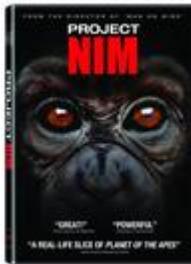


Psychology: Losing Its Way and Learning From It

A review of the film



Project Nim

(2011)

James Marsh (Director)



Reviewed by
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Sometimes in its desire to uncover new knowledge, psychology loses its way. Generally it happens when thirst for knowledge outstrips moral or ethical sensibilities. A classic example of such a departure is Stanley Milgram's (1973, 1974) early experiments in which 37 of 40 subjects delivered the highest level "shocks" to subjects, even after the subjects begged them to stop. That the subjects were not really being shocked could in no way justify the experiment. What of those students who obediently followed directions and thought that they had hurt their fellow students? How did they view themselves after the fact?

Another example is that of Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, in which 12 people were randomly assigned to play the role of prisoners and 12 others were assigned to play the role of guards. The guards' authoritarian attitudes led to abuse: Five of the prisoners quit the experiment; others became passive, depressed, and hopeless. The

experiment, scheduled to go on for two weeks, was discontinued after six days when Zimbardo realized that, in his assumed role as prison superintendent, he had permitted abuses to continue as though the experiment were a real prison (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Zimbardo, 1999). Both of these studies could not be performed today. Both are classics taught in introductory psychology classes because we learned many lessons from them.

Learning From Project Nim

The documentary film *Project Nim* portrays an example of psychology losing its way and learning from it. It did not seem that the way had been lost in the beginning. Indeed, the film shows that the research began in an idealistic climate as an exciting attempt to examine language acquisition and its roots in primates as well as to add information concerning the nature–nurture debate. It is telling that it began in 1973, a time in which all the old shibboleths were being reexamined and nothing was considered outside the pale of quality research. It was a time of excess, and the film is true to the zeitgeist of the times. The director, Oscar-winner James Marsh, adroitly mixes archival footage with reenactments. The result is such that the viewer has no doubt that what he or she is seeing is as close as one can get to living in the past.

The film profits from home movies made by Nim's first surrogate mother, Stephanie LaFarge. She believed her mission was to raise Nim just as she was doing with her seven children and see if he acquired language as did her human children. The language to be learned, given the different vocal anatomy of chimpanzees, was American Sign Language. The film shows Nim dressing, brushing his teeth, and interacting with the LaFarge children as an active, perhaps overactive, member of the family. The quality of the film is a bit grainy, but that only adds to the realism of the subject matter.

Although Nim is shown picking up a few signs for words, the laissez-faire ambiance of the family was soon questioned from the point of view of controlled research. Laura Petitto, the researcher then supervising the project, wanted to impose order, with schedules, notes, and a record of the words that Nim was learning. To this end, the film shows Herbert Terrace, the Columbia University professor who designed the experiment, abruptly taking Nim away from the LaFarges' New York apartment and settling him in an estate owned by Columbia with live-in graduate students under Petitto's direction. This marked the second break for the now-communicative chimp.

Nim flourished in his new surroundings, learning hundreds of words and even using them in unique combinations. He became a cultural phenomenon, catching the imagination of the public. The film highlights news stories and television interviews that focused on interspecies communication. However, the film also shows Nim growing to be a large

chimpanzee and becoming more threatening to his caretakers. In one of the film's interviews, one caretaker, an expert in sign language, tells of being violently attacked and bitten in the face by Nim. Following this attack and worried about legal action, Terrace abruptly ended the project, reasoning that nobody keeps a chimp more than five years because chimps get too strong (Hess, 2008). Viewers cannot help wondering why this outcome was not expected and planned for in the original research proposal.

The film depicts Nim being anesthetized and flown back to the compound in Oklahoma where he had been born. This fourth home, a cage in a compound with other primates, is shown as a more primitive habitat than the young primate had ever experienced.

About a year later, the Oklahoma compound experienced financial problems, and the director offered the majority of his adult colony to the Laboratory for Experimental Medicine and Surgery in Primates (LEMSIP) owned by New York University. For the fifth time in his short life, Nim was moved away from what he had come to know. This time, he was treated as an experimental subject and caged in a housing unit that is shown as having no fresh air, natural light, or access to other chimps.

