

A Case Study of the Emergence and Modern Use of “Alpha Male”

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Alpha male is a term used in both animal societies and human popular culture today. Defined as the “dominant male”, this term is misunderstood often, mostly in human society. This paper aims to trace the history of the alpha male concept and distinguish its origin in animal research on social hierarchies, explore the current impacts of this term on human society, and identify three key factors that led to this term being misused by popular culture in modern-day society. By exploring its history and current use, this paper suggests that uncared language, misogyny in the scientific community, and the popularization of scientific terminology in nonscientific landscapes are the key contributors to the current misunderstanding of the alpha male. Identifying these major factors provides a basis for future actions, such as increasing diversity on research teams and peer reviewing the diction of scientific literature.

Introduction

The term alpha male has been used in science, media, and daily conversations for decades. Alpha male simply means the “dominant male” (Merriam-Webster) and has been typically used in human society to depict an aggressive and dominant male character. This term has had a significant impact on scientific research and gender norms in modern society. The research that led to this term demonstrated social complexity and hierarchical dynamics in non-human species, which helped to launch a new sector of animal research (Strauss, E.D., et al, 2022). However, it is also used today to justify misogyny and pressure men to fit a traditional archetype.

This paper aims to explore the history of the term alpha male including its origin, popularization, the literature that arose from it, and the scientific myths that encouraged its use.

Additionally, this paper will explore its impact on society and specifically, young boys and men. The use of alpha in science is quite different from that in human society. The central objective of this review is to discern what major factors contributed to the sweeping misuse of alpha male in today's world, especially amongst anti-feminist, young men.

This paper will first explore how alpha male is used in today's society to discriminate against women. Then, it will outline the historical journey of this term, using the original literature that it was derived from and how said literature defined and explained this terminology. Finally, this paper will identify three major factors that have contributed to the misunderstanding of alpha males today. Those factors will be discussed in the following order: uncareful language in scientific literature, the deep embedding of gender bias in the scientific community, and the phenomenon of nonscientists using scientific terminology improperly, essentially creating a pseudoscience.

The Alpha Male In Human Society

The term alpha male was popularized in the late 2000s and has been used throughout social media in groups of individuals who subscribe to the idea of the Manosphere. This term refers to a collection of “websites and internet discussion groups that are concerned with men's interests and rights as opposed to women's, often connected with opposition to feminism or dislike of women” (Cambridge University Press & Assessment). The term Manosphere was first used in 2009 amongst different internet groups (Ging, D., 2017) and was then further popularized in *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* by Ian Ironwood in 2013. This culture uses alpha along with beta, omega, and zeta to describe the type of men that women want. The author suggests women prefer alphas, or men who display aggressive and dominating traits, and the

type of men that women will exploit and embarrass are betas (Ging, D., 2017). Men in these internet groups use social media to create and encourage a campaign of revenge against women that is founded on “the need to aggressively compete and dominate others”. Experts say that this need can be traced back to multiple sources of insecurity, such as sexual rejection, unstable employment, violence in media, pornography, and the “erosion of white male privilege” (Ging, D., 2017, p. 640).

An example of this behavior is the famous anti-feminist media persona, Andrew Tate. With a following of millions, Tate has used misogynistic language that has influenced an entire generation of young men and is merely one manifestation of this extremist culture. He has discussed women as “men’s property [and] that they should bear responsibility for rape” (Haslop, C., 2024, p. 1). While Tate himself doesn’t often mention the term alpha male, his antifeminist views are commonly associated with its use. There are multiple notebooks and literature that use both Andrew Tate and Alpha Male in their titles and descriptions, demonstrating a strong link between the influencer and this term. Some examples are *Andrew Tate the Way of Alpha* by Thomas Robertson (Amazon, 2023). and “Alpha Male Notebook with Andrew Tate Quotes” (Amazon, 2022) both of which can be ordered on Amazon.

The term alpha male is weaponized to criticize the feminist movement and the independence and free choice of women. Not only is alpha male used in this context, but there is also a strong connection between misogynistic rhetoric and other scientific terminology. Words like “evolution”, “instinct”, “nature”, “wombs”, “generation”, (Ging, D., 2017, p. 649), and even “female”, the latter of which, when used to describe women, is seen as dehumanizing. This phenomenon is coined as evolutionary psychology, or evo psyche (Haslop, C., 2024). This concept originally refers to “the study of behavior, thought, and feeling as viewed through the

lens of evolutionary biology” (Britannica), however, in the context of the Manosphere, states that women are “irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males, and need to be dominated” (Haslop, C., 2024, p. 2). The alpha male is part of this phenomenon, as it is a terminology rooted in science that is being misinterpreted and misused to perpetuate and justify independent agendas. It is noted that this language is also rooted in religion, patriarchal constructs, and white supremacy, however, for the purpose of this conversation, this paper will only discuss the contribution of this language in relation to the role of the alpha male in gender discrimination.

