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## **Frans de Waal's (1982), *Chimpanzee Politics***

Sarah F. Brosnan  
Departments of Psychology & Philosophy,  
Neuroscience Institute & Center for Behavioral  
Neuroscience, Georgia State University, Atlanta,  
USA

### **Definition**

This 1982 book by Frans de Waal follows the 4-year power struggle among a group of chimpanzee males, documenting the complexity of their social lives and offering up a lesson on the importance of understanding other species' behavior to understand the evolution of human behavior.

### **Introduction**

If Shakespeare had focused his political plays on chimpanzees rather than British royalty, *Chimpanzee Politics* would likely have been a plot he relished. The interactions among the chimpanzees, masterfully conveyed by de Waal, include overthrows, shifting alliances, and the murder of the former ruler. This fascinating book follows several years in the lives of a group of chimpanzees housed at the Royal Burger's zoo in Arnhem, the Netherlands, documenting their social lives and, in particular, the power struggle among the

group's males. Through his approach, readers are not only drawn into the saga, but come away understanding how to study behavior in other species and why it is so critically important for understanding the evolution of human behavior.

### **Power and Dominance in Chimpanzee Society**

One of the most notable things about *Chimpanzee Politics* (de Waal 1982) is the approachable way in which it was written. Rather than diving immediately into a dry account of the interactions between the animals, de Waal carefully sets the stage, allowing the reader to fully understand the ensuing story. He first introduces the characters, then considers their behavior. Throughout it all, de Waal is careful to separate the observations of each event from his interpretation of those events, which allows readers to understand where his assertions come from and then draw their own conclusions based on the observations. No less important is the inclusion of hundreds of photographs of the chimpanzees and behaviors that de Waal is discussing, most by de Waal himself; there is barely a page without at least one photograph. This is highly unusual in scientific books, but the impact is profound. The pictures allow the reader to create that essential mental image of the situation that enables them to not just read about, but mentally see, the narrative as it plays out.

After the stage is set, de Waal describes a 4-year period during which the reigning alpha male, Yeroen, is dethroned by the upstart Luit and then forms a 3-year alliance with the now second-ranking male, Nikki, that allows the two of them to dominate the more powerful Luit. Nikki benefits by being the king, and Yeroen benefits by maintaining substantial power despite his lower dominance – in fact, a key point throughout the book is that in politics, rank and power are not synonymous, a point as relevant to human society as it was to Yeroen, Nikki, and Luit. Yeroen maintains many of the benefits of rank, including relatively more free mating privileges than would be expected of an otherwise third-ranked male. It all falls apart 3 years later, quite literally overnight, when, for reasons unknown, but likely relating to Nikki's increasing intolerance of Yeroen, the alliance disintegrates. With the ruling males' sudden break, Luit immediately regains his position as the unchallenged alpha male. Although the original book ends here, the twenty-fifth anniversary edition adds an Epilogue that completes the story; ten short weeks after Luit became the alpha male, Yeroen and Nikki reunite for a single battle that kills him. They remove fingers, toes, and testicles, leaving him dead of blood loss. Shortly thereafter, young Dandy, who had previously been excluded from the males' intrigues, joins the dominant male triangle as the alliances shift again.

The story itself is captivating, but its scientific importance lies in its value as a record of this social group's dynamics. De Waal was able to acquire an astonishing amount of detail over an extended period of time (more than 4 years). This is due in part to his exceptional skills as an observer and in part to the fact that he was able to observe the group so intensively for such a long time frame. Although other longer-running studies exist, particularly in the wild, de Waal was able to get this level of detail because this is a captive group (albeit in a very large space), so he could see most of the animals most of the time, allowing for a level of completeness that is unprecedented. As a result, he knew who groomed whom, who mated with whom, who deferred to whom, and how the relative levels of these activities varied across the different manifestations of the

dominance hierarchy during these 4+ years. Although correlations drawn from observations can never indicate causation, the degree of documentation is sufficient that the full picture emerges, allowing speculation about not only the animals' actions but also their motivations. Moreover, because this is such a large population, including multiple adult males (a rarity in most captive populations), the dynamic is more complex than can typically be obtained in a captive population.