Some of Nim's supporters, notably Bob Ingersoll, made sure that word of Nim's plight got out, and the still-interested public became incensed. In response to the outcry, New York University agreed to send Nim and one companion animal back to the Oklahoma facility. Nim's sixth move found him back in a cage in Oklahoma.

With the public spotlight still on Nim, an animal rights activist is shown buying Nim; he had a special cage built for Nim at his equine rescue ranch in Texas. The film shows the beauty of the ranch and contrasts it with the specially built cage in which Nim, a social animal, had languished alone, unable to use his sign language with keepers who did not know how to communicate. For a time, then, Nim lived a solitary life in this seventh environment. Eventually, other chimps were brought in, and the film documents that Nim spent the remainder of his life there in ever-improving conditions. He died of a heart attack on March 10, 2000; at 26 years old, he should have had a life expectancy of at least 20 more years.

A huge amount of data accumulated over the years. Nim's "vocabulary" consisted of 150 words and 27,000 examples of multiple-sign combinations (Hess, 2008). But after analyzing the data, Terrace announced that the study was a failure, concluding that Nim was only mimicking, not acquiring language as humans do (Terrace, Petitto, Sanders, & Bever, 1979). From a narrow research perspective, this might be true. However, much can be learned from this research that will be of use to hundreds of future psychology students.

Uses for the Film

This film has multiple uses in psychology classrooms. At one level, it can be used to show the intellectual capacity of chimpanzees, clearly demonstrating that cross-species communication is possible, even if the syntax and rate of acquisition vary from that of human speech. It also shows that chimps are not easy animals to care for and that they have both physical and social needs that are species specific.

Project Nim highlights the nature–nurture controversy and provides support for both sides of this old issue. More important, it demonstrates that, even with the best intent, research can have unintended consequences, raising ethical issues that demand attention as we move from an anthropomorphic view of animals to a more realistic one. It challenges the worldview of humans having dominion over the earth. It demands that researchers take responsibility for the subjects of their research and that they plan for long-term involvement as they design and seek funding for their research.

The film tries to show that there were no real villains in Nim’s case, just human beings who did not have the vision to understand the consequences of their actions. With the benefit of hindsight, all of the principals in the project who were interviewed in the film were unanimous that this study was a mistake. Stephanie LaFarge, Nim’s second mother, remarked, “We co-opted him from the beginning. It was wrong. It was wrong.” Another former worker with Nim said, “We made a commitment to him, and we failed. We did a huge disservice to that soul, and shame on us.” Even Terrace admitted that he would never be involved in this type of research again.

There are human heroes in this film. Bob Ingersoll, who befriended Nim and fought for better conditions for him throughout his lifetime, certainly qualifies. Another hero is James Mahoney, LEMSIP’s veterinarian, who found ways to save many of the research animals once his laboratory was closed down. In an interview, he says that he believes that chimpanzees are very forgiving. This may be wishful thinking, but it is clear that Mahoney respected and was devoted to the animals he supervised.

Special Features of the DVD

The film is enriched by footage from 30 DVDs that Ingersoll compiled over the years in which he worked with Nim. The DVD also contains an in-depth interview with Ingersoll that shows the quality of his loyalty and friendship with Nim. There is a separate short feature on the making of the film itself in which the producer speaks of the inspiration for the film, namely, the book *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp Who Would be Human* by Elizabeth Hess (2008), who served as an advisor for the film and appears in this short feature. It should be

noted that using this film in the classroom would be greatly enhanced by being familiar with her book because it fills in many details alluded to or omitted entirely in the film.

The short feature also reveals some of the secrets of the film. For example, Marsh embellished many of the scenes by the use of specially built sets. He also had an actor, wearing a state-of-the-art animatronics suit, play the adult Nim because he viewed working with adult chimpanzees as unethical. The score was written specifically for this film; the musical director explains in this feature that he tried to keep it simple while still attempting to portray the emotions he believed that he observed as Nim experienced multiple changes in his life circumstances.

In summary, this excellent documentary film will probably not attract large general audiences. However, it deserves to become a staple in psychology courses because of the multiple discussions it can engender. It portrays a classic example of how psychology can lose its way and still learn from it.

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