Love According to Harry Harlow

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Digging into the history of psychological science, the Observer has retrieved classic interviews with prominent psychological scientists for an ongoing series Psychology (Yesterday and) Today. *Each interview is introduced by a contemporary psychological scientist, and the full text of the interview is available on the Observer website. We invite you to reflect on the words of these legendary scientists, and decide whether their voices still resonate with the science of today.*

I first read Carol Tavris's remarkable interview with Harry Harlow (www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/harlow) while he was a guest — figuratively, of course — in my home. I was, at the time, deep into researching a book I was writing about Harlow (published in 2002 as *Love at Goon Park*). And I was at that stage of a biographical project where the subject lives with you, haunting your life like a stubborn and difficult ghost.

So I didn't merely read the interview. I was a sponge soaking it up. I couldn't put it down, and I put it down only to read it again. What I felt with each reading was the pure, sharp shock of recognition. I'm a longtime journalist and science writer, so I've learned how hard it is to bring a subject to life on the page. But Harry Frederick Harlow, one of the most influential and most controversial psychologists of the 20th century, lives and breathes in this 1973 interview, sparking with insight and intelligence, mocking, provoking, and spitting in the winds of political correctness.

Born in 1905 in Iowa, and educated at Stanford University, Harlow became famous during his time at the University of Wisconsin. He moved there in 1930 and created a primate research program — one of the first in the country — in an unwanted building with the help of scavenged supplies and student labor. He created a new theory of primate intelligence there, championing the idea that monkeys were complex thinkers and were capable of learning from experience. And he'd gone directly from that theory to challenging a powerful behaviorist argument that love and affection were not worthy of psychological study. In typical Harlow fashion, he flung down the gauntlet in a 1959 speech, which was given when he became president of the American Psychological Association. Titled "The Nature of Love," the talk accused his profession of abandoning understanding of the most fundamental emotions to poets and songwriters.

It was, also, an accusation backed by years of meticulous research. Using cloth and wire surrogate mothers, and working with baby monkeys, Harlow had painstakingly demonstrated both the importance of touch and the fundamental intensity of a bond between mother and child. That work helped affect a sea of change in the way psychologists viewed the critical nature of relationships. Harlow continued to delve into the subject, eventually moving from nurturing aspects to destructive ones. In his later work — most done in the decade before Tavris conducted her interview — he'd looked at the influence of abusive mothers, then neglectful ones, and moved from there to the even darker question of complete social isolation. These studies in psychological destruction gradually darkened his reputation as well. He became a poster child for the emerging animal-rights movement. And his mother-focused child-rearing

research attracted the ire of the women's rights movement.

Tavris's interview occurred during this later period of his career — he retired from Wisconsin in 1974 — and she began by acknowledging the tensions and seeking his response to that. And it was quite a response. Consider this exchange, in which she brings up a feminist complaint that his work feeds into the notion that women are born to be caregivers and nurturers.

Tavris: *But your own research shows that there may be nothing instinctive about the so-called maternal instinct; your female isolates were lousy mothers. They had to learn to want infants and care for them.*

Harlow: *I'll take you apart. Look, we don't deny that apes and monkeys learn. They are bright, and they learn continuously. As soon as a situation changes, or a new ability matures, learning is overlaid on innate qualities,*

and it becomes difficult to tell them apart. But the innate components are there. God created two species, one named man and the other named woman. I can even tell you the difference between them. Man is the only animal capable of speaking and woman is the only animal incapable of not speaking.

Tavris: *Women's liberation will get you for that one.*

But what makes the interview so good is that Tavris herself stays so cool. Sure, she baits him a little here, but she never loses track of the real point: a wide-ranging and thoughtful discussion of his personal story, of his work with primates and its meaning in terms of understanding animals and ourselves. The conversation moves deftly, easily, from Harlow at his confrontational worst to his thoughtful best. As it concludes, the rational, ultimately decent man standing behind the work said: *In the first place I have an enormous regard for common sense. Any time we discover some great thing and it contradicts common sense, we better go back to the laboratory and check it.*

After reading the interview, I talked to Tavris as part of my own research. I wondered what she had thought about the discussion. She very kindly responded: "Sometimes Harlow was a blatantly appalling sexist, yet it was hard to know how much of it was designed to rile people up and how much was what he really thought. There was an unexpected sweetness to him that made his obnoxious remarks seem oddly artificial at the time. And she forwarded a copy of a letter he'd sent her following the *Psychology Today* publication.

He wrote: *Let me congratulate you on the splendid job you did on the interview. I'm not sure whether you were interviewing me or I was interviewing you. If I had known as much about recent developments in primate research as you do, I would have been able to respond to your questions in a more intelligent manner. I am convinced that you could raise the IQ of a vegetable — human, or otherwise.*

I was grinning when I read it. The tone was classic Harlow. And Tavris's editor wrote her a memo after seeing the letter, which I treasure to this day: It said "Total surrender. But not the letter of a small man."