FILM SUMMARY

PROJECT NIM is the story of a 1970’s experiment by the same name. Behavior psychologist, Herbert Terrace, initiated the project as part of his research on animal language acquisition. He was curious to know if chimps could learn to use language—human language.

Only 6 days old, Nim Chimpsky was taken from his mother and put in a New York home to be raised as if he were a human child. Soon after, Nim was taken out of that home and put in a residential facility with several teachers who were responsible for teaching him how to communicate through sign language. And he did. Nim learned many words. He asked for food. He told his teachers where he wanted to walk. He even asked for the toilet. But this cute little chimp soon grew into a wild animal. Despite every human attempt to nurture Nim into a socialized being, Nim began to behave just as a male chimp naturally would in the wild, even though he’d actually never met another chimp.

At age 5, with a vocabulary of 120 words, Nim was returned to the primate research center where he was born. He was abandoned by his human caretakers, then sold into medical research, and eventually he was purchased by a rancher who kept him in total isolation. In the end, Herbert Terrace’s ‘groundbreaking’ experiment revealed much more about human ambition and behavior than it did about chimps.

Project Nim
Discussion Guide

Director: James Marsh
Year: 2011
Time: 93 min

You might know this director from:
Man on Wire (2008)
Shadow Dancer (2012)
Theory of Everything (2015)
**FILM THEMES**

To make this film, Director James Marsh interviewed many people from all different stages of Nim’s life, each with a different perspective. This allows viewers to come to their own conclusions. Consider using the following themes and questions in your film discussion.

**SOCIALIZATION**

Nim’s “parents” and educators tried to nurture him into a communicative human being, which revealed how we are all socialized. Before we are even born, our parents begin to shape us and will us into the creatures they want us to become. Our teachers do the same. Our wildly unique selves must conform to fit social responsibilities and expectations, maybe to our benefit, or maybe not. As Stephanie Laforge said when Nim was taken from her home and put in language school: “He was less with language than he was with his unique self.”

**NATURE VS. NURTURE**

In Nim’s case, it is obvious that nature had the edge over nurture. But when it comes to human behavior and personality, the debate goes on. What determines the course of our lives and drives our impulses? Are we biologically wired to be a certain way? Or did our early environment and social conditioning shape and steer us? Biological and behavioral evolutionists have developed an array of theories, but none have provided definitive, satisfactory answers. The mystery of the human condition remains. How can you, or I, be explained as an animal but understood as a person?

**ANIMAL EXPERIMENTATION**

Professor Charles R. Magel said that animal experimentation rests on a logical contradiction: If you ask people why they experiment on animals, they say it’s because animals are like us. If you ask why it’s morally okay to experiment on animals, they say it’s because animals are not like us. Every year, 100 to 300 million animals die in laboratory experiments whose methods can be horrendously cruel, not to mention inconclusive.

**WILDLIFE HUSBANDRY**

For decades, we told ourselves that animals feel no pain, have no sense of fear or loss or mortality. This permitted us to do things to animals that we’d never dream of doing to humans. But now we know that animals are intelligent and emotional beings too, especially chimps. We also know that chimps have become an endangered species due to human activity such as forest degradation, hunting, and captivity. So we know how much suffering we have inflicted on chimps, both in the wild and in our laboratory cages. Now that we know better, we must do better.

“It’s an insult to chimpanzee intelligence to consider this their means of communication. It’s rather as if humans were taught to mimic some aspects of the waggle dance of bees and researchers were to say, “Wow we’ve taught humans how to communicate.”

Noam Chomsky
FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What were your immediate reactions to this film?

2. Did you learn anything new about chimps? About humans?

3. What are your thoughts on animal experimentation, and did your opinion change at all after seeing PROJECT NIM?

4. What was your impression of Nim’s use of language? Did he really learn how to communicate? Do you think it’s fair to anthropomorphize chimps to the degree that we expect them to communicate as humans?

5. Do you think it was strange that Nim’s first mother, Stephanie Laforge, immediately fell in love with Nim just as she had fallen in love with her own newborn babies?

6. Nature verses nurture is an old, unresolved debate. For you personally, which has been more important—the environment and people who’ve nurtured you through life? Or your own innate impulses, curiosities, struggles and desires?

7. Should medical science be exempt from basic ethics? Why or why not?

8. Currently, all chemicals and pharmaceuticals are required by law to be tested on animals. Supporters say it protects human lives. Critics say the results are questionable, and meanwhile, millions of animals suffer through horrific experiments each week. What are your thoughts on animal testing? Are there any alternatives?

9. Think of the ways you have been socialized to fit certain roles and fulfill certain expectations. What did you gain in the socialization process? What parts of you were lost?

10. How can we determine the value of a life? What makes one person more valuable than another? Is a human more valuable than a chimp? A chimp more valuable than a snail? Or is every living organism equally valuable in its own right?
FILM FACTS:


- A chimpanzee’s natural habitat is in western and central Africa—in humid forests, mixed savanna, or deciduous woodland—6500 feet above sea level. Chimps construct a vegetation nest high in trees for sleeping; they’re one of only a few mammals that use tools.

- There are 625 primate species and subspecies. 25% of primates are now at risk of extinction. Their primary threats are human-related activities such as deforestation, commercial hunting, and illegal animal trade.

- Wild chimpanzees were recognized as an endangered species in the late 1980s, but the U.S. bio-medical community successfully lobbied to prevent captive chimpanzees from receiving that same protection.

- On 12 June 2013, the U.S. announced its proposal to classify captive chimpanzees in the United States as endangered, affording them the same protection under the Endangered Species Act as their wild counterparts.

- Hundreds of millions of animals are subjected to medical experiments each year, and yet only one-third of these experiments involve advancement of human medicine and disease cures. Two-thirds of all medical experiments are triggered and driven by pure human curiosity.

- A human genome is 99.9% similar to another human’s, 98% similar to a chimpanzee’s, 70% similar to a slug, and 50% similar to a banana.

- Bob Ingersoll, a psychology graduate who often visited Nim at the Black Beauty Ranch, remains a passionate advocate for chimps in captivity. He now runs Mindy’s Memory, a sanctuary in Oklahoma for recovering research monkeys.

- The Nature versus Nurture debate has been around since the days of Shakespeare. But it was Francis Galton who coined the phrase. Galton was a 19th century polymath greatly influenced by Charles Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species.”

- All primates, even in the wild, use hand gestures to beg for food. They shake their heads no, laugh out loud when tickled, and even choose gender-based toys.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Gives others a chance to learn from Nim’s story.

2. Support the filmmaker, James Marsh, as he continues to bring other stories to life.

3. There are ways you can protest against animal experimentation. PETA.org runs ongoing campaigns. You can connect with local organizations in your city or country. Purchasing cruelty-free items is another way to protest against animal injustices.

4. Learn more about chimpanzees and other animals. The more you understand them, the more you will know how to help them.