

# Primate Behavior

Spilled Cheerios and Birdies at the Seneca Park Zoo

by

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## **I. Introduction**

In order to observe primate behavior first-hand, I made the journey to the Seneca Park Zoo in April of 2006. This exercise provided several choices of primates to observe: orangutangs, spider-monkeys, and bonobos. The building inhabited by the primates also contained a startlingly active sloth, as well as common sparrows and squirrels as are found in so many urban settings.

A study of primate behavior is relevant to anthropology because anthropology is a study of humans and human ancestors. Humans are of course primates, as are the other great apes: gorillas, chimps, bonobos, and orangutangs. Primates also include monkeys and lemurs.

Insight into behavior helps us discover what is unique about human beings as opposed to other species.

## **II. Materials and Methods**

I set out to observe each of the available primates for between ten and thirty minutes, intending to write out my findings on the most active subject. This required no special equipment or assistance, merely a pen and notebook, as well as my own wristwatch, which regretfully for experimental purposes lacks an exact second hand, as it instead features an orbiting representation of the starship Enterprise.

## **III. Primate Observations**

It was in watching the spider-monkeys that my hypothesis formed, and to my surprise it had little to do with the spider-monkeys, but rather with an entirely different group of primates: human beings. Specifically, human toddlers.

These toddlers came equipped with their own moving habitats, wheeled strollers packed with toys, cups of juice designed to slowly leak fluid instead of dumping it in a single convenient puddle, and plastic zip-lock bags of cheerios that left a clearly marked trail in the wake of said toddlers.

It was my hypothesis, based on the behavior of the parents of these toddlers, who own them and one might assume therefore might know something about them, that toddlers would be interested in spider-monkeys.

Spider-monkeys are cute, after all, and were rather active as they anticipated the arrival of the keeper with breakfast, and perhaps the key to let them into the outdoor portion of their habitats.

Yet as I observed the toddlers, none of them even seemed aware of the monkeys. The adults escorting them pointed to the monkeys, explained about the monkeys, even physically moved the children so that they faced the monkeys.

The toddlers responded by shouting "squirrel!" and "birdie!" and making every effort – often successfully – to escape their wheeled habitats and go pelting off in the direction of squirrels and birds. I found this odd, as squirrels and birds were clearly a part of the toddlers' everyday experience. These are not unusual animals, and the children were clearly aware of their names.

The human toddlers also displayed a tendency to prefer cheerios dropped on the ground by previous groups of toddlers to the cheerios in their own plastic zip-lock bags. Of seven toddlers who passed in one twenty minute period, not a single one was seen to eat a cheerio from their own bag, although interestingly each one possessed a cheerio bag without variation -- no froot loops, no chex mix, just cheerios -- and yet five

of the seven ate at least one cheerio off the monkey house floor. A sixth toddler was prevented from doing so by parental intervention.

Of these seven toddlers, none of them seemed particularly interested in the monkeys. The one that faced the monkeys the longest – timed at just under two minutes – while being held by a parent occupied herself by attempting to lick the front of the enclosure.

One adult focused intently on showing her offspring the monkeys. She attempted to engage the child's interest by referencing motion pictures and books that the toddler had – one would assume, although I hesitate to jump to conclusions -- seen before.

According to this woman, the spider-monkeys were “just like” such characters as “Curious George, Mort, and Tug.” Upon returning home and employing google, I discovered that Curious George is a chimp, Mort is a lemur, and Tug is a capuchin monkey. This google search also revealed that there was an episode of *Invader Zim* that I had missed, titled “The Scary Monkey from the Scary Monkey Show” at which point I became distracted, much like the squirrel crazed toddlers.

Adult humans put much energy into asking the toddlers, “Can you say monkey?” The toddlers clearly could, as they were universally capable of saying “squirrel,” yet they all refused to provide a demonstration.

#### **IV. Human Toddlers As Hunter-Gatherers**

In considering the meanings behind my observations, I concluded that the toddlers preferred familiar things, such as squirrels and birds, as opposed to monkeys, which they did not – and in my opinion quite correctly did not – equate to the familiar animated characters from their dvds.

The squirrels and birds were familiar, easily understood, and moving quickly in the immediate vicinity of the toddlers. Perhaps the toddlers even maintained the false hope that they might capture a squirrel or bird, which was clearly impossible with the monkeys, safely on the other side of the glass.

Perhaps this is related to an instinctual hunter-gatherer behavior, especially when considered along with the cheerio related behaviors. The toddlers preferred to eat what they gathered themselves, the cheerios from the ground, to what was given to them, the cheerios in the plastic bags.

The adults showed a universal stubbornness in their refusal to accept that their offspring did not find monkeys fascinating. These adults held tight to several firm beliefs: that repeating themselves in a cute voice would convince the toddlers to look at monkeys, that toddlers would somehow benefit from looking at monkeys, and that toddlers would prefer to eat cheerios out of nice clean plastic bags, rather than off the ground.

My own initial hypothesis, that toddlers would find spider-monkeys interesting, was shared by, and indeed borrowed from, the parents of these toddlers. Yet we were very much mistaken. The hypothesis collapsed under repeated evidence to the contrary.

These observations lead to many more questions, and suggest a number of further investigations. Perhaps it would be helpful to observe toddlers in a cheerio-strewn environment such as a day care center. Will toddlers eat cheerios from bowls if none are available on the floor? Perhaps a control group could be fed corn flakes or rice krispies.

It would also be interesting to observe these same parents in sixteen more years, when these offspring are choosing college majors. Will they suggest that their currently

squirrel-obsessed offspring major in “something practical like accounting” despite a possible future interest in poetry or philosophy? Will they frantically repeat, “Can you say School of Hotel Administration at Cornell?” over and over while little Johnny skips off shouting, “T.S. Eliot!”

Only time will tell.