Anthropology Lab Two:

Non-human Primate Culture and Learned Traditions

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**Section One:**

The definition of culture is a complicated concept to encapsulate. Popular beliefs of what culture represents are the creations of a the human race and it’s many achievements. As anthropology has developed, however, scientists are proposing a new idea of what really defines culture. There are several different primate groups that do show signs of a concept culture, which is seen as learned traditions that are passed down from generation to generation. To be more specific, traditions are habits that an animal participates in on structured basis such as daily, monthly, etcetera. Habits accumulated by a species is generally learned by observing other members in the group and attempting to copy these mannerisms. Observations made by researchers include capuchin monkeys banding together to hunt mammals. Fieldwork “...data come from Santa Rosa (Rose 1997), where C. capucinus preys regularly on squirrels.” (McGrew, 1989). The animal is then dismembered and distributed amongst the participants. This divide and conquer methodology shows clear evidence that primates possess the ability to work as a unit; a staple in human culture. Japanese macaques have a sense of cleanliness and eating standards by them not immediately eating their food after obtaining it. This behavior was observed in Japan in 1954 and “over the following years, the behavior gradually spread to other members of the group, at first from the inventor to its close kin...”(Allritz, 2013). Passing down helpful information in this manner is similar to how humans will do anything they can to help their family thrive. One research paper outlines a concept called the ratchet effect which is “...cumulative modifications and incremental improvements thus resulting in increasingly elaborate technologies”(Humle, 2013). This effect explains why Japanese macaques wash their food before eating and how primate society is furthered. Humans are most notable for this in regards to education and technological innovations. Another example of primate culture is when non blood relative chimpanzees gather in single file lines and patrol their home range borders. This behavior seems eerily similar to human tendencies to take territory claims seriously, to the point of murder if agreements are violated. This seems to be a socially constructed habit, as they do it at specified times of the day.

**Section Two:**

I am convinced that there is culture and learned traditions in nonhuman primates to a degree. Culture to me is still a human phenomenon and has not yet been achieved in other nonhuman primates. Written language, basic mathematics and other technological advancements lack which to me are something of great importance in labeling culture. It brings into question that are these primates capable of abstraction and other higher order thinking and are they mentally capable to handle it? This knowledge helps build culture and sense of civility to a group of individuals. With that being said though, primates do exhibit atypical behavior compared to other species around them, most notably eating habits and patrolling. These are more or less traditions, or repetitive behaviors that are learned and passed throughout a group. The ratchet effect is at play, aiding to the development nonhuman primate culture however this is a slow process. It is interesting that the ratchet effect is not as prevalent in primates but humans have seemingly mastered it. Since we have evolved from a primate ancestor, how is it that we have excelled and other species have not? As much as this sections sounds like rhetoric against culture in primates, I cannot refute the amount of evidence and detail collected by anthropologists. The validity of this data is without a doubt consistent and is factual. My opinion stands that I do not feel beyond a reasonable doubt that we can label nonhuman primate traditions and customs as culture.

References

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