How America Became Infatuated With a Cartoonish Idea of ‘Alpha Males’

By

**[Jesse Singal](http://nymag.com/author/Jesse%20Singal/)**
**May 18, 2016 12:43 pm**

Ever since there have been men, those men have looked at other men and said to themselves, *I want what that guy has*. It has always been the case that some men, by dint of noble birth or symmetric features or an effortless sense of humor, have had the most access to sex, resources, and society’s esteem.

It’s only been fairly recently, though, that we’ve come up with a tidy, sciencey-sounding taxonomy that can explain why some men — and for the purposes of a conversation that is about attracting women, we’re talking about straight ones — get what they want while others toil endlessly with little to show for it. “Alpha males” are the winners, and “betas” are always a step, if not several laps, behind. (And don’t even ask about [omega males](http://www.askmen.com/dating/curtsmith_300/384_5-signs-you-are-an-omega-male.html).) And while the alpha male/beta male model sometimes feels intuitively correct, and has influenced many, many internet-age kids, make no mistake: It’s dying, even if its adherents are louder thanever.

There are many definitions of “alpha male,” but the term, as it has most commonly been interpreted recently, involves a level of dominance: Alphas get their way because they know how to, because they know to not back down. To butcher the old expression, women respond to alphas’ strength by wanting them, men respond to it by wanting to *be* them. But a liaison, relationship, or friendship is only going to occur on the alpha’s terms: He has neither the inclination to compromise, nor any need to, since he can always get — let’s be honest, take — what he wants. Alphas offer few wasted words — you won’t see them sputtering some nonsense about their feelings, or begging others to like them. To the outside observer, everything comes easily to them.

The concept of the alpha male comes from the animal kingdom, and interest in the sorts of animal hierarchies led by alphas picked up greatly in the second half of the 20th century. Google Scholar can only provide a rough estimate, of course, but it [returns 11 research mentions of “alpha male” between 1900 and 1950](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=%22alpha+male%22&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C33&as_ylo=1900&as_yhi=1950), and [about 2,220 for the period between 1950 and 2000](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=%22alpha+male%22&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C33&as_ylo=1950&as_yhi=2000). [Google Books](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=alpha+male&year_start=1800&year_end=2015&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Calpha%20male%3B%2Cc0) shows a similar trend: The term barely existed in books until 1960 — though in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, first published in 1932, human beings were assigned, from fetushood on, to a caste ranging from alpha to epsilon — and since then has been on a mostly consistent upswing.

A solid chunk of that upswing [comes from primatology research](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=%22alpha+male%22+and+primatology&btnG=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C33&as_ylo=1950&as_yhi=2000) — researchers have long been fascinated by the complicated social structures of chimps, gorillas, and our other evolutionary cousins. The alpha chimp and the silverback gorilla, physically imposing as they often are (alpha chimps have been known to rip tree stumps out of the ground in terrifying displays of dominance), have come to symbolize in the public imagination a natural order that favors a single dominant male “winner.”

Even after discussion of alpha males was well established in various fields of animal behavior, though, the concept was rarely applied to humans. What changed that, at least in part, was the release of the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal’s book *[Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes](http://www.amazon.com/Chimpanzee-Politics-Power-among-Apes/dp/0801886562?ascsubtag=%5B%5Dbm%5Bp%5Dcioc0315s007fjny6826jyzhy%5Bi%5DVdVtz3%5Bd%5DD%5Br%5Dgoogle.com%5Bz%5Dm)* in 1982. “I don’t think the term alpha male was in use outside of primatology when I wrote *Chimpanzee Politics*,” de Waal told me in an email.

