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Primateology on Display

Nicholas Langlitz, 2020, *Chimpanzee culture wars: Rethinking human nature alongside Japanese, European, and American cultural primatologists*, Princeton University Press, 407 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-20427-7

Chimpanzee Culture Wars delves into the culture of primatology research and the furious debate over whether chimpanzees have culture. Langlitz has lifted the veil on primate research whose methods have appeared as the proverbial ‘black box’ to scientists outside the discipline. The research of primates has often appeared disparate and disguised by supposedly revolutionary discoveries about primate behaviors and carefree images of Goodall and Fossey interacting with their research subjects. Langlitz’s primary focus of the ethnography compared and contrasted the differences in primate research between eastern and western cultures, and between the lab work and field work. Ethnographically, Langlitz has conveyed the methodological and logistical difficulties that primatologists face, revealing the tangible difficulties that primate researchers face in the lab and in the field, which minimizes the mystique of primate research and in turn makes the field more relatable. Langlitz does not focus on whether or not non-human primates themselves have culture, but instead highlights the development of each area of primate research including cultural, epistemological, and ontological milieu surrounding researchers to better understand the viewpoint for each school of thought and how they arrive at differing theories and conclusions. Langlitz offers a fresh perspective on the culture of science because both the epistemological and ontological issues of primate research and defining culture as a whole need to be continually examined and reevaluated.

The more historical divide in the field, between research performed in the West in Europe and the United States and that performed in the East in Japan, is expertly outlined by Langlitz. The two observed cultures were drastically different during the genesis of primatology and resulted in a more empirical approach in the West whereas the East evolved from a more holistic approach that considered humans and non-human primates together. The Japanese work has often been criticized for its use of direct human involvement in the behaviors of primates, whereas the Westerners are criticized for not considering how their involvement influences primate behaviors. The divide is further emphasized by the interaction between lab and field research. Westerners tend to keep lab and field research separate whereas the Japanese have often sought to combine the two with varying degrees of success. The divide between lab and field work for western researchers is battled through epistemology and ontology. Lab researchers focus on the psychology of primates whereas field researchers focus on the observed behaviors of primates and their interactions with each other and natural world. The field workers tend to argue for the possibility of primate culture because they observe in-person the diffusion of behaviors through geographic groups and through generations. Lab researchers have typically fought against the idea of primate culture by setting boundaries that potentially separate humans from primates, but as these boundaries are falsified, new ones are established that prevent the possibility of primate culture (e.g., only humans use tools, only humans use language).

Langlitz's rather humanistic approach to the examination of primate researcher culture will not agree with those who prefer more empirical forms of ethnographic research, but the approach was warranted given the nature of his research subjects and the ever-changing field of ethnographic research. This being said, the author controlled for variables, when possible, in order to make direct comparisons between observations. Langlitz was fortunate in his ability to make direct comparisons between cultures and methodologies through the use of his contingency table (p. 9-12) by comparing Euro-American researchers to Japanese researchers and field workers to lab workers. The contingency tables allowed Langlitz to make lateral comparisons between the researchers' cultures and the researchers' methods, which was reinforced by forward comparisons between Langlitz's take on his own field and the cultures he was studying. Langlitz performed his study through second-order observations, defined as observing primatologists while they observed primates in both the lab and field. Though Langlitz's research was primarily

concerned with such second-order observations, his analysis differed from Haraway's (p. 95) because Langlitz considered first-order observations of the primates under study, which undoubtedly placed his interpretations within a more appropriate epistemological framework. This framework allowed Langlitz to directly observe primate behaviors and the researchers' interpretations of these behaviors and draw comparisons on how the scientific and geographical cultures have influenced the researchers' interpretations of observed behaviors. In this regard, the expert convergence of first- and second-order observations in the field with higher theoretical concepts places Langlitz akin to Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur* (1966).

Langlitz did not follow the Malinowskian format of ethnography, and there is a general lack of experiential authority within the ethnographic portions of the literature, which is instead dominated by direct dialogue from Langlitz's research subjects (e.g., Clifford 1983). The dialogic nature of Langlitz's presentation of the primate researchers' cultures is necessary for his philosophical interpretations and historical background that interject frequently to provide context for the subjects' point of view. It is recommended that readers be generally familiar with philosophical and socio-cultural paradigms before reading this book because it delves deeply into concepts of epistemology and ontology and their evolution throughout time. Additionally, it is assumed that the dialogic approach used by the author was necessary as Langlitz examined the culture of what could arguably be called his peers. Langlitz also highlighted dialogue from interlocutors that frequently discussed the individual's position or feelings towards their academic counterparts, superiors, and their perspective on the epistemological and ontological nature of their own unique culture within their respective fields. This approach presents a pseudo-polyphonic narrative that attempts to reach as close to the 'native's perspective' as possible through the presentation of dialogue from multiple interlocutors throughout the cultural, epistemological, ontological, and hierarchical ranges of primate research, which address multiple aspects of these individuals' perspectives.

The last chapters of the book reaffirm the necessity for primate research and the continuous evaluation of the primate research paradigms and its researchers. It is in the last chapters that Langlitz touches on the main reason why we perform these inane convoluted studies. What makes us human and what does it mean to be human? These questions become even more

important when assessed through Langlitz's solemn fatalist discussion of chimpanzees and in turn our own species. Though "fatalism is a swear word by which hardly anyone is swearing" (p. 314), Langlitz's fatalism is not misguided. Langlitz's fatalism may take center stage in the Anthropocene as sociopolitical clashes continue unabated, the destructive potential of *Homo sapiens* has increased in recent history, and the looming environmental crisis continues to progressively worsen. Primates have served as anthropologists' proxies of early human behavior because they are our closest living relatives. The observations and interpretations presented by Langlitz produce a relatively novel anthropological question: will the extinction of multiple primate species serve as a proxy for the study of our own demise?

Langlitz presented a good ethnographic study on the culture of primate researchers that is rich in philosophical discussion. The more philosophical approach of the author was necessary given the nature of the research, which examined not only human culture but the cultural relations between researchers and chimpanzees. This work will most likely become requisite for aspiring primatologists and primate behavioral psychologists because it requires researchers in both fields to address biases and shortcomings of their methodologies and epistemologies. Additionally, the book provides another source for examining differences in nationalistic cultures within the sciences and how research is performed in reference to one's own viewpoint. *Chimpanzee Culture Wars* is an excellent text that will continue the discussion on chimpanzee culture, human culture, and what it means to be human for years to come.

References

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Clifford, James. "On ethnographic authority." *Representations* 2 (1983): 118-146, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928386>

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