AN INVESTIGATION OF THE HERMENEUTIC PROPERTIES OF WRITING PRIMATOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: The works of Frans de Waal (Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes 1982) and Jane Goodall (In the Shadow of Man, 1971; The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior, 1986) are examined in a postmodern perspective. Ethnographers and primatologists traditionally leave the comfort of familiar surroundings to engage in a relatively long-term observational, interactive and interpretive experience with the members of another society or the members of another species. The writing strategies of these two "chimpographers", as well as the ways in which these strategies influence the presentation of the authors' interpretations of their fieldwork experiences are examined for their hermeneutic qualities. An investigation of the hermeneutic properties of interpretation allows one to critically read an ethnography (or primatological work) and remain sensitive to its possible underlying political, historical, economic, racial and gender related motivations or determinants (Clifford 1986:6; Haraway 1989:8).

Introduction

> The more [we] learn about these great apes, the deeper our identity crisis seems to become... If we look straight and deep into a chimpanzee's eyes, an intelligent, self-assured personality looks back at us. If they are animals, what must we be? (Franz de Waal 1982:18).

> It has come to me, quite recently, that it is only through a real understanding of the ways in which chimpanzees and man share similarities in behavior that we can reflect with meaning on the ways in which men and chimpanzees differ. And only then can we really begin to appreciate, in a biological and spiritual manner, the full extent of man's uniqueness (Jane Goodall 1971:251).

> I had gone into anthropology in search of Otherness. Meeting it on an experiential level was a shock which caused me to begin fundamental reconceptualization about social and cultural categories. Presumably this was the sort of thing I had gone to Morocco to find, yet every time these breaks occurred they were upsetting (Rabinow 1977:29).

The above quotes reflect a shared experience on the part of the authors, each of whom, through intensive immersion into the lives of an Other, has had his or her identity challenged. Ethnographers and primatologists traditionally leave the comfort of familiar surroundings to engage in a relatively long-term observational, interactive and interpretive experience with the members of another society or the members of another species. A principal goal of many such excursions (and probably an outcome of all) is to achieve an understanding of the minds of the individuals under study. In doing so, the author, whether primatologist or ethnographer, is likely to engage in a reevaluation of his or her own identity.

I selected the above quotes as introduction to an essay in which I will discuss the applicability of some of the recent concerns surrounding the doing and writing of ethnography to the study of primatology. I will begin with a brief discussion of hermeneutics, a branch of philosophy that considers the limitations of objectively achieving an absolute and reproducible knowledge of the inner life of an Other. I will then consider the writing strategies of two "chimpographers," Jane Goodall and Franz de Waal, and the ways in which these strategies influence the presentation of the author's interpretation of the fieldwork experience.

Hermeneutics and Its Relevance to Primatology

According to Dilthey, it is "only by comparing myself to others and becoming conscious of how I differ from them [that I can] experience my own individuality. We are mainly aware of the inner life of others... through the impact of their gestures, sounds and acts on our senses. [Furthermore,] we have to reconstruct the inner source of the signs that strike our senses... by transferring them from our own lives" (1976:247-248). Thus one is constantly modifying his or her identity in response to experiences with an Other. One's understanding of the other is, in turn, based largely on one's individual identity. Hence interpretation is a dynamic process which does not necessarily lead toward an absolute and timeless truth.

This is just one form (or portion) of the hermeneutic circle. Some theorists have "shifted focus from the hermeneutical situation of the interpreter... to the hermeneutical properties of the 'object' itself..." (Agar 1980:264). Thus Geertz, for example, stresses the fact "that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to..." (1973:9). Although of concern to an ethnographer, who studies "other historically situated persons" (Agar 1980:264), this aspect of the hermeneutic circle is of little, if any relevance to the majority of primatologists (with the exception, perhaps, of those who attempt to communicate with the great apes through sign language or other symbolic means). In general, primatologists, unlike ethnographers, do not engage in language mediated communication with their subjects. Furthermore, there are, as far as I know, no indications that non-human primates themselves engage in hermeneutic interpretation. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, I will only consider hermeneutics with reference to the observer engaged in a perpetual circle of interpretation and reinterpretation of self and other.