Part of the appeal of de Waal’s best seller, which told the story of the six years he spent observing a colony of captive chimps in the Netherlands, was the idea that it could offer insights into human life, too, and naturally one of the messages that echoed the loudest had to do with alpha-chimp behavior. One [Chicago](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-03-10/features/8501130886_1_chimpanzee-politics-harper-row-colony)*[Tribune](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-03-10/features/8501130886_1_chimpanzee-politics-harper-row-colony)*[article](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-03-10/features/8501130886_1_chimpanzee-politics-harper-row-colony), for example, flipped back and forth between scenes from de Waal’s research and human scenarios from a real-life office, with a natural focus on males near the top of the hierarchy grappling for power. “The startling thing about chimpanzee corporate life is how much it resembles our own,” remarked the article’s author, Duncan Maxwell Anderson, in a sentence that only makes sense if you don’t think too hard about it. He also pointed out that “a Dutch consulting firm … ordered 100 copies [of *Chimpanzee Politics*] and gave them to all the firm’s clients and employees.” Indeed, the book’s promotional materials note that it was “acclaimed not only by primatologists for its scientific achievement but also by politicians, business leaders, and social psychologists for its remarkable insights into the most basic human needs andbehaviors.”

***Related Stories***

[No, Evolution Doesn’t Disprove](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/evolution-doesnt-disprove-lean-in.html)*[Lean In](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/evolution-doesnt-disprove-lean-in.html)*[’s Arguments](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/evolution-doesnt-disprove-lean-in.html)

[Lame Evolutionary-Psychology Arguments Hurt Men, Too](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/12/lame-evolutionary-psych-arguments-hurt-men-too.html)

Still, the concept of the human alpha didn’t quite break through to the mainstream — it took a couple more decades for that to happen. As late as the mid-1990s popular outlets wrote about alpha males in an introductory manner. “Take a powder, sensitive guy,” went a *USA Today*article from 1996. “The new ideal man — at least, if you believe the latest issue of *Esquire* — is a superior fellow the mag dubs the ‘alpha male.’ And he’s putting the ‘man’ back in manhood.” Naturally, there were instances of backlash too, with one 1998 article on Silicon Valley alphas in the San Jose *Mercury News* offering a cautionary note: “[B]eware, say researchers who specialize in the study of these so-called ‘alpha males’ — the business world’s top dogs. The same traits prized by their colleagues could just as easily undercut their personal lives, contributing to family stress, higher odds of infidelity, divorce and overwork.”

It was Al Gore, though, who really helped the idea of male alphas and betas blow up in the 1990s. In late 1999, *Time* magazine, reporting on Gore’s hiring of Naomi Wolf as a consultant, reported that “Wolf has argued internally that Gore is a ‘Beta male’ who needs to take on the ‘Alpha male’ in the Oval Office before the public will see him as the top dog.” This notion — that Gore was trying to step out of the hypermasculine shadow of Bill Clinton — proved irresistible to the media. “Can Gore Go Alpha?” wondered the *Times* in a 1999 article which then then offered some thoughts from experts on how Gore could achieve the alphaness he was seeking. One of those experts suggested that he was just too loyal a husband and father to be an alpha: “He stays with the same woman, he likes his kids. He’s photographed with the grandchild. He doesn’t hide his age, He’s perfectly decent, and real men aren’t perfectly decent.” Naturally, Wolf didn’t take well to the narrative that she was trying to turn Gore into an aggressive bulldog. “Naomi Wolf, the feminist writer turned feminist campaign consultant, disputes the notion that she has been giving Al Gore secret lessons in how to bare his teeth, growl and get elected leader of the pack,” [led a](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/05/us/naomi-wolf-feminist-consultant-to-gore-clarifies-her-campaign-role.html?pagewanted=all)*[Times](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/05/us/naomi-wolf-feminist-consultant-to-gore-clarifies-her-campaign-role.html?pagewanted=all)*[story](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/05/us/naomi-wolf-feminist-consultant-to-gore-clarifies-her-campaign-role.html?pagewanted=all) a few days days later — Wolf claimed she had only mentioned the term once.

So, by the dawn of the 21st century, a lot of people were aware, at least in passing, of the concept of a human alpha male. But it was still something of an abstraction; it still hadn’t quite taken hold as a *goal* that normal guys could reach for. In 2005, *The Game*, Neil Strauss’s mega-bestselling account of his time in the pickup-artist community, changed that — in the long run, it turned alphadom into a real-world, achievable goal for perhaps millions of men.