The dangers of the alpha male have especially been relevant in the past 20 years or so, as social media has allowed antifeminists to find one another across the world and make blatant statements of misogyny anonymously and without consequence. Recent studies have shown that the more young men consume media of varying types, the more likely they are to align with “traditional masculine ideology”, which is defined in this case as more aggressive and dominant traits in men (Scharrer, E. & Warren, S., 2021). Additionally, young boys find this rhetoric from personas such as Andrew Tate to be comical and even a voice of reason (Haslop, C., 2024), indicating that the mindset of men who consider themselves alpha males is damaging to younger generations. This finding, along with the language of evolutionary psychology, indicates to this author that the language used in animal research needs to be carefully evaluated, defined, and peer-reviewed before publication to avoid similar cases to the pseudoscience being created by the manosphere and anti-feminists today.

Background & Origins

Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and can also be defined as something first, dominant, or related to the beginning (Merriam-Webster). In social groups, the use of the term alpha indicates an inherent social hierarchy, where Alpha means first, Beta means second, and so on. The first scientific study to describe social hierarchies in non-humans was Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe's 1922 publication. Schjelderup-Ebbe observed chicken flock behavior, noting clearly that some hens were pecked more often than others. He described this hierarchical behavior as "Hackliste", which translates to "pecking order", coining the dominant hens as "despots", or rulers (Strauss, E.D., et al, 2022, pp. 1-2). While Schjelderup-Ebbe made no mention of alpha in his research, his observations were foundational to sparking a new field of animal research: sociality and hierarchy. While many published works after Schjelderup-Ebbe's described social hierarchies in primates, domestic species, and birds (Strauss, E.D., et al, 2022), the first that used the term alpha male was research on the wolf.

In 1981, David L. Mech published *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*, where alpha is used in relation to wolf behavior and sociality. In this book, Mech discusses multiple studies on wolf behavior from the previous decade and includes anecdotes and observations from his own work with wolves. Alpha male is first mentioned on page 69, along with alpha female (Mech, D.L., 1981, p. 69). In total, there are 47 mentions of alpha, 13 of which refer to both female and male wolves, 23 of which refer to male wolves, and only 11 of which refer to female wolves (Mech, D.L., 1981). Additionally, when discussing male vs female alphas, the language and context are quite different. For example, the vast majority of the times alpha female was mentioned was in relation to breeding or reproduction throughout the book, using phrases like "in heat", "tenderly", and "important" in terms of pack mating (Mech,

D.L., 1981). Conversely, alpha male was associated with much more diverse descriptors such as “motivated”, “leader”, and “initiative” (Mech, D.L., 1981).

After Mech’s work, the publication that further popularized the public's use of the alpha male was *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* by Frans De Waal in 2007. De Waal was and remains one of the leading primatologists in the world and is attached to countless books and pieces of research. In this book, De Waal meticulously details the social behaviors and interactions of a chimpanzee troop in a zoo in Arnhem, Netherlands (De Waal, F., 2007). He gives an in-depth account of the social hierarchy, greetings, and relationships between the chimps he comes to know very well. De Waal (2007) uses the term alpha male throughout the publication, as males come into and out of power. However, when describing the alpha male, De Waal remained quite objective. He discussed that alpha males are kept within the social expectations of the troop, meaning that if he stepped out of line, his position would be vulnerable (De Waal, F., 2007). De Waal talks about a time when the alpha male was on poor terms with the troop, but was brought back in and accepted due to one of the females in the troop (De Waal, F.). De Waal mentions alpha females as well, stating that while they are less prone to conflict or violence, their position of power and popularity in the group can make or break a male's position as alpha (De Waal, F.). He even admits that alpha males are not even necessarily confident, as their sense of security, again, is reliant on the rest of the troop (De Waal, F.). It was this literature that sparked the onslaught of the manosphere just two years later.

