

KISSING COUSINS

WHEN IT COMES TO LOVE AND SEX,
HUMANS BEHAVE SURPRISINGLY LIKE BONOBO CHIMPS



By Benedict Carey

IT BEGINS THE WAY PRIMATE MATING RITUALS often do, with eye contact. The male sees the female, stares for a moment, then looks away. The female glances back at him, then into the distance. They gaze past one another for some time before finally their eyes meet and hold steady. Facial expressions are exchanged, something is communicated, and now the male has moved himself next to the female, although he's being careful not to get too close, not to touch.

It doesn't take a primatologist to tell you that he's thinking about it, though. Like him, this female is in her adult prime, well-groomed and healthy, fertile and available. It is early evening, a time of day when the species relaxes and feeds, when its primal appetites are aroused. And no male or female comes to this place—the Dark Horse, a lively bar and restaurant in Atlanta—for the spicy potato skins.

"I study apes and monkeys, not humans," Frans de Waal is saying from his table, which commands full view of the couple at the bar, "but you can see traces of primate behavior by watching how people interact, rather than by listening to what they say." De Waal is an ethologist—a student of group behavior, of how animals cooperate and compete, of how they signal dominance or submission, sexual interest or disdain. As a researcher at Emory University's

Yerkes Primate Center, he's one of a handful of animal observers who have described human-like sexual habits in primates and speculated about how these habits illuminate the origins of human affection and sexuality.

"In a place like this," he says, "human males will invite sex by puffing up their shoulders and chest. By standing tall, by looking... formidable."*

The male at the bar is dark-haired, athletic, confident, a Todd perhaps. He rolls his neck and back muscles while leaning on the bar, occasionally staring severely through the bar's plate-glass window. Just now he's raising his shoulders and inflating his chest while tucking his shirt into the back of his pants. Formidable? This man's an assassin.

"The female may simply smile back if she's interested," says de Waal, "or she might draw attention to some part of her body she thinks is sexy—her chest, her eyes, whatever."

The woman is slender, blond, and satin-skinned—Courtney, let's say—and she's having trouble keeping

Illustrations by Greg Spalenka

hair from falling into her face. She blows it from her eyes, tucks it behind her ears. A minute ago she tipped her head back, her mouth slack, letting the golden strands slip from her face like a silk bathrobe. She punctuates this performance with a crafty smile.

As the Thursday night crowd shoulders in, and the music throbs louder, Todd and Courtney are having to lean closer together to hear one another. It's still early, yet their knees are almost touching, the air warming between them. They've ordered a plate of nachos to settle their hunger.

"Food sharing," says de Waal. "Typical chimp behavior. If they're really daring they'll start to feed each other."

WE HUMAN BEINGS have always considered ourselves the sexiest animals alive. We flirt. We seduce. We mate spontaneously, according to our moods rather than some biological clock. Our sex lives seem richly varied compared to those in the rest of the animal kingdom: Rabbits don't engage in foreplay, dogs don't experiment with sexual positions, cows don't have oral sex. Unlike most species, ours includes heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, and so-called sex addicts.

And yet we may not be so special after all.

Consider the primates, the family of mammals to which we belong. The earliest primates were hairy herbivores who poked around the forest for food, some of them finding a rich supply of fruit and greens in the trees, others doing better by rooting around in the bushes. From the tree-dwellers arose baboons, macaques, and other monkeys, while the ground-dwellers spawned the gibbons, gorillas, chimpanzees—and early humans, who eventually evolved out on the savannah, probably surviving by scrounging for berries, root plants, and the occasional scrap from an abandoned carcass. It has been about 8 million years since our ancestors began living outside the forests; and during that time our chimp cousins again branched into two groups: common chimpanzees and pygmy chimpanzees, or bonobos.

This family tree isn't some fund raising gimmick invented by primate preservation societies. It's now possible to measure the genetic difference between humans and all other animals. We share a chunk of

our genetic material with the bullfrog. It makes some sense; both species have four limbs, two eyes, a mouth, a tongue, lungs, and so on. We share about 75 percent of our genes with dogs, 93 percent with monkeys, and 98.4 percent with bonobos and common chimps. We are genetically "closer" to these two species than dogs are to foxes, closer than gorillas are to monkeys.