A big part of the reason it made such an epochal splash was that Strauss himself is very much a normal guy — a schlubby writer who never had much success with the ladies. But the adoption of some simple wisdom changes that. Early on in the book, Strauss recounts the lessons he learns from Mystery, a pickup artist famous for, among other things, encouraging his protégés to [“peacock”](http://www.the-alpha-lounge.com/peacocking.html) by wearing garishly ridiculous clothing. Mystery explains to Strauss and the other would-be Casanovas what it means to be alpha: “Besides confidence and a smile, we learned [from Mystery], the other characteristics of an alpha male were being well-groomed, possessing a sense of humor, connecting with people, and being seen as the social center of a room,” [Strauss writes](https://books.google.com/books?id=Mogf4cZDm_sC&q=%22sense+of+humor%22#v=snippet&q=%22sense%20of%20humor%22&f=false). (Betas, on the other hand — and this definition seems consistent wherever you go — are frequently ignored or mocked by women, viewed by their peers as pushovers, and rarely get what they want, partly because they’re scared to truly go after it.)

Thanks in part to these lessons, Strauss is soon enjoying what what can only be described as a full-blown sexual extravaganza. This became the Ur-narrative of the alpha-male movement: Betas — even pathetic, helpless-seeming betas — can become alphas if they put enough time into it. Whether through [neuro-linguistic programming](http://www.neilstrauss.com/the-game/nlp-and-pick-up/) or nutritional supplements or body-language training or whatever the other alpha-izing trick du jour is, there’s always something that can be done to improve the situation, and it always involves becoming more assertive and/or imposing and/or dominant.

This idea proved to be catnip for men hoping to achieve the level of success — sexual, career, etc., but mostly sexual — that seemed to come so agonizingly easily to *other* men. The notion of the alpha male took all sorts of different frustrations and dysfunctions and envies and swept them together into a simple binary. Either you’re alpha or you’re not, and if you aren’t, boy, is a lot of failure going to spring from that deficiency. The good news is that it can (usually) be fixed: “If you’ve read the traits and characteristics of a beta male and find that you fit the mold, understand that being a beta male is a choice,” [notes one guide](http://www.tobealpha.com/what-is-a-beta-male/).

But how does one choose to break these patterns? What does it mean to become an alpha? Self-proclaimed experts have always disagreed about this, and that’s where the internet has stepped in. Over the last 20 years — but particularly since *The Game*’s release — a vast ecosystem of alpha-oriented online communities have popped up to teach men how to crawl out of the sad pit of their betadom. All draw on Strauss-style narratives of pathetic schlubs metamorphosing into sparkling alphas (sometimes, in the case of the attire Mystery favors, *literally*sparkling).

There’s endless appetite for this stuff: Young men desperately need to know whether they are alpha and, if not, what they can do to avert the slow-motion catastrophe of perpetual betadom. That’s why large segments of the internet have turned into a thick sludge of alpha-male content. A quick Google search for “How to be an alpha male” [returns 16.5 million results](https://www.google.com/search?q=how+to+be+an+alpha+male&oq=how+to+be+&aqs=chrome.0.69i59l2j69i65j0j69i57j0.944j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) where you can get you information on [how to be an alpha male](http://attractioninstitute.com/how-to-become-an-alpha-male-2-easy-steps/)(from “The Attraction Institute”); [read signs you’re](http://www.askmen.com/top_10/dating/top-10-signs-youre-not-an-alpha-male.html)*[not](http://www.askmen.com/top_10/dating/top-10-signs-youre-not-an-alpha-male.html)*[an alpha male](http://www.askmen.com/top_10/dating/top-10-signs-youre-not-an-alpha-male.html) (according to AskMen, non-alphas panic in a crisis, suck up to their superiors, and let women pick up the check); et cetera ad infinitum. Amazon’s book collection offers [endless opportunities to improve your alpha game](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref%3Dnb_sb_ss_c_0_11?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=alpha+male+become&sprefix=alpha+male+%2Caps%2C190&rh=n%3A283155%2Ck%3Aalpha+male+become&ascsubtag=%5B%5Dbm%5Bp%5Dcioc0315s007fjny6826jyzhy%5Bi%5D9PesVG%5Bd%5DD%5Br%5Dgoogle.com%5Bz%5Dm).

