

I am used to being attacked by fellow anthropologists for having a naturalistic approach and for arguing that cognitive science, experimental methods, and evolutionary theorizing are highly relevant to anthropology's pursuit. Some of these attacks have been quite violent (one, [in l'Homme 1982](#) concluded with the suggestion that, in order to show me the irrelevance of what is in the skull, I should be given a blow on the head); few if any have paid much attention to my precise claims, but at least they were quite right in targeting me as a naturalist. I am also used to having to work harder in order to get evolutionary biologists and comparative psychologists to pay attention to what I have to say than I would have to if I were one of them. That is understandable.

However, what happened in the past few days was a novel experience.

I posted on [PLoS ONE](#) a [comment](#) expressing mild reservations on an interesting article by Darby Proctor, Kristin E. Bonnie, Andrew Whiten, and Frans de Waal, "[Prestige Affects Cultural Learning in Chimpanzees](#)" (PLoS ONE 5(5): e10625) (to which I had drawn attention [here](#) at ICCI). The authors [replied](#) and I have now posted a [rejoinder](#) to their reply. So far, business as usual. Then [Eric Johnson](#), who runs the excellent blog [Primate Diaries](#), joined in with a [comment](#) attributing to me weird views that I do not hold, and I have now [replied](#) to his comment. Johnson put an expanded version of his comments on his blog under the title "[Anthropology, Primatology, and the Definition of Culture: Reply to Sperber](#)." It would have been nice to have my work really discussed at Primate Diaries. Johnson might have for instance discussed, or at least reported our paper: Nicolas Claidière and Dan Sperber (2010) "[Imitation explains the propagation, not the stability of animal culture](#)." *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 277(1681): 651-659. He might, in any case, have looked at the title of that paper and its mention of animal culture and spared himself the embarrassment of attributing to me the view that "humans alone are capable of culture." His post is aimed at correcting me of that misconception and of other views that I do not hold! I assume that Johnson assumes that I hold such views because they are typical of mainstream anthropologists: I am guilty by association. Anyhow, Olivier Morin posted a [comment](#) to correct these misattributions, and I have now replied to Johnson's post in the form of a [comment](#) on his blog (which is not yet online as of this posting).

Things become, I believe, of at least anecdotal relevance to our cognition and culture blog with Frans de Waal joining in the discussion [here](#). He first objects to Olivier's point that while "most animals are able to survive without receiving information from their conspecifics, we can't ..." writing: "This is in fact not true. ... I'd say most smart social animals are as culture-dependent as us humans." As Olivier points out in his rejoinder, most animals are not smart social animals. After all, let me add, 'animals' includes for instance a vast number of species of insects. Among insects, social learning "is currently known only from a few well-studied examples in social Hymenoptera" (Reuven Dukas (2008) [Evolutionary Biology of Insect Learning](#), *Annual Review of Entomology* Vol. 53: 145-160).

Then de Waal turns to my case:

"Sperber believes our evidence is weak, whereas in fact we feel it is the other way around. We have no idea what kind of evidence cultural anthropologists bring to the table. This field seems to get by without any empirical evidence, let alone controlled experimentation.

Once anthropologists start collecting the sort of data we collect on primates, we can compare notes and see if there are substantial differences. But until then anthropologists should think twice before asking others for evidence they themselves never produce."

Reading this brought to mind Roman's Polanski's film, [The Fearless Vampire Killers](#): The Jewish inn-keeper who has recently turned into an undead enters his Christian servant's room by the window.

When she tries to fend him off with a cross, he laughs: “ Oy vey, have you got the wrong vampire!”

Oy vey, Frans de Waal, have you got the wrong anthropologist!

I happen to be also an experimental psychologist. As such, I have worked and published on a variety of topics, some of which - theory of mind or epistemic vigilance - are of clear comparative psychology and evolution-of-culture relevance. I also have - for those who care - all the conventional credentials, publications, academy memberships, and so on, not to be told that I should “think twice before asking others for evidence.” I myself think the only credential you should need is a reasonable argument.

Now, having vented, let me point the more general relevance of the anecdote. Much of Frans de Waal’s work is of clear anthropological importance. Whether they are convinced by his specific claims or not (sometime I am, sometimes I am not), anthropologists and other social scientists should definitely pay attention to his work. I for a long time, and we now at the Cognition and Culture Institute have been trying to help bridge the gap between anthropology and the natural sciences. The greatest obstacles have come from anthropologists most of whom are opposed to naturalistic approaches. But telling anthropologists, as does de Waal, that they should shut up, that they have everything to learn from natural scientists but nothing to contribute, that they “seem to get by without any empirical evidence” (our years of fieldwork must be some kind of paid vacation) is, to put it mildly, neither fair nor smart. De Waal’s reaction illustrates the fact that a serious obstacle to an integrated approach to cognition and culture is to be found also on the side of at least some natural scientists who are blind to anything other than their own contribution.

Since this is a story of wild misinterpretations, let us indulge. Let’s pretend that, when de Waal writes, “We have no idea what kind of evidence cultural anthropologists bring to the table,” this is not the contemptuous remark it sounds like but a commendable admission of ignorance.