

# Bonobos

---

**The Bonobos, sometimes called pygmy chimpanzees, have been promoted as having a peaceful, matriarchal society.**

This finding, whether true or not, has been used to argue for significant changes to human society.

On the bonobo theme, the following is from an article in the New Zealand *Listener*, March 22 1997, pp.28-29

## ***PLANET OF THE APES***

***Our men are violent because our ape ancestors were violent.***

***The only hope? Hand power over to women. Grant MacKenzie reports***

...

- 1. Recent scientific developments prove beyond reasonable doubt that man came from the same ancestor as the other apes.*
- 2. The societies of chimpanzees (to whom we are extremely closely genetically linked) and other apes suffer from demonic male violence.*
- 3. Human males perform many of the same demonic, violent acts as chimpanzees.*
- 4. Bonobo apes have expunged male violence from their society.*
- 5. They have been able to do this because the females bond with each other and the males do not co-operate with each other.*
- 6. Had humans developed from bonobos instead of an earlier primate, there would be no demonic males.*
- 7. The only hope for humans to rid themselves of demonic violence is to hand over power to women.*

---

The term "**demonic males**" is used in the title of a book, Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson (1996) *Demonic males : apes and the origins of human violence*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin. The book aims to show that bonobos are different from other apes (including humans), presenting them as some sort of ideal:

*Bonobos ... offer a vision of animals unlike any that we have been familiar with in the past. They have evolved ways to reduce violence that permeate their entire society. (p.26)*

*... a strange species that wasn't even known seventy years ago and wasn't watched until twenty-two years ago. (p.27)*

The authors' observations are value-loaded and possibly coloured by their favourable opinion.

They describe bonobo behaviour as follows:

On female-female alliances which appear to be used to prevent dominance by the larger males:

*... the bonds among females come not from kinship but from experience. In other words, the newly arrived adolescent must work to develop her support network ... What do her friendly interactions with the senior female consist of? Partly it's the ordinary social life of primates, sitting close and grooming each other. But in addition ... she has sex with the older female ... It looks as though the adolescent's development of a bond with a senior female is her passport into a network of support and security. (pp.208-210)*

(Note however that research suggests that human lesbian couples have high levels of partner violence. See [Hidden bruises ... advocate.com](#): "Although little research has been done on domestic violence among gays and lesbians, most experts agree that the level equals that among heterosexuals, with anywhere from 25% to 33% of couples experiencing some form of abuse ... In New York City, fully half of the incidents of violence against gays and lesbians reported to the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project are domestic abuse cases." For data, see: [Lesbian Violence Rates Apparently even Higher](#). Here is some more discussion: [Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships](#))

As for lessons for humans, we should also note that: "*Many of their sexual encounters involve ... sex with infertile infants.*" (p.213)

Wrangham and Peterson put great weight on the part played by sex:

*Bonobos use sex for much more than making babies. They have sex as a way to make friends. They have sex to calm someone who is tense. They have sex as a way to reconcile after aggression.* (p.213)

It is also seen as enjoyable, Wrangham and Peterson referring to "the abandonment and excitement exhibited by two females practicing [female with female sex]" (p.209).

They mention that bonobos eat meat, but make the point that "they have never been seen eating monkeys" (p.216). They describe three cases where males were seen with monkeys:

*In these three cases, the bonobos tried to get the monkeys to play. The observers thought the bonobos were treating their monkeys like dolls or pets, not prey.* (p.217)

One of the monkeys was "gently flailed" by its tail before being released. The other two died during the "play". This demonstrates either poor parenting skills or killing of animals when the need for food was absent.

If violence is lower among the bonobos, Wrangham and Peterson suggest that this might also be because:

*Bonobos have evolved in a forest that is kindlier in its food supply, and that allows them to be kindly too.* (p.224)

This might also explain the low level of observed intercommunity violence described on pages 214-216.

Wrangham and Peterson suggest that a South American monkey, the miquiqui, displays similar behaviours to the bonobo, with females being co-dominant, males less aggressive and females more sexual than other mammals. They conclude that, *Miquiquis provide evidence supporting the idea that female power favors relaxed, public, non-conceptive sex* (p.295). There is an implied direction of causality here. To reverse the causality, it could equally be argued that female overt demonstration of enjoyment of sex and availability for sex removes the need for much male aggression. By this reasoning, male aggression and need for power in other species could be linked to females placing requirements on the granting of sex other than pleasure. The lower levels of aggression among bonobos may also be linked to abundance of resources.

