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Humanics Ergonomics

"The Chair" by Galen Cranz

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Based on the April '99 review in [Ergonomics in Design](#), of the [Human Factors & Ergonomics Society](#).

"The Chair", by Galen Cranz

Reviewed by Rani Lueder, CPE

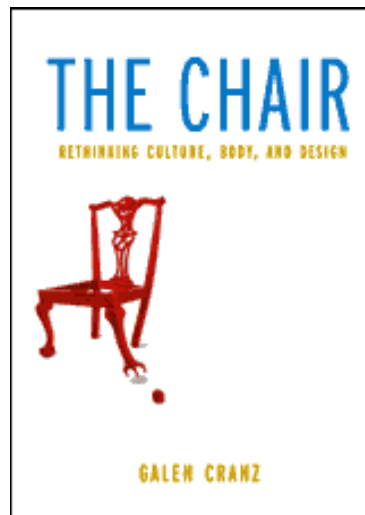
The Chair, by Galen Cranz
Rethinking culture, body & design
1998, 253 pp. WW Norton & Company
ISBN 0-393-04655-9

This book is about seating and sitting. Having once spent my vacation scouring Europe's museums for the earliest representation of a chair (earliest I could find was 1570), I looked forward to opening its covers.

Dr. Cranz teaches Environmental Design at the UC Berkeley Architecture Dept. Not surprisingly, she cuts a wide swath on seating, spanning history, sociology, industrial design, architecture, ergonomics, and holistic body/mind approaches – particularly the Alexander technique.

Parts of her book are engrossing. In particular, her historical perspective of how chair design has evolved historically may be unmatched. Her discussion of the holistic aspects of posture is also interesting.

That said, this book is not noteworthy for the caliber of its review of the ergonomics research on sitting postures and seating. Much of it is plain hogwash.



Throughout the book she refers to us as "er-gon-om-ic-ists" [should be "er-gon-om-ists"] and claims the discipline is derived from the Greek "ergon" and "omics" [should be "nomos" (laws)].

It is sometimes painful to read her sweeping generalizations. Dr. Cranz writes that ergonomic researchers "have concluded that the workstation should be an indication of the worker's status" (p. 55)... and "status differences have to be maintained, ergonomicists say" (p. 56), citing as evidence two office planning guides written by and for architects that fail to mention ergonomics or ergonomists anywhere in the books.

She misrepresents research, as when she castigates Dr. Etienne Grandjean's "poor reasoning" in *Fitting the Task to the Man*, writing "Amazingly, Grandjean starts with the slump as a goal" (p. 108). Drs. Grandjean et al's research had actually documented computer users' self-selected postures. These researchers reported that rather than sitting upright, the computer users they observed tended to recline somewhat.

She cites findings from a small laboratory study by Drs. Bendix et al. (12 subjects for 2 hours in 3 back support conditions) as proof that lumbar supports on chair backrests are unequivocally unnecessary (p. 109) – but not the many studies that contradict. Minor assertions are meticulously cited, but questionable conclusions often are not sourced.

If you are looking for a thorough analysis of seated posture, this is not the book for you. It provides a unique

and multidisciplinary perspective on the context of seating, but – *please* – take her review of the ergonomics research on sitting postures and seating design with a heavy dose of salt. Or skip it entirely.

Rani Lueder has consulted in occupational ergonomics and product design research since 1982. Her activities in sitting and seating include co-organizing the Second International Symposium on Seating, held in Tokyo. Her second edited book, on [sitting postures](#) (Taylor & Francis), is sold worldwide. Since 1988, she continues to consult on sitting posture on extended retainer for a range of organizations in Japan. She served on the seating subcommittee for the American National Standard Institute guideline ANSI HFES 100-2007. She has consulted in the design of more than 250 lines of seat design and other products that support posture. She edited the book [Ergonomics for Children: Designing products & places for toddlers to teens](#) (2008, Taylor & Francis)

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