Discussion

There is a clear disconnect between the use of the alpha male in the scientific literature and its use in human circles. De Waal illustrated alpha males as gentle, empathetic, decisive, and

dependent on the rest of his group (De Waal, F.). Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebb didn't even mention roosters in his observations, making the leaders he recorded all females. Even in the literature that contains biases, such as *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*, the alpha male is still compared more equally to alpha females compared to in human society, where the term alpha female is hardly ever used while alpha male is used frequently. This discrepancy between the two uses begs the question: How did the alpha male become so misunderstood and weaponized? This author has distinguished three distinct factors that may answer this question.

I. Uncareful Language

This author believes that one of the biggest factors that caused the alpha male phenomenon to occur was a lack of clear definitions and objective language in the literature. While De Waal's book painted a more objective and very different image of the alpha male, there was one discrepancy that may have altered the outcome: a definition. While he discussed the alpha male of the chimpanzee troop he was studying, there was never a clear definition stated in his book about what the alpha male is. The term in and of itself already suggests power and control, so without any supplemental definition or clarifications, the term somewhat loses its meaning throughout the book. In De Waal's attempt to remain objective yet nuanced, he didn't create clear parameters for the terminology he was using, which is important in scientific work, even if that work is popular literature versus a research article.

By exploring the alpha male case study, we can see that diction can have lasting effects. Any scientist knows how damaging bias, leading information, and subjective opinions can be in a work of research. Matthew Normand (2017) explores the role of linguistics in scientific understanding and says that "What we know about the world is simply the way we have learned to talk about the world" (Normand, M.P., 2017, p. 675), which in the context of the alpha male,

can be quite troubling. It demonstrates that even when alpha males are described as empathetic or docile, people will still think it factual that they are aggressive and hostile because that is how they were talked about in the past. This is why detailed and specific language is so crucial in science, as it is the language that will determine the general public's views, not the science itself. Science is a precise practice and thus requires precise language more so than everyday language (Normand, M.P., 2017) to avoid miscommunications or wrongful assumptions. Research is an important part of a scientist's job, however, this author argues that communication and linguistics are equally crucial. If a scientist cannot effectively communicate their findings responsibly and objectively, then the science itself can become lost, or, like in the case of the alpha male, weaponized.

II. Gender Bias in Science

While the field of science is perceived as accurate and objective, it is still at the whim of human values, biases, and behaviors. Therefore, there is an unfortunately rich history of discrimination in scientific research. It can range from excluding whole demographics of subjects to choosing specific language that results in a subconscious misperception of the research itself. The history of misogyny in science is complex and long, going back to Darwin, however, this paper can only emphasize this concept within animal and hierarchical research. The previously mentioned literature *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species* demonstrates gender-based implicit bias well. Based on the descriptions of alpha males versus alpha females in wolf society, there is a clear disconnect between how Mech (1981) described females and males, even when both are considered alphas. To make it clear, this author is not criticizing researchers for simply describing animal behavior, as many species have dominant males and submissive females, however, even when a species does have more equal

dominance amongst the sexes, such as wolf breeding pairs, the language and type of attention each receives is unequal. In Mech's work, male wolves are observed with a more open and diverse perspective, while female wolves are mostly observed from a reproductive angle, excluding other behavioral and social roles they may fill. While Mech (1981) didn't describe anything inaccurately, per se, it is this language that perpetuates implicit discrimination.

Assumptions and correlations are carried with the reader, assuming females will be more docile and males more dominant.

Not only does misogyny appear in the diction of research, but also in what people decide to research. De Waal's work, which presents as very objective and neutral, doesn't explore the alpha females of chimp society, even though he reiterates how important females are in these troops (De Waal, F., 2007). Tens of pages of his book describe the stories of alpha males, however, the alpha females are noted to have a "stable" hierarchy and only get two pages in his novel in a subtitled section of the Social Mechanisms chapter (De Waal, F., pp. 178-180). This isn't meant to criticize De Waal's research, but more so to demonstrate how much work is done to understand the males of an animal group, but not necessarily the females. Researchers seem to simply decide to focus more on males than females, as seen in Mech's and De Waals' publications.

III. Use of Scientific Terminology in Nonscientific Settings

The final contributor to the alpha male being popularly misused throughout human society is its transition from scientific context to pop culture. In other words, what was coined and described in a scientific setting was then used in a setting of popular culture and social media use. Scientific literature is available to almost everyone, whether they are an experienced scientist or not. Specifically, De Waal's and Mech's books were published along with any other

book you may find in a library or online. This means that your audience is no longer that of only scientists or coworkers. You are now opening the literature to anyone who may happen upon it.