A consideration of hermeneutics allows one to "focus on the interpreter as participant in a tradition which guides and is changed by the process of understanding another. Rather than striving for 'objective knowledge,' one accepts the fact that knowledge is situated in a historic moment, some of whose presuppositions are difficult, if not impossible, to articulate" (Agar 1980:255). Such a consideration is of importance in attempting to critically read an ethnography or primatological monograph.

The act of objectifying one's personal fieldwork experience in the form of a written text requires an interruption in the hermeneutic circle. The written text may be viewed as a photograph in the sense that the writer's interpretive experience has been frozen in time (Crapanzano 1980:ix). Writing techniques influence the extent to which a written interpretation of the fieldwork experience is presented as conclusive or processual. An 'authoritative' voice is one which de-emphasizes the processual or hermeneutic aspect of inquiry. Interpretation is conveyed as repeatable, verifiable and absolute. A 'self-reflexive'

voice, or one which communicates self-doubt, stresses the processual or hermeneutic aspect of inquiry. Interpretation is represented as negotiable and changing.

I will now consider some of the specific writing techniques that serve to convey an authoritative or self-reflexive voice. A consideration of these techniques is central to the process of critically reading any text, including an ethnography or a primatological monograph. (Here I would like to note that whether a text is read as authoritative or self-reflexive may depend to a great extent on the personal perspective of the reader. I will discuss this aspect of textual analysis shortly.)

A frequently drawn but simplistic dichotomy exists between "scientific" (factual) and "literary" (fictitious) writing. Impersonality, quantification and objectivity are associated with scientific writing, while literary writing is described as "incurably figurative and polysemous" (Clifford 1986:5), anecdotal, impressionistic and subjective. Probably most, if not all, writers of ethnography and primatology employ techniques associated with both scientific and literary writing, although some texts may appear to be weighted more heavily toward one or the other. In terms of this discussion it is necessary to ask whether or not scientific or literary writing techniques are responsible for conveying a more or less authoritative or self-reflexive voice.

One might begin with the assumption that techniques associated with scientific writing are responsible for creating an authoritative voice. Statistical analyses, an explicitly stated quantitative and repeatable methodology and impersonality may, for some readers, add conviction or authority to any conclusions suggested by the author. Such techniques (even if their applications are not fully understood by the reader) may influence the reader's perception of the validity of a text. Similarly, a reader may assume that literary texts, particularly by authors who explicitly admit to interpretive or subjective analyses, are self reflexive and non-authoritative. Neither of these assumptions, however, will necessarily be shared by all readers. Nor will they necessarily reflect the intention of the writer.

To assume that scientific writing is authoritative and literary writing is self reflexive may lead a reader to focus only on the relatively superficial aspects of the organization and presentation of fieldwork experience ('data'). More importantly, in assessing whether or not an author communicates or neglects the hermeneutic aspect of inquiry, is the manner in which the author conveys his or her interpretation of the fieldwork experience. Are interpretations presented as final and absolute, or in progress and contestable? Scientific methods of data organization and presentation are authoritative only when they are used to support the repeatability and verifiability of interpretation. Literary methods of data organization and presentation are non-authoritative only when they are used to stress the subjectivity and negotiability of interpretation.

I will now discuss the ways in which the writings of Jane Goodall and those of Franz de Waal convey, or neglect to convey, a hermeneutic quality of interpretation. I am mainly concerned with how each writer presents his or her interpretations of the psychological or mental processes of chimpanzees. Of course the chimpanzee mind is not the only, or even necessarily the main, focus of primatological inquiry, but interpreting chimpanzee mental processes is likely to be subject to self reflection and self doubt to a greater extent than investigating relatively easily observable phenomena such as demography or feeding ecology.

I am not suggesting that studies of demography and feeding ecology, especially if they are used to explain similar phenomena among humans, are not influenced by the personal and historical context of the interpreter. But I do believe that to "reconstruct the inner source of the signs that strike our senses" requires a troubling leap of faith that is particularly difficult to ignore and thus is likely to be evident in primatological (and ethnographic) texts. An analysis of the ways in which a primatologist presents his or her interpretation of the chimpanzee mind seems, therefore, especially appropriate to a discussion of self-reflexive (hermeneutic) versus authoritative (conclusive) writing.

