5) How to talk about uncertain times in your family. Interview by Amy Jacobs at WKSTT FM (recorded archives), San Luis Obispo, CA

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/family>).

Wikipedia, Feral organism, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feral_organism