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Journal of Research in Personality 36 (2002) 541–542

JOURNAL OF
RESEARCH IN
PERSONALITY

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Abstract

Social roles, alternative strategies, personalities, and other sources of individual variation in monkeys and apes

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The study of animal personality is logical given the striking individual variation encountered by anyone who works with animals, whether it is with fish or mammals. The more complex an animal's social life, the more striking individual differences become, and the more recognizable they are to us. The habit of naming and recognizing individuals started in primatology with Kinji Imanishi, in the 1950s, and it may not have been accidental that this habit did not come from the West but from the East. There was a period in which Western science preferred to focus on so-called species-typical behavior while actively resisting the individualization of animals. In those days, giving names to animals was frowned upon as an unnecessary humanization. In the East these inhibitions never existed, and its individualized approach to animals has clearly won out. The sources of individual variability in behavior are far from simple, however, as they may depend on rearing history, social position, age, as well as inborn individual characteristics. The problem of disentangling these factors is at least as great in animals as in humans. For example, a male chimpanzee who rises to the top of the hierarchy will dramatically change in almost every regard: he may have started out as a trouble-maker, who attacked others without apparent reason, only to become the friend and defender of the downtrodden once he had reached the top position. Such transformations warn against the view that individual variation in animals must be genetic: the same complex social determinants apply as in human society. The techniques to study individual variability have thus far relied heavily on personality ratings by people familiar with the animals (such as animal caretakers in the case of

most primates). This is a dangerous technique since it is hard to separate projection of human-like characteristics onto animals from actual behavioral tendencies. The ratings technique needs to be complemented with systematic observations, which help provide a sound empirical basis to the personality scales developed for animal. These scales resemble those for humans in many regards, and even include complex traits such as psychopathy in the case of chimpanzees.