"Chimpography": Primatology as Ethnography

Jane Goodall's The Chimpanzees of Gombe / Patterns of Behavior is a 673 paged volume published in 1986. It is "in essence a description of one community of chimpanzees [supplemented] whenever possible... with behavior reported from other sites" and experimental data from studies of captive chimpanzees (Goodall 1986:59).

Unlike her earlier book, In the Shadow of Man (1971), The Chimpanzees of Gombe contains detailed quantitative descriptions, tables and graphs of such behaviors as grooming, sexuality, ranging, aggression and feeding. The detail and scope of this volume, as well as the predominantly impersonal style of description, suggest that it is not intended for a general readership.

Frans de Waal's Chimpanzee Politics, published in 1982, is based upon observations of a captive group of Chimpanzees in the open air enclosure at the Burger's Zoo in Arnhem, Holland. With its narrative style, evocative language and almost complete absence of quantitative data, Chimpanzee Politics is clearly geared toward a general audience. (Although I have yet to meet a primatologist or student of primatology who has not read Chimpanzee Politics).

Although the two books differ somewhat in their purpose and in their intended readership, I feel that both reflect the attitudes of their authors toward the interpretation of chimpanzee behavior. Furthermore, in considering the ways in which writing styles influence the extent to which interpretations are conveyed as conclusive or negotiable, I do not feel that it is necessary to confine oneself to only "popular" or only "academic" literature. In comparing the two books I will nevertheless try to avoid concentrating on the superficial differences (for example, the presence or absence of tables and graphs) arising from the fact that one book is geared toward a more academic audience and the other toward a more general audience. Thus I will attempt to focus on relatively equivalent phenomena, such as the explicitly stated methodologies and the writing techniques used by both authors in their anecdotal descriptions and in their characterizations of individual chimpanzee "personalities."

Methodology and Presentation

> Since Malinowski's time, the 'method' of participant-observation has enacted a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity. The ethnographer's personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as

> central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective' distance. (Clifford 13:1986).

Scientific writing "brings charges of insensitivity, of treating people as objects, of hearing the words but not the music, and of course, of ethnocentrism. [Literary writing] brings charges of impressionism, of treating people as puppets, of hearing music that doesn't exist, and, of course, of ethnocentrism" (Geertz 1988:10).

If, in the words of Dilthey, "we have to reconstruct the inner source of the signs that strike our senses... by transferring them from our own lives," a certain amount of empathy or intuition is inevitable in attempting to understand an unfamiliar Other. But both ethnography and primatology have been (and continue to be) subject to scientific scrutiny. The observer/interpreter is expected to be sufficiently detached from the observed, thereby engaging in objective and repeatable interpretation. Thus, there exists a contradiction "between personal [subjective] and scientific [objective] authority... Fieldwork produces a kind of authority that is anchored to large extent in subjective, sensuous experience... but the professional text to result from such an encounter is supposed to conform to the norms of a scientific discourse whose authority resides in an absolute effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject" (Pratt 1986:32).

In objectifying one's fieldwork experience in the form of a written text, the inherent conflict between subjectivity and objectivity must be grappled with. In the words of Geertz, "finding somewhere to stand in a text that is supposed to be at one and the same time an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place" (1988:10).

The conflict between objectivity and subjectivity is clearly apparent in the writings of de Waal and Goodall. Early in his book, under the heading "Ethology," de Waal relates an incident in which a schoolteacher attempts to interpret a male charging display for a group of schoolchildren. The schoolteacher's interpretation, according to de Waal, is "ridiculous." But he then asks:

> ...who can guarantee that the many interpretations in this book are in fact the truth? Although I feel that after all these years I know the group intimately and am seldom wrong about the events that take place in it, I can never be absolutely sure. To study animal behavior is to interpret, but with a constant gnawing feeling that the interpretation may not be the right one... Both [overly cautious and overly impressionistic] attitudes lead nowhere, but I will unfortunately not be able to avoid them completely. At some points I may seem exaggeratedly hesitant and at others I may appear to go too far in my interpretation. There is no other way. Behavioral study is conducted on a see-saw between these two extremes (1982:30).

