AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE
150 YEARS • 1848-1998

LEARNING FROM THE CHIMPANZEES: A MESSAGE HUMANS CAN UNDERSTAND

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When I began my study of wild chimpanzees in 1960 at Gombe Stream Research Center it was not permissible, at least not in ethological circles, to talk about an animal's mind. Only humans had minds. Nor was it quite proper to talk about animal personality. Of course everyone knew that they did have their own unique characters—everyone who had ever owned a dog or other pet was aware of that. But ethologists, striving to make theirs a "hard" science, shied away from the task of trying to explain such things objectively. One respected ethologist, while acknowledging that there was "variability between individual animals," wrote that it was best that this fact be "swept under the carpet."

How naïve I was. As I had not had an undergraduate science education, I did not realize that animals were not supposed to have personalities, or to think, or to feel emotions or pain. I had no idea that it would have been more appropriate—once I got to know him or her—to assign each of the chimpanzees a number rather than a name. I did not realize that it was unscientific to discuss behavior in terms of motivation or purpose. It was not respectable, in scientific circles, to talk about animal personality. That was something reserved for humans. Nor did animals have minds, so they were not capable of rational thought. And to talk about their emotions was to be guilty of the worst kind of anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to animals).

The editorial comments on the first paper that I wrote for publication demanded that every "he" or "she" be replaced with "it," and every "who" be replaced with "which." Incensed, I, in turn, crossed out the "it's" and "which's" and scrawled back the original pronouns. As I had no desire to carve out a niche for myself in the world of science but simply wanted to go on living among and learning about chimpanzees, the possible reaction of the editor of the learned journal did not trouble me. The paper, when finally published, did confer upon the chimpanzees the dignity of their appropriate genders and properly upgraded them from the status of mere "things" to essential beingness.

When I first began to read about human evolution I learned that one of the hallmarks of our own species was that we, and only we, are capable of making tools. I well remember writing to Louis Leakey about my first observations of the chimpanzees of Gombe, describing how David Greybeard not only used bits of straw to fish for termites but how he actually stripped leaves from a stem, and thus made a tool. And I remember, too, receiving the now oft-quoted telegram that Leakey sent in response to my letter: "Now we must redefine tool, redefine Man, or accept chimpanzees as humans." By and large, people were fascinated by this information and by the subsequent observations of other contexts in which the Gombe chimpanzees used objects as tools.

The mid-1960s saw the start of a project that, along with other similar research, was to teach us a great deal about the chimpanzee mind. This was Project Washoe, conceived by Trixie and Allen Gardner who purchased an infant chimpanzee and began to teach her the signs of ASL, the American Sign Language used by the deaf. When news of Washoe's accomplishments first hit the scientific community it immediately provoked a storm of bitter protest. It implied that chimpanzees were capable of mastering a human language, and this, in turn, indicated mental powers of generalization, abstraction, concept formation, and an ability to understand and use abstract symbols. And so, with new incentive, psychologists began to test the mental abilities of chimpanzees in a variety of ways. Again and again the results confirmed that their minds are uncannily like our own.

As in Darwin's time, it is again fashionable to speak of and study the animal mind. This change came about gradually, and was, at least in part, due to the information collected during careful studies of animal societies in the field. As these observations became widely known, it was impossible to brush aside the complexities of social behavior that were revealed in species after species. A succession of experiments clearly proved that many intellectual abilities that had been thought unique to humans were actually present in nonhumans—particularly in the nonhuman primates and especially in chimpanzees—although in a less highly developed form.

Today, ethological thinking and methodology has softened, and it is generally recognized that the old, parsimonious explanations of complex behavior were inappropriate. The study of animal mentation is fashionable, and the examination of animal emotions is commonplace. This is without doubt due, in large part, to the information that came in from long-term field studies conducted during the 1960s. All of these careful observations, made in the natural habitat, helped to show that the societies and behavior of animals are far more complex than previously supposed by scientists. In light of the new information, overly simplistic explanations were generally abandoned, leading to a changed and expanded understanding of our fellow animals on Earth.

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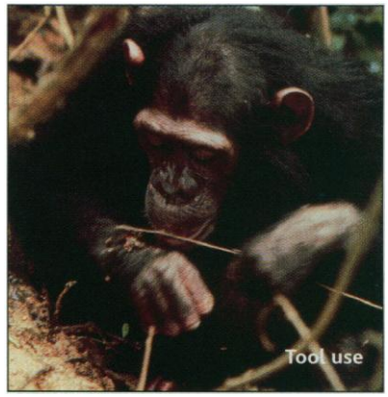
Of all the facts to emerge from my years of research on the chimpanzees at Gombe, it is their humanlike behaviors that most fascinate people: their tool-using and tool-making abilities; the close supportive bonds among family members, which can persist throughout a lifetime of 50 or more years; and their complex social interactions—the cooperation, the altruism, and the expression of emotions like joy and sadness. It is our recognition of these intellectual and emotional similarities between chimpanzees and ourselves that has, more than anything else, blurred the line, once thought so sharp, between human beings and other animals. Through observations of chimpanzees, people's attitudes toward nonhuman animals has definitely begun to change. In fact, the winds of change are blowing. There is finally, in our society, a growing concern for the plight of nonhuman animals. This changed attitude, among scientists and nonscientists alike, has unquestionably come about because chimps are so like us.


Flo and family

One of the unexpected rewards that I have found as I become increasingly involved in conservation and animal welfare issues, has been meeting so many dedicated, caring, and understanding people. I cannot close this without sharing a story that, for me, has a truly symbolic meaning. The hero in this story is a human being named Rick Swope who visits the Detroit zoo once a year with his family. One day, as he watched the chimpanzees in their big new enclosure, a fight broke out between two adult males. Jojo, who had been at the zoo for years, was challenged by a younger and stronger newcomer, and Jojo lost. In his fear he fled into the moat which was brand new, and Jojo did not understand water. He had gotten over the barrier erected to prevent the chimpanzees from falling in—for they cannot swim—and the group of visitors and staff that happened to be there watched in horror as Jojo began to drown. He went under once, twice, three times. Rick Swope could bear it no longer. He jumped in to try to save the chimp, despite onlookers yelling at him about the danger. He managed to get Jojo's dead weight over his shoulder, and then crossed the barrier and pushed Jojo onto the bank of the island. Rick held him there—the bank was very steep and if he were to let go Jojo would slide back into the water—even when the other chimps charged toward him, screaming in excitement. Rick held Jojo until he raised his head, took a few staggering steps, and collapsed on more level ground.

"ALL OF THESE CAREFUL OBSERVATIONS, MADE IN THE NATURAL HABITAT, HELPED TO SHOW THAT THE SOCIETIES AND BEHAVIOR OF ANIMALS ARE FAR MORE COMPLEX THAN PREVIOUSLY SUPPOSED BY SCIENTISTS."


Tool use


Flossie


Tool use

The director of the institute called Rick. "That was a brave thing you did. You must have known how dangerous it was. What made you do it?"

"Well, I looked into his eyes. And it was like looking into the eyes of a man. And the message was, 'Won't anybody help me?'"

Rick Swope risked his life to save a chimpanzee, a nonhuman being who sent a message that a human could understand. Now it is up to the rest of us to join in too.