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Maybe it's not surprising, then, that both chimps and bonobos hug, kiss, and cuddle each other very much the way we do. And the similarities don't end there. Bonobos, a species that until recently wandered the rain forests of its native Zaire in relative obscurity, lead sex lives as active and imaginative as any human's. "Bonobos will have sex at any time, with all combinations of partners, for all sorts of purposes other than reproduction," says de Waal.

Dark-haired and svelte, adult bonobos stand about five feet tall, their wrinkled, black faces open and expressive beneath a spiky coiffure parted neatly down the middle. The males are slightly larger than females, who have a hot-pink genital swelling, similar to the baboon's, visible from behind. Like humans, male and female bonobos may become aroused at virtually any time. They French kiss. They have oral sex. They rub each other's genitals, they copulate side by side, from the rear, and—unlike any other nonhuman

primate—they often do it face-to-face. On a typical day your average bonobo gets more action than Todd and Courtney could during a getaway weekend at the Orlando Hilton. Take Maiko, a male in his adolescence, and Connie-Lenore, a female nearing her adult prime, who live on a grassy, two-and-a-half-acre hill at the Wild Animal Park near San Diego. On a recent Saturday Maiko and Connie-Lenore invited sex whenever they felt the urge—Maiko by parading around with his pelvis thrust forward, and Connie-Lenore by dropping onto her back and spreading her legs. The two of them engaged in sexual play with several of the juveniles in the group and had intercourse seven times themselves, all in the missionary position.

"Females seem to like it that way," says Amy Parish, a graduate student at the University of California at Davis who monitors bonobo sexual behavior at several colonies around the world, including this one. "If the male mounts from behind, they'll sometimes stop, turn around, and finish face-to-face."

The bonobos at the Wild Animal Park—there are nine in all, the largest group in the country—spend the day goofing off, eating, having sex, and napping in the shade, like a couple of highly sexed families on an island vacation. Of course they're not furry humans, and neither are common

chimpanzees. But together the two species provide glimpses of our not-so-distant past; in particular, bonobos and common chimps offer clues to the origins of human touching, male-female relations, even sexual orientation.

"If we see a certain behavior in all three species," says de Waal, "we can say that it originated from our common ancestor, and that early humans very likely behaved that way."

THE PRIMATES AT the Dark Horse haven't dared to feed each other yet, because a problem has developed. Two problems, really: Each has a friend in tow, hers a studious-looking woman with light brown hair, his a thick-armed night crawler in his forties, definitely in his native habitat. At the beginning of the evening these two were curious, pleasant, patiently hanging onto the edges of Todd and Courtney's conversation.

But the camaraderie has frayed, and now broken. Courtney's friend looks

...ored, even slightly disgusted, and Todd's friend is restless and fast becoming hostile. He's shifting on his bar stool like an ornery bull, feverish with scotch and nicotine. He appears ready to stand, to move—to do something—when suddenly Todd turns and throws his arm around him.

It's a natural movement, like a backslap, only now Todd's rubbing his friend's back, now kneading his neck. Their heads close, the two men exchange words, smile, order drinks, and the friend slumps a little and seems to breathe easier. Unfortunately for Todd, Courtney is breathing easier too, and it's going to take some work to recharge the circuits between them. In the meantime, he's having to tend to his frustrated friend: rubbing his back again, slapping his butt, being playful and very physical.

"It's interesting what happened between them," says de Waal. "The one sensed, perhaps unconsciously, that his friend was getting upset, and so he soothed him. The contact itself was soothing. It's not sexual at all, simply a matter of calming tensions, very similar to what chimps do."

Both common chimpanzees and bonobos may turn hostile when they're anxious or threatened, but just as often they'll try to diffuse the tension with affection. This is especially obvious around feeding time, when ethologists notice a dramatic increase in physical contact among both species in captivity. "In common chimps it's hugging, kissing, grooming," says de Waal. "In bonobos it's usually sexual—genital rubbing, oral sex, copulation, and so on."

Wild bonobos plunge into a kind of sexual frenzy when they discover trees full of fruit. "It's a free-for-all, an orgy," says Nancy Thompson-Handler, who studies bonobos at Lomako, an observation site in Zaire. "You'll see lots of sex, in all combinations of partners, for about ten minutes. Then the activity drops off, and they start eating."