According to Geertz, "...most ethnographers tend to oscillate uncertainly between [scientific (objective) and impressionistic (subjective) interpretation], sometimes in different books, more often in the same one" (1988:10). Whether de Waal oscillates uncertainly, he oscillates explicitly and without apology. Goodall, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the

importance of avoiding impressionism and subjectivity:

> A good observer "must be aware of the need for scrupulous integrity and record only the facts of which he is certain. He must (insofar as possible) be objective and not allow personal bias to distort the data. Intuitive interpretations, while they may be of crucial importance to the understanding of a given sequence of events, must not be confused with the facts" (1986:603).

In general, Goodall's writing reflects this highly cautious approach toward the interpretation of chimpanzee behavior. The writing of de Waal, on the other hand, reflects a more daring approach. One finds, however, clear indications that neither author has completely resolved the conflict between objective and subjective interpretation. According to Goodall:

> Objectivity in recording is the goal of all behavioral scientists. This is not to say that a certain amount of empathy with one's subjects is not admissible - indeed, I personally believe it to be desirable - but the report itself must separate objective fact from subjective interpretation. The Tanzanian field staff have been taught to write down what they actually see, then, in parentheses, their interpretation of unusual or interesting happenings. Often these interpretations, based on intuitive understanding when in the presence of the animals themselves, provide me with valuable insights that otherwise would be lost (1986:606).

Similarly, despite de Waal's explicit reliance on "daring interpretations," he states that:

> Intuition is valuable, but scientists are only fully satisfied when they know what lies behind it. It is not necessary to depend on [intuition] all the time. The unconscious method we have learnt to use to interpret and understand the signals of [for example] a dog can be translated into an effective, scientific tool if it is applied consciously and systematically (1982:46).

Both authors appear to view "intuition" as a legitimate method of interpretation. But both authors also maintain that there exists another kind of interpretation that is objective, verifiable and absolute. From the quotes above it appears that neither author has succeeded in integrating, or resolving the conflict between, these two methods of interpretation.

Clearly, neither de Waal nor Goodall employ an explicitly hermeneutic methodology. Chimpanzee Politics and The Chimpanzees of Gombe do not contain narratives of an evolving (or revolving) understanding on the part of the authors of their personal identities and the identities of their subjects. It is likely, however, that the authors have an understanding of the inherent difficulty of objectively achieving an absolute and reproducible knowledge of the chimpanzee mind. This understanding should be reflected by a nonauthoritative, self-reflexive writing style. It is thus relevant to ask to what extent, in their investigations into the chimpanzee mind, do the authors convey authority or self-doubt through their applications of scientific or impressionistic methods of interpretation?

Anecdotal accounts provide a good basis for comparing the writing and interpretive styles of de Waal and Goodall. The following is an excerpt from one of the many "word pictures" (anecdotal asides) found in The Chimpanzees of Gombe:

> One of the things that was so striking... was the sheer exuberance of the chimpanzees. If they had been humans, we would not hesitate to say that they were having tremendous fun. There was a good deal of noise and much play, mating and grooming. There were wild displays with a lot of screaming but no serious fighting (1986:151).

The above quote is consistent with Goodall's extreme avoidance of anthropomorphism. Despite the fact that the chimpanzees exhibited all the external signs of "having fun," Goodall was careful to include the phrase "if they had been humans" in her interpretation. Goodall's cautious anecdotal style contrasts sharply with that of de Waal. The following is an excerpt from one of de Waal's self-proclaimed "daring interpretations":

> Yereon hurts his hand during a fight with Nikkie... [Subsequently,] Yereon limps only when Nikkie is in the vicinity...
> Interpretation: Yereon was playacting. He wanted to make Nikkie believe that he had been badly hurt in their fight... He may have learned from incidents in the past that his rival was less hard on him during periods when he was (of necessity) limping (1982: 47-48).

This interpretation is consistent with the emphasis placed by de Waal on intuition. Whereas Goodall was reluctant to attribute to a chimpanzee the ability to "have fun", de Waal credits chimpanzees with the ability to engage in "conscious, premeditated [and deceptive] action" (1982:46).

