Milestones for Irv DeVore and the Simian Seminar

According to John Tooby, "the three most important events of the late 20th century were the civil rights movement, humans on the moon, and the exchange of ideas that took place at 33 Hurlbut Street." To the 50-odd veterans (Fig. 1) gathered there once again on April 16 and 17, 2005 to celebrate Irven DeVore's 70th birthday (approximately) and the 35th anniversary of the Simian Seminar (approximately), the hyperbole captured a strongly shared feeling that was expressed in various ways, and by many, during two days of talks and informal interactions. Most of the former seminarians seemed unable to imagine how their professional lives and world views would have turned out, had they not been party to the conversations and community so generously sponsored by Irv and Nancy DeVore for many years in the living room of their large yellow Victorian north of Harvard Square.

One of the pioneers of primatology in the early 1960's with his work on savannah baboons (Fig. 2) with Sherwood Washburn, Irven DeVore helped found the field of primate behavior and ecology in this country with his two 1965 books, Primate Behavior: Field Studies of Monkeys and Apes (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965) and The Primates (Time-Life), that inspired a whole generation of students of all ages. This was quickly followed by the equally ground-breaking interdisciplinary project on the !Kung (Fig. 3) that combined social anthropology, human ecology, genetics and archeology (e.g., Man the Hunter, Aldine, 1968), and a later project on the pyg-

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Figure 1. Celebrants at the Irven DeVore and Simian Seminar reunion.
or topic was too sensitive, too politically incorrect or too bawdy to be off limits. This openness was made possible by an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, and affection, which was very deliberately cultivated by the DeVoreys. At the reunion, Irv himself broached the question lurking in the backs of many minds: “How has Irv survived his profane lifestyle?” The matter was discussed at some length, with Robert Trivers eventually asserting that Irv possesses “the strongest phenotype this side of Ernst Mayr,” followed by Irv’s promise to give us an opportunity to celebrate his eightieth birthday. In keeping with this theme, Cheryl Knott (Harvard) gave a fascinating talk on past-prime, “over the hill” orangutan males, who give fewer long calls, spend more time resting, travel less, have lower testosterone levels, and exhibit diminished secondary sexual characteristics. She captured the spirit of the Scandinavian Seminar by telling the assembled post-primes a story about the indignities of their life phase.

Perhaps the flavor of the occasion is best summarized by listing the questions that lecturers set out to answer. Paleontologist and functional anatomist Dan Lieberman (Harvard) asked “Why do humans wear underwear? What’s the point of evolving sexy genitalia just to cover them up?” Other questions included: “Do second born half-sibs have higher variance in weight gain than second born full sibs?” (John Harung, SUNY, Brooklyn). “Are women more likely than men to remember the quality and location of foods at a farmers’ market?” (Steve Gaulin, Santa Barbara). “When do chimps kill each other?” (Richard Wrangham, Harvard). “How is evolutionary theory revising contemporary psychoanalysis?” (Mal Slavin). “Are males really smarter?” (Ben Campbell, Boston University). “What can monitoring cortisol levels tell us about the way adolescents respond to stress?” (Nancy Nicolson).

Mark Moffet (Berkeley) talked about the emergent properties of rain forest canopies, and asked “How good a botanist is a monkey?” Andy Marshall (Harvard), who remarked that Irv’s undergraduate course was the first—and only—time he had ever seen a professor imitating a black

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Figure 2. Irv DeVore and fellow primates in Kenya circa 1959. The primate who does not appear in this photo is Nancy DeVore who, as Irv pointed out during the reunion, typed both his field notes and his thesis. In Borneo and the Kalahari she drove the truck, and while in the Kalahari, baked bread in termite mounds. Courtesy of Anthropology.

Figure 3. Three primates in the Kalahari in 1968. From left to right: Irven DeVore, John Yellen, and Henry Harpending. Courtesy of John Yellen.
buck mating on the run, asked if the densities of gibbons and langurs are related to the density of fall-back foods. Jim Moore (San Diego) asked "How did AIDS originate within the context of colonial Africa?" John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (Santa Barbara) wanted to figure out "How humans increase their probability of identifying kin?" as well as "Why red states vote for Bush, blue ones for Kerry?" Jay Phelan answered "No" to the question "Is it likely that calorie-restricted diets will greatly increase longevity in humans?" Robert Trivers (Rutgers/Harvard) gave a tantalizing preview of his forthcoming book with Austin Burt, *Genes in Conflict: The Biology of Selfish Genetic Elements*. John Pickering (Georgia) asked us to help him create a tribute to Irv on his *Discover Life* web site, and then asked when the talks would end so we could play poker (another time-honored tradition at Simian Seminars).

Alison Brooks (George Washington) and John Yellen (NSF) spoke as a tag-team, bringing us into a debate that is making the Middle Stone Age seem exciting. Why, after more than a million years of humdrum handaxes, was there a sudden "creative explosion" in human art and technology 50,000 years ago? Was there some sudden transformation or, as in the competing hypothesis (which they favor), were there gradual technological developments in Africa leading to higher densities of socially interconnected humans, leading to further innovation, leading to further population growth?

Terry Burnham (Harvard) described an ongoing debate over the roots of irrationality in human economic decisions—a debate that many in the social sciences characterize as the "war in economics over altruism." The debate stems from the results of economic games conducted in many cultures around the world by a group of researchers that includes neuroscientists, economists, psychologists, and anthropologists. Even though the participants were given the opportunity to behave selfishly without consequences, (they were told that this was a "one-shot" deal and they would never encounter the other participants again), they tended to behave generously. The researchers claim that these results are evidence for a special group-selected reciprocity differen from the reciprocal altruism defined by Robert Trivers in 1971. But Burnham views the debate as more of a scrimmage than a war. In tune with a handful of others present, he pointed out that "to tell someone an interaction is a one-shot deal does not correspond to circumstances likely to have pertained in humankind's Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness."

Discussing what he referred to as "evolution on another planet," Jon Seger (Utah) described the population genetics of crustacean ectoparasites called "whale lice" that live exclusively on right whales. Every right whale carries large populations of three different species, and the right whales themselves were divided into three species five million years ago, when they stopped crossing the equator. Thus the system amounts to a replicated evolutionary experiment with populations that are "huge, stable and countable." Seger concluded by suggesting that the discovery and subsequent development of this system by his collaborators Vicky Rowntree, Zofia Kaliszewska, and Wendy Smith, illustrates the arguably superior scientific aptitudes of women. Clearly alluding to contrary opinions recently expressed by Harvard's president Lawrence Summers, he proposed that women continue to dominate the sciences mainly by being better at extrascientific confrontational politics.

David Haig, who currently occupies what some refer to fondly as the "Trivers Chair of Evolutionary Logic" at Harvard, described the effects on human development of the loss of a set of paternally inherited genes on chromosome 15: reduced muscle tone, sleepiness, and impaired sucking. Later on, however, at around 3–4 years (the age of weaning in the EEA), babies with this "Prader-Willi" syndrome develop an immense appetite and eat almost everything in sight. Haig is exploring what such patterns of development can tell us about conflicting interests of maternal and paternal genomes.

Drawing on field data from repeated visits to the Kalahari Desert between 1960 and 2000, Polly Wiessner (Utah) critiqued the well-meaning interventions of NGOs and government agencies by describing the ways in which food aid and other forms of "assistance" have undermined the !Kung ethic of "modesty, equality, and respect." Leave off the modesty, add raucous humor, and the !Kung ethos may provide a model of what worked so well over the years for the disparate intellects gathered at the Simian Seminars.

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