Humans are hardly the only animals in which males use aggression—or its threat—to intimidate females.
O
n the surface, female chacma baboons at Namibia’s Tsaobis Nature Park seem to have it pretty easy. Amidst the rocky hills that flank a dry river bed, the primates live in large, coed troops that appear to be peaceably promiscuous. A female, when she becomes fertile, will approach several different partners and present them with her hindquarters, which have swollen to mark her receptivity. Tsaobis males have never been observed forcing themselves on females. “It’s often seen that females are quite free to choose their mates,” says evolutionary biologist Alice Baniel, who has studied the desert baboons for six years. But when Baniel, a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, France, was doing her Ph.D. research a few years ago, she wondered if that freedom might be illusory—if something more complex was going on. The males, after all, can be aggressive. They chase females, trap them in trees, even physically attack them, though the belligerence doesn’t end in mating attempts. So Baniel and her team collected data on female behavior, choosing one animal at a time and recording her activities for an hour. She combined that information with earlier data her Ph.D. advisor, Elise Huchard, had collected. Examining more than 3,400 hours of observations of 53 females, Baniel noticed a pattern, which she published last year in the journal Current Biology: When a male chased and attacked a particular female in the weeks preceding her ovulation, he was more likely to monopolize her sexually later, during her most fertile days.

Why would a baboon choose to mate with her tormentor? Baniel rejected one idea: that females preferred the most-aggressive males because they produced healthier offspring. If that were the case, she says, the females would have chosen partners who menaced everyone rather than the ones who had singled them out. Rather, it appeared to the biologist that male baboons employ a long-term strategy of sexual intimidation. “By threatening females and inducing fear in them over prolonged periods,” Daniel hypothesizes, males not only coerce the females to mate with them later on, but also “discourage them from leaving their proximity or from trying to mate with rivals.”

Baniel’s paper adds to a growing body of research suggesting that sexual harassment, at least as nonscientists define the term, is hardly limited to humans. Males of numerous species, from mammals to birds, fish and even insects, can be sexual menaces—and females have developed ingenious strategies to avoid unwanted attention.

Some scientists suggest this research may yield clues about human sexual coercion, including extreme workplace harassment. “Many aspects of this behavior are directly comparable to what we see in nonhuman primates, with aggression—violence or the threat of violence—being used to intimidate women into unwanted sexual behavior,” says University of New Mexico anthropologist Martin Muller. Baniel, too, says human sexual misconduct might have evolutionary roots. But she is quick to add that this doesn’t make it inevitable. “Even if a behavior is grounded in evolutionary roots, it’s important to recognize that there might be circumstances under which this behavior is not adaptive. For example, in nonhuman primates, it’s possible that males use aggression to instill fear in females, so they’ll submit to sexual advances later. “These attacks,” Goodall wrote in her book The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior, “certainly function to increase the fearful respect of the females for the males concerned; they learn that they must either totally avoid a particular male, or quickly respond in a positive way to his requests.”

Smuts, now retired from the University of Michigan, wrote several papers during the 1990s. She argued that studies of primate sexual coercion could help us understand our own species and lamented that few colleagues had given the subject much attention.

One exception was British behavioral ecologist Tim Clutton-Brock, who cataloged the ways nonhuman males across species—orangutans, otters, deer, ducks, butterflies—tried to force themselves on females. He referred to sexual harassment as “asymmetric wars of attrition.” Imagine, he says, a conflict between a male who wants to mate and a female who doesn’t. “Whoever wins that contest is the individual who’s prepared to go on for longest,” he explains. “It’s not necessarily a great deal of violent aggression involved. It’s just continual persistence. Rebuffing persistent courtship has costs—less time for feeding, for example—and females finally give up and acquiesce.”

Clutton-Brock divided sexual coercion into three categories, a taxonomy many scientists still use. “Harassment” is persistent behavior aimed at getting immediate results. “Intimidation” is punishment of noncompliant females (others define it as long-term aggression to assure future

In Lincolnshire, England, a female grey seal fends off a male’s attempt to mate (left). To protect themselves from such unwanted attention, which decreases the time available to nurse pups, females (in Scotland, above) may synchronize when they give birth.
African swallowtail butterflies, which, when they are try -

one-seventeenth as much time fending off males as do

birth. Mothers who pup during that peak period spend

Sable Island, female grey seals synchronize when they give

mind-boggling. Some seek the friendship of protective

Females fight back

that intimidation can be a truly long game.