Descriptions of individual chimpanzee personalities provide another good basis for comparing the writing and interpretive styles of the two authors. In Goodall's chapter entitled "Who's Who," she "summarizes the life histories and personalities of [a few of those individuals at Gombe] who have contributed to our understanding of chimpanzee behavior" (1986:60). Similarly, in de Waal's chapter entitled "The Chimpanzee Personalities," he discusses individual differences which, in his words;

> can only be portrayed accurately by using the same adjectives as we use to characterize our fellow human beings. Therefore terms such as 'self-assured', 'happy', 'proud', and 'calculating' will be used... These terms reflect my subjective impression of the apes. It is anthropomorphism in its purest form (1982:54).

The following two quotes are similar in many respects. Both are brief excerpts from descriptions of the personalities of dominant females; Flo at Gombe and Mama at the Burger's Zoo. And both discuss the mechanism by which a mother's rank is transmitted to her offspring:

> Flo was a high-ranking, aggressive female in the early '60s, and there can be no doubt that her status and personality were strong factors in the rise to power of her son Figin, and in Fifi's present high rank (Goodall 1986:66).

> Mama's "daughter, Moniek, now lives like a princess. Mama is very tender and protective. Every member of the group realizes that the old female's anger will

> flare up to its former hurricane force if but a hair on her daughter's body is harmed. In this way Moniek inherits some of the enormous respect which her mother enjoys in the colony" (de Waal 1982:61).

Goodall, in contrast to de Waal, again exhibits a strikingly non-interpretive and non-literary writing style. De Waal, on the other hand, employs impressionism and anthropomorphism, and does so with pride.

How do these two general writing styles convey authority or self-doubt? Initially, I suggested that many of the techniques associated with scientific writing, such as impersonality and objectivity, may serve to convey an authoritative voice. De Waal's writing style, although literary, is in some respects highly authoritative. Although he explicitly admits to impressionistic interpretations, subject to his own personal biases, de Waal never elaborates on what the precise nature of these personal biases may be. He never posits alternative interpretations and he relegates his self-doubt to a few pages in the introductory chapter. In her recent book, Primate Visions: Gender Race and Nature in the World of Natural Science, Donna Haraway suggests that de Waal's explicitly impressionistic style may in itself create a kind of authority:

> In Chimpanzee Politics 'the male is [described as] rational and status oriented; the female [as] protective and personally oriented' (de Waal 1982:197). De Waal asks disingenuously if that conclusion is only another example of his prejudices. Through De Waal's disarming insistence on the inescapability of interpretation in ethology and his disavowal of positivism, the reader is constantly reminded by the author of the interpretive frame, and thereby caught all the tighter in the web (Haraway 1989:147-148).

Conversely, Goodall, with her relatively objective and non-anthropomorphic writing, generally avoids characterizing the chimpanzee mind. The reader (or at least this reader) does not feel, having read The Chimpanzees of Gombe, that he or she "knows" the individual chimpanzees in terms of their mental or psychological qualities.

De Waal, on the other hand, with his authoritative and highly evocative use of impressionism and anthropomorphism, leaves the reader feeling satisfied that he or she has achieved an understanding of the chimpanzee mind. In the words of Dilthey, "...a great deal of human happiness springs from empathy with the mental life of others" (1976:247). An ethnographic or primatological text that elicits such empathy may serve a "therapeutic" function (Tyler 1986:128). Yet the writing strategies responsible for the elicitation of empathy may, as in the case of Chimpanzee Politics, serve to de-emphasize the hermeneutic aspect of inquiry, thus persuading the reader to accept the absolute and uncontestable nature of the author's conclusions.

Conclusions

The doing and writing of primatology, like the doing and writing of ethnography, involves numerous ethical considerations. An investigation of the hermeneutic properties of interpretation allows one to critically read an ethnography, remaining sensitive to its possible underlying political, historical, economic, racial and gender related motivations or deter-

minants (Clifford 1986:6, Haraway 1989:8).

To suggest that a given author employs a writing style that de-emphasizes the hermeneutic quality of interpretation is not in itself a criticism of that author. Depending on the ethical concerns of the author, he or she may consciously (or selectively) avoid an approach that may undermine his or her authority. Similarly, depending on the ethical considerations of the reader, he or she may consciously (or selectively) avoid acknowledging the personal motivations of the author, instead choosing to accept the absolute and uncontestable nature of his or her interpretation.

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