It's tempting to attribute this arousal to the act of eating itself. But de Waal says it's more likely the anxiety of competition that prompts the affection: competition for food, in the case of the common chimps and bonobos, and competition for sex, in the case of Todd and his friend. Watch bonobos lollygag around for a while and you see that almost any anxiety—whether from a fight, a chase, an argument, even aggressive playing—touches

off sexual activity in the group. At the Wild Animal Park, for instance, Connie-Lenore bit a juvenile named Congo, sending him scrambling behind a hill, screeching and nursing his fingers. Fifteen minutes later he was back, caressing his attacker, visibly reducing the tension.

"That's his way of saying, 'No hard feelings,'" says Amy Parish. "As far as he's concerned the argument is over." The

a biologist at the University of Michigan. Because affectionate physical contact is pleasurable, he says, it's not surprising that some animals might use touching as a way of mending hostilities.

"It suggests to me," says de Waal, "that our impulse to avert aggression and violence, to make peace with our enemies, is very deep-rooted. It goes back at least eight million years."



Bonobo females quickly form loyal friendships. They protect each other's offspring, share food, and may even try to break up courtships between their friends and males they don't like.

same sort of reconciliation occurs after two adult males square off: One of them almost always approaches the other to offer a friendly genital inspection, or to rub rumps with his provoker. When two females get on each other's nerves, they'll often work out their differences by mounting face to face, pressing their swellings together and rubbing.

De Waal believes these peace offerings are precursors to what today are considered very human gestures: kissing and making up, shaking hands after a fight or sports contest, having sex with a reconciled lover. Because the ancestral humans who came of age on the savannah hadn't the teeth and claws to kill other animals, they had to find ways of getting along, of working together to scout for hidden food supplies or trap small game.

"When animals cooperate in a group they're going to have separate interests, they're going to disagree, and they're going to have to figure out how to make up somehow," says Richard D. Alexander,

HAVING MADE a fragile peace with his friend, Todd has decided to make a strong move on Courtney. The hour is getting late, and he's insinuating himself into her very breathing space, his eyes smoky, watching her lips, one of his hands resting lightly on her waist. His body language has undergone a transformation: The steel-jawed assassin is now heavy-lidded, languorous; he looks poised to deliver a rough embrace and a violent, wet kiss.

Courtney herself is undecided, to be generous about it. She's looking uncomfortable, maybe a little trapped, when her friend leans over and says something in her ear. Courtney turns away from Todd, and the scene immediately goes cold. Todd's bedroom slouch tightens noticeably, the initial confidence giving way to confusion, irritation. It's not just that Courtney has shut him out, but that she's deep in whispers with her friend, and it has a catty, malicious

look to it.

Courtney's friend, who has been uncomfortable from the beginning, biding her time, has suddenly asserted herself. Hold all bets.

BONOBO FEMALES have something their common chimpanzee cousins don't: close girlfriends outside the immediate family. When they reach sexual maturity, at around the age of eight, bonobo females leave the care of their mothers to forage and travel with unrelated juveniles and adults. Unlike common chimp females, who form few social bonds and become somewhat isolated from the larger community, bonobo females quickly form alliances with other females, which often blossom into loyal and lasting friendships. These friends will protect each other's offspring, share food, have sex, and stand up for each other in fights with males. They may even try to break up a courtship between a friend and a male they don't like, similar to what Courtney's friend appears

ing with her whispering.

In captive groups you'll see adult females who like each other hanging out together, grooming each other, lying around near each other all day," says Parish. "The males will be scattered, off by themselves." Females dominate most of these groups. In Germany at the Stuttgart zoo, which houses nine bonobos, the imperious Kom-bote rules with the subtlety of Margaret Thatcher. At the Wild Animal Park, the muscular Louise is just as harsh.

Takayoshi Kano, a Japanese primatologist who has studied wild bonobos in Zaire for 20 years, reports that females often elbow their way past bigger, stronger males at feeding sites, and will even climb past them in trees to get fruit. The males tolerate this pushiness because food is plentiful and apparently they'd rather not risk the wrath of the tight clique of female allies and splinter the group. "It is perhaps most accurate to say that it's an egalitarian society," says de Waal, "in which the females have considerable power over food and sex."

