

On Alpha Males and Roving Inseminators  
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One of the highlights of this year's APA convention for me was attending the invited lecture of primatologist Frans de Waal, whose recent book, *Our Inner Ape*, explores the question of what research on lower primates can tell us about human nature. As most scholars of gender know, this question is the subject of highly contentious debate. On one side are essentialists, who usually argue that males and females have immutable differences from each other. On the other are social constructionists, who assert that gendered behavior is malleable and highly dependent on culture and social settings. Even the staunchest essentialist would not claim that environment has no effect; even the most extreme social constructionist would not say that biology does not exert influence on behavior. Still, the current trend, in my opinion, is for scholars to concentrate on one set of influences and basically ignore the other. de Waal is an exception to this tendency and does a fine job of talking about both influences simultaneously.

Sociobiological types often present a hypertrophied stereotype of the male as a naturally aggressive, competitive animal whose sole purpose in life is to fight off other males and mate with as many females as possible. Central to this argument is the assumption that the "alpha male" at the top of the dominance hierarchy, is a bully who rules the troop using violence and intimidation. de Waal notes that some alphas are indeed bullies, but has also discovered that, in primates, those that use these strategies are usually overthrown by the troop after a short time. In contrast, most alphas are "populists." They keep the peace in the troop by breaking up fights and supporting reconciliation after aggression takes place. The populist male's alpha position is much more stable than the bully's. In one case, a populist primate was found to occupy the alpha position for more than a decade. Far from being dictators ruling with iron fists, the most successful alphas are beloved and benevolent leaders. Nice guys don't usually finish last in the primate world, and de Waal also describes the importance of cooperation and peacemaking, a set of behaviors that historically have been ignored by scholars with a blindered, stereotypic view of social relationships in primates.

The other linchpin of sociobiological theory is the differential reproductive investment argument. Joseph Pleck facetiously referred to the sociobiological male ideal as the "roving inseminator" who maximizes his reproductive fitness by indiscriminately seeking as many female sexual partners as he can manage. The sociobiological argument is basically that, because sperm are an abundant resource and males physiological role in the reproductive process takes only a few seconds, males are motivated to have sex with many females. In contrast, because ova are a scarce resource and females must invest nine months plus in the process, they are motivated to be selective and attempt to "trick" the male into monogamy.

The sexual strategy of the male is taken by most to unquestionably maximize his gene propagation. But in her excellent book on female sexuality (*Woman: An Intimate Geography*), Natalie Angier casts serious doubt on the assumption:

“Just how good a reproductive strategy is this chronic, random shooting of the gun? A woman is fertile only two or three days a month. Her ovulation is concealed. The man doesn't know when she's fertile. She might be in the early stages of pregnancy when he gets to her; she might still be lactating and thus not ovulating. Moreover, even if our hypothetical Don Juan hits a day on which a woman is ovulating, his sperm only has a 20 percent chance of fertilizing her egg...each episode of fleeting sex has a remarkably small probability of yielding a baby...less than one percent. And because the man is beating and running, he isn't able to prevent any of his one-night stands from turning around and mating with other men...[If he were] to spend a bit more time with one woman...the odds of his getting the woman during her fertile time would increase and he'd be monopolizing her energy and keeping her from the advances of other sperm-bearers. It takes the average couple four months, or 120 days, of regular sexual intercourse to become pregnant. That number of days is approximately equal to the number of partners our hypothetical libertine needs to sleep with to have one of them result in a “fertility unit,” that is, a baby.” (pp. 336-337).

What Angier and de Waal teach us is that we need to examine the implicit beliefs of the biologically-based point of view and understand how gender shapes the very frameworks in which we understand the assumptive “objectivity” of biology. Many sociobiological works are found in the Biology section of the bookstore rather than somewhere that identifies the claims as social theorizing, and often the lay public cannot distinguish between the two nor generate alternative hypotheses to those presented. People are likely to accept these hypotheses as fact, and therefore popular conceptions of Alpha Male and Roving Inseminator remain both cause and effect of toxic conceptions of masculinity.