This paper emphasizes this point because scientific writing and popular writing are very different. As Normand (2017) mentioned, scientific language needs to be much more precise to effectively describe the work. Therefore, when you have “everyday” people reading scientific literature, miscommunications, misunderstandings, and misperceptions are much more likely. A scientist may know the history of the alpha male and understand the nuance that accompanies it. However, a nonscientist may not grasp that complexity, leading to people interpreting the science much more literally, such as in the case of the alpha male. This isn't to say that science should not be made available to the public, as this author believes that it should. However, understanding that a scientific work may not just be read by colleagues but by people with little to no background changes the context in which that work is being written. More clarification, bolded definitions, and precise explanations may be needed to discourage any misinterpretations or weaponization of scientific discovery. In the same breath, it is also the responsibility of the public to read scientific literature responsibly and objectively. A research article cannot be interpreted with the same tools that a piece of fiction work would be, for example, and to do so would be irresponsible. Early education on the topic would benefit the public's ability to read, understand, and fairly interpret scientific literature.

The Alpha Male in Science Today

Since his publication, De Waal has made many efforts to dispel the incorrect use of the alpha male. In his 2017 TedTalk, he discusses the science of the alpha male in chimpanzees and makes clear that alpha males are not bullies (TED, 2018). In fact, when an alpha male is a bully

in chimps, they don't often last long in their position. He offers a definition of an alpha male as "the highest-ranking male" (TED, 2018), which was lacking in his book. He also states that the most important trait of an alpha male is empathy, as the alpha male chimp demonstrates more of this than any other member of the coalition (TED, 2018). He also discusses the importance of the alpha female in chimp coalitions, as she is the "centrum" of the group (TED, 2018).

Additionally, he brings up bonobos, which are equally related to humans as we are to chimps. These primates operate in a matriarchal system with an alpha female yet have been researched much less than chimps and seem to be ignored in the movement of alpha males (TED, 2018). De Waal strongly disagrees with the way the alpha term has been used throughout human society since his book, and even states that it is an insult to chimpanzees to call a "bully" an alpha (TED, 2018).

It is worth noting that since the original pieces of literature that led to this term, a much more comprehensive and complex perspective of dominance has been established in the animal research community. Factors such as personal relationships, hormone levels, or even skin pigmentation (Lewis, R.J., 2022) may play a role in dominance, or, on the other hand, interactions that were deemed indicative of hierarchy may have simply been a product of happenstance. "A focus on strength, aggression and fighting provides an incomplete understanding of the power landscape that individuals actually experience" (Lewis, R.J., 2022, p. 1), demonstrating that human understanding of animal hierarchies may not be a complete picture. Considering this, using terms such as alpha male that are not fully explained or defined in the literature to describe dominance is even more irresponsible. To base an entire psychology of being the alpha male, when that concept is not fully developed or even consistent across research is fallacious. It is based on these points that this author believes using alpha to describe any

member of a social system is outdated, oversimplified, and not an effective way to describe animal hierarchies.

Conclusion

The modern use of the alpha male term is a manifestation of decades of uncared language in animal behavior research, gender bias in the scientific community, and irresponsible use of scientific terminology in popular culture. The danger of the alpha male concept lies within its suggestion of a hierarchy within a system, and when applied to a patriarchal state, it can lead to discrimination. The alpha male movement specifically uses the term to demonstrate a social hierarchy that places men over women and erases any existence of an alpha female. The use of alpha male by anti-feminists has created a pseudoscience that believes there are fundamental and biological differences between men and women that justify discriminatory behavior. This has led to the unfortunate reality of women being treated less than men, talked down to by men, and put in danger when around the wrong people.

While more research is needed to gain a holistic understanding of gender bias in scientific literature and the impacts of the term alpha male on human society, a few recommendations can be made. As mentioned, more quantitative research should be performed to translate this phenomenon and bias into numerical data that can be synthesized, averaged, and used as hard evidence to support further action. Additionally, the diversity of scientists and researchers needs to be prioritized. Including more women, scientists of color, and researchers of diversified backgrounds would encourage a more multidisciplinary approach to animal research. Multidisciplinary, in this case, speaks to not only animal experts publishing a piece of literature, but also linguistic experts, writers, social justice advocates, and potentially even psychologists

helping to publish that same piece of work. While this may not be realistic for every piece of research, this author does believe that including communication and diversity experts on animal research can help bridge the gap between science and the public. It is vital to the validity and lifespan of scientific work to prioritize these recommendations in future research.

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