All this content has some breezy science affixed to it, of course — in 2016, what would a self-improvement plan be without some empirical-sounding buzzwords to throw around? In the case of alpha-dominance, the natural corresponding field is evolutionary psychology, or the study of how ancient evolutionary impulses forged millennia ago affect our behavior in the present day. It’s a real discipline with real insights to offer, but the version of it embraced by the alphateers is a bastardized, pseudoscientific strain wielded mostly by [people seeking to reinforce traditional roles of masculinity and femininity](http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/evolution-doesnt-disprove-lean-in.html), and the latter has fed into the former: Seek out a guide to alpha-maleness, and stories about how because something something something survival on the savannah millennia ago, women are drawn to physically and socially dominant men won’t be far behind.

These story lines, based as they are on misinterpretations and hysterical overextrapolations of our “natural” gender roles, feed rather fantastical visions of what it means to be a man, an adult, or both. Minutes after diving into the most alpha-obsessed pockets of the internet, you will come across stuff that reads as though the authors have rarely, if ever, interacted with other human adults in the real world: “Yes, you have to be dettached a bit [sic], put yourself first, cater to your own needs first, but an alpha is naturally a leader of a community, a leader of both men and women, and so he needs to have a certain level of empathy towards others,” goes a post entitled [“Lessons from evolutionary psychology: traits of the alpha male”](https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/3algk0/lessons_from_evolutionary_psychology_traits_of/) on TheRedPill, a rather infamous subreddit dedicated to “Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men.” The poster continues: “He has always been the protector of others. He is the one who was in charge of ensuring their survival.” (Wait, remind me whether we’re talking about humans or chimps again?)

The appeals to nature and the wild show up again and again — a big chunk of being alpha, readers are told, has to do with dominating others. And to dominate others, it’s important not to come across as a pussy, because in those chimp colonies the pussy-apes always get punked. In his second rule for “How to Become a More Dominant Man,” Mike Cernovich, a well-known and rather acerbic manosphere presence with 45,000 Twitter followers, [tells his readers](http://www.dangerandplay.com/2014/03/17/how-to-become-a-more-dominant-man-body-language/) to “Stop smiling so much, you goofs.” “Girls always tell me I need to smile more,” he writes. “Well if girls think I am so ugly with my Mr. Frowny Face, why are they always talking to me and grabbing my arms and telling me how great my back feels when they hug me? I smile when around my god daughters and my dog. Otherwise I don’t see any need to smile like some goof.”

Did you notice the mixed signals? Just a few paragraphs ago, Mystery told us to smile. Which is it? This sort of contradiction is a common theme in alpha-land. Should you smile, or no? Should you confidently approach women, or ignore them, making yourself out to be the center of the room until *they* come to *you*? How much empathy should you exhibit? Different peddlers of alpha offer different answers. These inconsistencies raise the question of just how rigorous and scientific the idea of an alpha male really is.

For most straight males who grew up in the internet age, at least *some* aspect of the alpha-male idea has become deeply internalized. And kids caught in the wrong place at the wrong time — those who don’t have access to a leavening view of masculinity, women, and so on — can end up tumbling pretty far down the rabbit hole — again, just go to TheRedPill on Reddit.