---

An Australian newspaper, *The Age*, echoed *The Listener* in an article by Pamela Bone on 10 January 1997 (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/ns970110a.htm>). To quote:

*There are no human societies to show us what a system other than a patriarchy might be like. But there is one society, described as one of the most peaceful and unaggressive in the world, where females keep the peace and enforce the rules. It is the society of the bonobo, or pygmy chimpanzee, of Africa....*

---

This view of the bonobos has been promoted by research such as that of Frans B. M. de Waal. Here is a link to an article he wrote: [Bonobo Sex and Society: The behavior of a close relative challenges assumptions about male supremacy in human evolution](#) (Originally published in the March 1995 issue of *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN*, pp. 82-88) How did he conduct his study?

*For my study, which began in 1983, I chose the San Diego Zoo. At the time, it housed the world's largest captive bonobo colony--10 members divided into three groups. I spent entire days in front of the enclosure with a video camera, which was switched on at feeding time.*

He suggests that:

*Serious conflict between bonobo groups has been witnessed in the field, but it seems quite rare.*

Even if such conflict is rare, *The Listener's* suggestion that power in human society should be handed over to women may not be entirely accepted by some, given the bonobos' alternative approach to conflict as suggested by de Waal:

*First, anything, not just food, that arouses the interest of more than one bonobo at a time tends to result in sexual contact. If two bonobos approach a cardboard box thrown into their enclosure, they will briefly mount each other before playing with the box. Such situations lead to squabbles in most other species. But bonobos are quite tolerant, perhaps because they use sex to divert attention and to diffuse tension.*

---

The bonobos are described at: [Wanted Alive: Great Apes in the Wild](#)

In particular:

*Bonobo behaviour is much less aggressive and violent than that of their cousins, perhaps because food is more easily obtained within the bonobos' rainforest habitat.*

It is clear that knowledge of the bonobo is sketchy. On this site it is claimed that:

*Studies of wild bonobos reveal that their behaviour and ecology is rather different from chimpanzees. Both species are highly social, but bonobos live in much smaller groups that often consist of fewer than 20 individuals, although groups of up to fifty have been observed.*

On another site, [BPF - Bonobo Protection Fund](#), it is claimed that:

*All other apes live in small bands, with rarely more than 1 to 8 individuals seen together at one time. Bonobos, like ourselves, like to live and travel in large groups, sometimes up to 100 individuals. ([see here for full article](#))*

---

## Have we romanticised bonobos?

Gordon Tullock has challenged the very favourable view of bonobos being presented in some circles. He is currently actively researching in the relatively new field of **biological economics** which looks at non-human systems. For more information on this field, see [Journal of Bioeconomics](#), or contact the editor in chief, [Janet Landa](#).

In a paper, "Animal War", presented at the Pacific Rim Allied Economics Organisations conference in Sydney in January 2000, he drew on information from *Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape* by Frans De Waal & Frans Lanting, Berkley: University of California Press, 1997. The following quote is from pages 84-85 of that book:

*"This brings me to a final point: the tendency to romanticize bonobos. Even if strikingly pacific, they are not the long-lost noble savages. All animals are competitive by nature and cooperate only under specific circumstances and for specific reasons, not because of a desire to be nice to one another. The question of why bonobos are egalitarian and tolerant thus needs to be balanced with the question of in which areas they are most competitive. Such areas must exist: the history of biological and anthropological research warns strongly against idealization of a particular species or human culture. Science has erred before with a range of so-called peaceable species, from gorillas to dolphins, as well as with hunter-gatherer societies claimed to be free of aggression. Generally, such idealizations mean that something highly significant has been overlooked or, worse, covered up.*

*Thus, if wild bonobos frequently show physical abnormalities, such as deformed digits or even entirely missing hands or feet, we should seriously consider the possibility of trauma due to violence. There exists a distinct sex bias in the incidence of these abnormalities (adult males being the most afflicted category), and we know that male bonobos are involved in more fights than females. I speak from experience with naive claims: there was a time when I believed chimpanzees to be absolutely wonderful at managing conflict. Then it became known that males in the wild engage in brutal warfare against other groups, that they may kill and cannibalize infants of their own species, and that even within the group, violence may escalate to the point of deadly injuries. In the Arnhem Zoo, one male was fatally maimed and castrated by two others, and in Gombe National Park, a male chimpanzee would no doubt have lost his life had he not been treated by a veterinarian. This victim, too suffered scrotal damage from an attack by group mates. I would not reject out of hand the possibility of similar aggression among bonobos.*

