

Clever Hans and Smart Simians

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Kindred Methodological Pitfalls

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Abstract. — *This paper raises the question of what type of interspecific codeswitching occurs between man and animal in experiments designed to teach language-like communication systems to apes. While reports underplay the possible effects of social contamination and other experimenter-induced errors, close analysis of the verbal descriptions of training and testing conditions, observational techniques, relevant photographs, drawings, and films, reveals that a host of methodological pitfalls — from errors in observation, recording and sampling to overinterpretations and fudging of data — beset all phases of ape "language" research. In particular, apes in these experiments, even in double-blind or paper-pencil tests, may be subject to a number of unwitting cues emitted by humans who are prone to underestimate both the semiotic acuity of their captive dependents and their own ability to give off and respond to subliminal signs. This critical investigation, seen against a background of studies of human and nonhuman nonverbal communication, sources of deception in behavioral research in general, and information about deceptive communication by animal trainers, stage magicians, and other performers, casts doubt upon the reliability of claims that apes can learn to use a human language.*

"The peculiarity of the case is just that there are so many sources of possible deception in most of the observations that the whole lot of them *may* be worthless ... I am also constantly baffled as to what to think of this or that particular story, for the sources of error in any one observation are seldom fully knowable" (William James in Murphy and Ballou 1960: 310, 320).

1. Introduction: Morality Play or Comedy of Manners?

It has been justly observed, most recently by the prominent historian Lynn White, Jr. (1979: 74), that "Scientists focus so sharply on objects that they forget to think critically about subjects, that is, themselves." When scien-

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