Luckily, some researchers have started debunking and complicating the concept of the alpha male in important ways. The best such dissection was [written by the cognitive psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/07/07/the-myth-of-the-alpha-male/) a couple years ago. In his essay, Kaufman takes the reader through a small pile of the social-science literature on masculinity, relationships, and dominance, and comes to the conclusion that when you actually review the literature carefully, a much more nuanced, less Neanderthalic portrait of successful masculinity emerges:

The dominant male who is demanding, violent, and self-centered is *not* considered attractive to most women, whereas the dominant male who is assertive and confident is considered attractive. As the researchers suggest, “Men who dominate others because of leadership qualities and other superior abilities and who therefore are able and willing to provide for their families quite possibly will be preferred to potential partners who lack these attributes.”

Their results also suggest that sensitivity and assertiveness are not opposites. In fact, further research suggests that the combination of kindness and assertiveness might just be the most attractive pairing. Across [three studies](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/232516571_Dominance_prosocial_orientation_and_female_preferences_Do_nice_guys_really_finish_last/file/60b7d527001a2acb33.pdf), Lauri Jensen-Campbell and colleagues found that it wasn’t dominance alone, but rather the interaction of dominance and pro-social behaviors, that women reported were particularly sexually attractive. In other words, dominance only increased sexual attraction when the person was already high in agreeableness and altruism.

The key insight here is that prestige matters — it shouldn’t surprise anyone that women are most attracted to men who carve out an impressive niche for themselves — but there are many routes to it. And anyone claiming that kindness is a bad move doesn’t know what they’re talking about.

This idea that masculine worth can only be earned through the demonstration and projection of strength isn’t new — it’s been around since the first time one Neanderthal bashed another Neanderthal’s head in with a third Neanderthal’s skull. What *is* new is the pseudoscientific packaging drawn from barely relevant animal studies, from misunderstandings of how hormones work (alpha-peddlers are obsessed with hormones, specifically testosterone), from overblown evo-psych claims.

On the one hand, it makes sense that boys are drawn to this oversimplified model, particularly because it feeds into so much of the ambient culture surrounding masculinity and femininity. But on the other hand, it’s a bit strange, simply because these days they are awash in alternative models: Michael Cera and Jesse Eisenberg and Seth Rogen are legitimate movie stars. Kendrick Lamar’s breakthrough album involved gang-banging, yes, but in many of the verses he adopted the persona not of an alpha gangster, but of an exhausted and scared kid traumatized by the gunfire around him. Drake and Kanye are frequently, openly — quite ostentatiously, in the latter’s case — vulnerable.

If the goal of being alpha is to get access to women, prestige, and money, it can’t be the case that these men aren’t alpha in any sense that could possibly matter. And they’re reflecting trends one can observe at every level of society, not just in the superstar outliers. Looking at the scope of American masculinity from Friday-night football heroics in Texas to art galleries in hipster districts, there’s probably never been a time when there were more ways to “win” as a male.

And yet the hardline alpha-worshippers are not only hanging on — if anything, they’re inflamed and emboldened. Online, they seem to be as loud and angry as ever. As Jonathan Chait wrote this week, Republicans [have rediscovered the cult of masculinity](http://nymag.com/betamale/2016/05/gop-cult-masculinity-trump.html) thanks to Donald Trump. On Twitter, grown-man Trump supporters are unironically calling other men whom they perceive to be weak-kneed or effete “cucks” (naturally, not supporting Donald Trump is one of the primary symptoms of being a cuck).

Any time there’s a reconfiguration of gender roles, religion, or anything else viewed as a bedrock for how society is supposed to be organized, that reconfiguration is going to bring a backlash. That seems to be what’s going on now. Given that some of the ideas that drive the alpha-male archetype have been around for millenia, it’s unrealistic to expect they’ll go away anytime soon — there will always be men, and particularly frustrated young men seeking out a simple narrative to explain their failures, who are drawn to this idea. So the most likely outcome isn’t some mass enlightenment in which the world realizes all at once it has moved past the alpha male; it’s that the wannabe alpha will putter on eternally, puffed-up and nervous, stealing a quick glance at himself in the club mirror to make sure his smile isn’t too wide and therefore weak — while the *rest of us* ignore him and move on.

http://nymag.com/betamale/2016/05/the-rise-of-the-alpha-beta-male.html