They also resort to actual violence

in Gombe assert themselves,

in part, by symbolic violence:

charging and chasing females and

putting up their fur to look bigger.

Female Trinidadian guppies often endure one

rush at females with ears cocked forward, trying to sniff

making it harder to attend to foals. Male spotted hyenas

lactating females for up to one-third of a mile at a time,

ing the health of their young.

Male grey seals try to mount lactat-

ing than females, but they still look for quality mates. “You

the same pattern in females?” Males might be less discern-

more energy in caring for offspring. “So why don’t we see

reproduction and female sexuality. Humans, she argued,

inherited these structures from other primates and added

new tools, like language, to tighten that control. “If male

chimpanzees could talk,” she wrote, “they would probably
develop rudimentary myths and rituals that increased male

political solidarity and control over females.”

Culture temps behavior

Many scientists share Smuts’ view that other animals can

help us understand human sexual aggression. “It’s all a con-
tinuum,” says Muller, who has done pioneering fieldwork

on chimpanzees. “At the one extreme, you have coercion

backed up by threats of violence. But humans are clever,

and they can come up with nonviolent means of coercion,

like threatening your job or career.”

Scientists do worry that human predators and their

apologists will point to baboons and chimpanzees and

insist that harassment is biologically inescapable. “We need
to be very careful that we don’t make the ‘naturalistic fal-
lacy’: that because something is found in the natural world,

we are saying something about it morally,” Alonzo says.

Suzanne Alonzo, an evolutionary biologist at the Uni-

versity of California–Santa Cruz, suggests another possible

protection: the drab physical appearance of females in spe-
cies with flamboyant males. “There’s a huge literature on

why males do have these ornaments,” she says. One explana-
tion is that flashiness signals a healthier mate who will invest

more energy in caring for offspring. “So why don’t we see

the same pattern in females?” Males might be less discern-

ing than females, but they still look for quality mates. “You

would expect to see some female ornamentation—maybe not

the huge, beautiful tail of the male peacock, but something”

Puzzling over the mystery with evolutionary biologists

David Hosken and Nina Wedell at England’s University of

Exeter, she recalls Hosken asking, “What about the

fact that another cost to females is that, if they signal how

curend they are, males then would harass them?” This

made “perfect sense,” Alonzo says, and in 2016 the trio

published their hypothesis in the journal Animal Behaviour.

Does human sexual harassment have roots in other spe-
cies? This remains as touchy a subject as it was when Smuts

first wrote about it. In a 1995 article, “The Evolutionary

Origins of Patriarchy,” she argued that the structures of
certain primate societies—for example, the strong male-

female alliances among chimpanzees—helped males control

In Tanzania’s Gombe National Park, a male chimpanzee (left) puffs up his fur as part of a dominance display, and a mother chimp calmly tends to her infant (above). The park has yielded some of the most innovative research on sexual dynamics in primates.

Feldblum agrees and argues that studying sexual coer-
cion among animals could help us curb the mistreatment of

women. “The important thing about this research is not to

legitize but to try and get a clear-eyed view of the evolu-
tionary origins of human behavior so that we can mitigate

some of the behaviors that we find undesirable,” he says.

“Ultimately, we’re going to probably be able to say that sex-

ual aggression has deep evolutionary roots,” he adds. “What

is unique about humans is that we can rely on cultural evolu-
tionary origins of human behavior.”

The role of culture in shaping human behavior is

fundamental, says Clutton-Brock. And though humans

still have much work to do to address sexual violence, he

emphasizes “how important social norms are in helping us

get along with each other quite happily. Human society is,

in many ways, a great success. And human society saves us

from the sorts of things that animals regularly inflict on

one another."

Barry Yeoman wrote about animal mourning in the February–

March 2018 issue.

mating). Then there’s “forced copulation,” in which males

rely on speed or brute strength to overpower females.

There are many variations. Male Grey’s zebras chase

lactating females for up to one-third of a mile at a time,

making it harder to attend to foals. Male spotted hyenas

rush at females with ears cocked forward, trying to sniff

or bite them. Female Trinidadian guppies often endure one

mating attempt per minute involving high-speed chases.

Scientists do worry that human predators and their

apologists will point to baboons and chimpanzees and

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