

***The Cultured Chimpanzee: Reflections on Cultural Primatology.* By William McGrew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp xi + 248, table of contents, preface, references, index, black/white photographs, ISBN 0-521-53543-3, pbk)**

Sandra Wright

Volume 29, numéro 1-2, 2007

Retour à l'ethnographie
Back to Ethnography

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018764ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018764ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wright, S. (2007). Compte rendu de [*The Cultured Chimpanzee: Reflections on Cultural Primatology.* By William McGrew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp xi + 248, table of contents, preface, references, index, black/white photographs, ISBN 0-521-53543-3, pbk)]. *Ethnologies*, 29(1-2), 371-374. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018764ar>

This book will be of interest to researchers of any hereditary artistic tradition. Lyons spent a great deal of time with the artists and their families and writes with empathy and realism about the life of the painters. From my own experience of working with the musicians of Nathadwara, I can appreciate both the rewards and the difficulties of this approach. I thoroughly recommend this beautifully produced book to anyone interested in the development and practise of Indian painting as well as the lives of the painters.

Anne-Marie Gaston
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

The Cultured Chimpanzee: Reflections on Cultural Primatology. By William McGrew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp xi + 248, table of contents, preface, references, index, black/white photographs, ISBN 0-521-53543-3, pbk)

As *Homo sapiens*' closest living relative, chimpanzees can provide insight into how human behavioral diversity developed. This book raises awareness of the range of primate behaviour and that individual learning, genetics and environmental variables are inadequate to explain such diversity within species. The author argues that if we accept that culture explains this diversity then social sciences should allow primates into the "Culture Club" from which they have previously been excluded. In order to build his case, the author begins with constructing an operational definition of culture, outlines methodology (and biases) in various disciplines that study behaviour, provides evidence (or lack thereof) from several species and finally indicates what improvements are necessary in theory and data collection for the field of cultural primatology to advance as a discipline.

The introduction sets the stage for the reader to entertain the possibility that primates may have culture. It tackles the premise that, by virtue of the fact that humans have many unique behavioral and cognitive traits, we are the only species with culture. Since humans are the only species that uses language and verbal reports are often used to collect information on culture, this characteristic excludes other species. However, the issue of language appears to be a surmountable stumbling block, for although primates lack language they do behave and the

purpose of an action can be inferred from both language and action. In fact, observing behaviour may be more reliable than verbal reports when attempting to determine why humans do things in a certain way.

The next chapter attempts to define culture. Since there is no consensus among anthropologists as to what culture is, each researcher uses his/her own definition. This can be an impossible situation if researchers want to compare various populations of humans or primates. The author explores various ways to define culture and indicates that his own preference is to define culture as “the way we do things” (25). The key elements of this statement are reduced to four criteria: overt action, standardization, collectivity and social identity. However, when providing evidence for culture in other species, elements from two definitions are combined. The key elements used later in the text are that culture is learned socially, is collective and requires dissemination, standardization, tradition and diffusion. Many of the criteria stem from Kroeber’s (1928) requirements for culture. Although there is overlap between the definitions, mixing criteria causes some confusion. One of the main points is that an operational definition for culture is necessary and should be used consistently.

The third chapter outlines the main disciplines that study behaviour and discusses their various methodologies. The main question that each discipline studies with respect to human behaviour is categorized. This categorization is simplistic, as there is overlap within disciplines in terms of the types of questions asked. For example, psychology is characterized as only asking “how” questions, interested in mechanisms of behaviour. However, in the last twenty years, evolutionary psychology has asked questions about adaptation of behaviour, much like zoology. This minor issue aside, the need to consult the disciplines of archaeology, cultural anthropology, psychology and zoology and their methodologies is emphasized.

The next four chapters use the criteria outlined for culture to provide evidence of culture in various species. The text first examines evidence from fish, birds and non-primate mammals. Most social learning in other animals is limited, to the point where most are dismissed as “one trick ponies”. Birds for example, may show variation in song learning due to social learning, but this is the only area of diversity in their behavioral repertoire. The one exception noted is cetaceans, as killer whales show variations within a population in foraging and communication. There

is also a warranted reluctance not to equate culture with social learning, as culture involves more than mere social learning.

The data presented for material culture in chimpanzees is somewhat convincing. Evidence for the construction of shelters, use of tools to obtain and process food and for self-maintenance is the most extensive. Material culture varies between populations of chimpanzees and is accessible to researchers. Material culture is more accessible than behaviour as it leaves behind artifacts that can be studied when the subject is absent. This becomes important as several populations of chimpanzees are not habituated to human presence, so what they leave behind is the only record of primitive technology available.

There is some evidence that the structure of chimpanzee society meets the requirements for culture, although this is relatively new and less data is available. Collection of this type of data is difficult due to such constraints as limited access to study sites (and hence difficulty collecting data across sites and comparing data between sites), lack of habituation to the presence of humans, lack of sharing data among primatologists, and difficulty conducting both field and lab experiments for hypothesis testing due to practical and ethical concerns. The first half of the chapter on chimpanzee society presents data that suggests a culture based on social behaviour is plausible. However, the second half of the chapter is very speculative and resorts to re-labelling behaviour. For example, the author provides two explanations for infanticide by males, one that is relatively well accepted (evolutionary explanation) and one that is speculative and lacks evidence (a custom). This re-labelling of behaviour weakens the evidence provided.

The text concludes with the author's opinions on the growth of the field of cultural primatology. In my opinion the author accomplishes his main goal of championing the idea that animals, other than humans, have the capacity for culture. When species are admitted to the "Culture Club," it should be due to the behavioral data meeting the criteria delineated by an operational definition of culture. One should be wary of oversimplifying the concept of culture by equating it with social learning and thereby suggesting that several species have culture, when they are unlikely candidates. By the same token, social scientists should realize that chimpanzees are capable of complex behaviour known only to *Homo sapiens*. However, a more extensive database is required to

make a convincing argument that chimpanzees have the potential to meet the criteria that would admit them to the "Culture Club."

This book would be of interest to those in the social sciences. Whereas the data currently available falls short of indicating that nonhuman primates have culture, it raises several controversial points. By generating discussion and possibly cooperation amongst these disciplines, we might get closer to answering the issues raised.

Sandra Wright
Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
Corner Brook, Newfoundland

Reference

Kroeber, Alfred Louis. 1928. "Sub-human culture beginnings." *Quarterly Review of Biology* 3: 325-342.

Our Cannibals, Ourselves. By Priscilla Walton. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 172, Acknowledgments, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0-25202-925-9)

Our Cannibals, Ourselves is an interdisciplinary look at a clash in cultures. In this book, Walton attempts to show what happens when two conflicting cultures (in this case, European and non-European) meet and the stories that inevitably result. Walton considers the concept of an unknown and possibly dangerous "Other" and the impact when contact with that "Other" is brought home. She also explores "modern day" cannibal stories, which include germs and contamination, Cold War narratives and vampire tales, Mad Cow disease, eating disorders, serial killers, and the consumption of culture.

Although Walton's concepts are intriguing, they are not always well executed. In several places, Walton begins to clearly explain the linkage between cannibals and her more modern subject matter, only later to make leaps in logic which do not include her readers. Her concepts are extremely interesting and engaging; however, the reader may get the impression that they are never fully explained or linked in a manner which is evidentially conclusive. Entire concepts, such as transubstantiation (the changing of bread and wine to body and blood in the Catholic mass), are barely mentioned even though a concept