This balance of power, combined with the use of sex to reduce tension, makes the bonobo an extraordinarily peaceful animal, not at all human-like in this respect. Humans rape, chimp males bully and intimidate their sexual partners, but bonobos apparently know sex mainly as an expression of affection, reconciliation, pleasure, or a kind of social currency. "Sex isn't a social glue as much as it is a lubricant," says Thompson-Handler.

And while chimps and humans kill and make war, bonobos rarely even come to blows. When two unrelated groups meet in the wild and rival males posture aggressively, it's soon followed by—any guesses?—sexual contact between females and between males. Primatologists consider bonobos the flower children of the primates.

A QUICK LOOK around the Dark Horse turns up plenty of Todds and Courtneys, several groups of loud, well-scrubbed young men, but no uninhibited couplings between cocktail tables, no free sex—no flower children. In fact, it's hard to find sexually permissive, communal, bonobo-like communities anywhere, despite the many similarities in our sexual behavior. Men control almost all the world's human societies, industrial and tribal, and almost all of these societies are structured around some kind of family system.

Unlike bonobos, who never left the familiar forest, our ancestors moved out to the harsh savannah, where finding food required a more subtle use of intellect. According to University of California anthropologist Donald Johansen, these early humans survived by acquiring an intimate knowledge of their stark terrain, by becoming opportunists. They watched for circling vultures, listened for the cries of



Many of their behaviors are forerunners to what we consider very human gestures: kissing and making up, shaking hands after a fight, going to bed with a reconciled lover.

wounded birds, learned which patches of scrubby vegetation hid fleshy bulbs underground. To pass along these complex, memorized survival strategies, parents had to teach their children, guiding them well past weaning.

Instead of nurturing their young for seven or eight years, like bonobos, they fed, protected, and tutored them for ten, 12, 14 years, and more. The women who bore the children provided much of this child care, while continuing to forage for food. At the same time, men were at greater liberty to roam—to gather food and hunt large game.

"This is the basic division of labor," says Jane Lancaster, an anthropologist at the University of New Mexico. "Women lost some autonomy in exchange for guaranteed male input into raising the offspring." With men committed to feeding and protecting their children, families gained strength. "Human males invest more in their kids than males of virtually any other species," says Lancaster. And

the close-knit family system—couples mate for life—guaranteed that males would spend their time and energy on their offspring.

Behaviors such as oral sex, haphazard mating, and face-to-face copulation survived the shift toward family life, while others fell away. Having frequent casual sex with friends and neighbors, as bonobos do, would have soured relations between early-human moms and dads in a hurry.

But where sex helps maintain the family in humans, in bonobos it appears to sustain the whole community. Bonobos use sex not only to ease tensions and make peace, but for fun, for food, sometimes as a way to say hello—and they're not so concerned about gender. Homosexual contact is common. His sessions with Connie-Lenore notwithstanding, Maiko rubbed scrotums with Congo a couple of times, apparently just to be friendly. And Connie-Lenore had six passionate encounters with Lina, an adolescent female.

"It's quite possible that our earliest ancestors behaved this way," says de Waal. "But later, when we developed the family system, the use of sex for these purposes became limited. Some of the sexual behaviors we see, such as homosexuality or bisexuality, may be leftovers that some people now consider unacceptable or perverse."

Many people may in fact be born bisexual, he believes, but in societies that force them to choose, they go one way or the other.

Bisexuality, kinky sex, multiple partners, so-called sexual addiction—it's all there in our closest relatives. "Whatever you think about these behaviors," says de Waal, "after watching the bonobos, you cannot argue that they're unnatural."

Of course, simply knowing almost anything goes in nature isn't reason enough to roll around with the next warm body that comes down the street. Most people would like something more: a shared sense of humor or curiosity, some mutual fascination, some mystery, excitement, devotion. A little love, come to think of it. Something that Courtney, for her part, didn't find at the Dark Horse. After two hours, her flirtation with Todd ended the way human mating rituals often do. She gazed into the distance for a minute, made a brief parting gesture, and was gone. ■

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