Prior to the writing of this book, almost all scientists studying animal behavior based their analyses and interpretations on tallies of events and behaviors that had occurred in the group. De Waal does the same – throughout the book, he discusses frequencies of grooming or aggression and displays charts of how these various behaviors altered depending on who was currently dominant – but he subsidizes this approach with historiography. In this, his goal is to understand the details of what happened in the group during these periods of social instability. To do so, he also relies more heavily than most on anecdotes. There is a saying in science, used to disparage one-off observations, that “the plural of anecdote is not data,” but de Waal takes issue with this when it comes to key events that are not replicated because there is no way for them to be replicated. For example, there has only been one American president to leave office under threat of impeachment (Richard Nixon, who resigned before he could be impeached for the Watergate scandal), but just because it has only happened once makes it no less important to understanding what causes the downfall of a key political official. In particular, to understand why among US presidents brought up for impeachment, only Nixon fell from power, it is instructive to compare his story to those of the only other two attempted impeachments of US presidents, which were not successful (Andrew Johnson, in 1868, for violating the Tenure of Office act following the suspension of Secretary of War Stanton and Bill Clinton, in 1998, for perjury and obstruction of justice following his statements regarding his relationship with Monica Lewinsky). The power of anecdotes for understanding rare events is no less true with

chimpanzees; the fact that the Yeroen–Nikki coalition was unique does not make it any less important for understanding what happens in chimpanzee male social interactions.

Although the book is written at a level to be enjoyed by a general audience, this was also the first book to widely introduce several of de Waal's scientific ideas. For instance, it is here that he first brings the idea of the minimally winning coalition to studies of chimpanzees and emphasizes its role in understanding power dynamics. He also provides the data to support a disambiguation of dominance and power. As he shows, the individuals who are at the top of the dominance hierarchy, as evidenced by the direction of formal subordination signals (i.e., the pant grunt in chimpanzees) are not always the ones who have the power in the group, as evidenced by who is allowed to mate, who intervenes in fights, and who has the support of the other key chimpanzees (i.e., the alpha female). Finally, in this book, de Waal makes a claim that verges on shocking in today's society, which is that the dominance hierarchy is not always a bad thing. As he shows, the worst fights and the highest levels of stress occur when the dominance hierarchy is unstable. When rank is clear, there is nothing to fight over; each individual knows their place, and days can go by without a fight, even in the presence of otherwise conflict-inducing events, such as an estrous female. However distasteful this may be in our society that strives for egalitarianism, this insight provides insight into the causes of conflict and instability among humans.

Throughout, de Waal repeatedly emphasizes the links between chimpanzee and human behavior. This likely causes strong reactions in almost everyone, ranging from those who find these links obvious to those who are horrified, either at the audacity of his attempt to level the playing field between humans and chimpanzees or his willingness to imbue these nonhuman creatures with motives, planning, thought, and other hallmarks of higher-order cognition. No matter what the reaction, it is in this way that the book is perhaps its most important, by reminding readers that

humans are also products of their biology and their evolutionary history. Whether it causes the reader to reevaluate his or her position in the state of nature or work harder to understand the antecedents of human-specific cognition and behavior, this understanding is critical for fully understanding human behavior.

## Conclusion

De Waal has written an astonishingly large number of very well-received books for any author, much less one who has simultaneously led a productive research career. What is it about *Chimpanzee Politics* that causes it to stand out? It has never been out of print and is now in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition. Not only is it routinely cited by academics, but it is well known in the nonacademic world; then-US Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich reportedly put it on his recommended reading list for freshman representatives. Part of it is likely the story itself. This is not a dry textbook about animal behavior; this is, at heart, a narrative about Yeroen, Nikki, Luit, Mama, Gorilla, and the other chimpanzees. The aforementioned inclusion of photographs throughout the book reinforces this by giving the reader faces to put with names and a mental image of the various behaviors that de Waal discusses. Part of it is the balance between data and narrative; de Waal conveys the story, but never loses sight of the data that underpin it. The rest is the obvious connection between these apes and humans. The narrative rises above a discussion of chimpanzee politics and allows the readers to see human behavior, as reflected in the lives of these chimpanzees.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Apes](#)
- ▶ [Chimpanzees](#)
- ▶ [Dominance](#)
- ▶ [Frans de Waal](#)

- ▶ Hierarchy
- ▶ *Pan troglodytes*
- ▶ Power
- ▶ Social Behavior

## References

- de Waal, F. B. M. (1982). *Chimpanzee politics: Power and sex among apes*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.