*While we should think twice before attributing to bonobos violence that has not actually been witnessed, they are not saints. It is unlikely, given their spirited temperaments, that the harmony reigning in their societies is based entirely on inborn pacifism. Competitive undercurrents are not hard to detect. No matter which sex dominates, there must be negative sanctions to keep subordinates in line: injuries in zoo colonies point in this direction. [footnote: Parish ... compiled records of injuries due to fighting in zoo colonies of bonobos. She found that all the wounds were caused when females, often collectively, attacked males ...] We have also seen indications from the field that females are serious rivals when it comes to their sons' dominance ranks, and that their fights can be vicious. In other words, bonobo society is not all rosy. The species is no exception to the rule that cooperative tendencies are best understood in conjunction with competitive ones, even though I agree that in bonobos the emphasis seems to have shifted. to the former."*

De Waal and Lanting mention observation of patterns of violence among bonobos:

*... if a male tried to harass a female, all the females would band together to chase him off ... "A group of males will not attack a female, but the opposite can occur." (p.78)*

They also compare food sharing among chimpanzees and bonobos (see pages 78 and 82-84):

*[Among bonobos] The possessor of the food was almost always an adult female. Bystanders surrounded her, some begging by stretching out a hand or touching her mouth. Males would display in the vicinity by breaking off branches and charging about, or they would hang about at the edge of feeding clusters. They would be nice to the young, all of whom had free access to the food. Not permitted to enter the cluster themselves, the males could do little aside from steal scraps from the infants ... The image of female-controlled food distribution with waiting and "parasitizing" males at the margin is dramatically different from the typical feeding clusters of chimpanzees, in which an adult male holds an animal carcass*

*while others beg for a portion. Chimpanzee possessors share both with their fellow hunters, usually other males, and with females." (pp.78, 82)*

A BBC documentary, "Pygmy Chimpanzee: the last great ape", 1997, broadcast on New Zealand's TV ONE, 18 January 2000, showed a slightly different treatment of the young. Describing the situation of an male orphaned wild bonobo, it too was excluded from the food by the females. It was suggested that his survival would not have been possible among chimpanzees unless he had been adopted by an adult female. An alternative interpretation could be that an adult chimpanzee might adopt an orphan, but in this bonobo case at least, he was left to his own devices (from the age of 3), save for the friendship of the adult males.

---

### **An alternative assessment**

It is clear that our information on bonobos is sketchy and that many of the conclusions are highly speculative. As an alternative to the view expressed in the *Listener* that "*The only hope for humans to rid themselves of demonic violence is to hand over power to women*", we might consider the following, which is equally speculative:

The bonobos have an abundant food source and no major enemies besides man. As a result, they have not had to rely on males for hunting and defence. It has therefore been possible for females to attain a more dominant position. They have done this through banding together against the males, using force where necessary. They have a firmly set hierarchy, resulting in few challenges. Sex is used to create and identify alliances, possibly as suggested in some human prison populations. Care for the young of others is possibly more in deference to the status of the mother than from concern for the young.

If this contains a relevant lesson for humans, it might be that a secure society in apparent plenty may be more susceptible to female domination. The end result may be a rigid society, more closely representing a totalitarian state than a democracy which can accommodate dissent and change. Those of lower status may be tolerated on the fringes of the society, and controlled, sometimes violently, by group pressure if they attempt to assert themselves.

However, it may be that a bonobo community is only viable for small populations. Also, information on human lesbian couples does not support the hypothesis that human female relationships will be peaceful.

Some would argue that the increasing prevalence of children being raised in single parent households, in combination with state support for such households and matrimonial property and child support legislation, is reducing the apparent importance of males in these households. ("*Today about one-third of all children are born to single parents, and over time about two-thirds will live in a single-parent household,*" - Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, (D-NY), Sunday, 26 December, 1999, on NBC's Meet The Press.) While this might result in a power-shift towards females, the long-term viability of such a system would depend on the willingness of males to continue to produce and contribute while being marginalised in this way.

---

### **More on bonobos:**

[Bonobo Links](#)

[Bonobos: The Left-Bank Chimpanzees](#)

---

### **Animals and humans**

Comparisons of humans with apes may be useful for seeing our behaviour from a different perspective, [as described here](#).

Here is another example of study of animals being considered relevant for humans (from the Manawatu Evening Standard, 11 January 2000, page 4):

*Sex, men and tomcats...*

*LONDON: Men have more in common with tomcats when it comes to sex than once thought, new research shows.*

*Although it has been 90 million years since men and cats shared an ancestor, their sex chromosomes still strongly resemble one another, according to a study. Scientists at the United States National Cancer Institute in Maryland compared genetic details of male humans, cats and mice. Looking at the order of 19 genes and six other chemical markers in the X and y chromosomes, the research team found the order of genes for men and cats was essentially the same.*

*While this did not mean male sexual behaviour was exactly like that of the tomcat, it meant the cat could make a good model for studies of humans.*

Stuart Birks

18 January 2000

Last revised 23 February 2000