Book Review

Natural Conflict Resolution. Edited by Filippo Aureli and Frans B.M. DeWaal, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2000, xiii + 409 pp., $65.00/£40.00 (cloth); $24.95/£15.95 (paper).

This multiauthored book, addressing a broad audience, preserves cohesion by superb organization. The same authors collaborate with different coauthors to maintain continuity. Boxes are successfully integrated into chapters. Introductory and concluding chapters, and some transitional material, complete the job.

The appended definitions are less satisfactory. Aggression as behavior performed “...in order to cause physical injury or to warn...” and Submission as “...reflecting fear, appeasement and attraction...the absence of aggressive tendencies...” invite anthropomorphism. Social dominance as “...consistent outcome in favor of the same individual...” and appeasement as “Actions...to reduce the risk of being attacked...” are consequences; akin to self preservation, they specify no activity. Motivational implications may be denied as metaphor, but what Machiavellian scheming and cognitive abilities are assumed when animals compete to groom one another in order to obtain agonistic aid and improve their dominance ranks? When I challenge “genes for infanticide” or “attempt to kill” (p. 266), friends smile and tell me only computers and unsophisticated students are that literal.

Descriptions of social organization often mention despotic, egalitarian, tolerant and intolerant dominance styles. Preuchoft and van Schaik are marvelously clear in describing despotic groups as those in which agonistic contests (influenced by dominance) decide virtually all conflicts and competitions, such that a subordinate immediately yields whenever a contest might occur. When aggression is only sometimes used to achieve an end, then it is the dominant that must signal when it will use these techniques; this is called tolerant. If dominance does not exist, or rarely predicts conflict or competitive outcomes, it is called egalitarian. But do formal status signals exist? Reliable behavioral indicators of dominance are useful to investigators, but are animals that yield, whenever they perceive a pending contest,
symbolically communicating status? Silk’s box makes a similar point; after an agonistic encounter, an honest signal of peaceful intent may produce reconciliation without being a reconciliation signal.

Van Schaik and Aureli theorize about social organization and valuable relationships. They identify predation, sexual harassment and infanticide as possible selective pressures. They deduce the selective advantages of infanticide and counter strategies, and readily admit that evidence for infanticide may be absent as a result. Therein lies the problem. In the evolutionary arms race between predator and prey, if one gets ahead, the selective pressure is stronger on the other, and the balance is maintained. In contrast, if counter strategies to infanticide are so successful that infanticide never takes place, then the selective pressure for infanticide, and any counter strategy, is zero. How can a theory be falsified when both the existence and nonexistence of data are explained? Logic and theory cannot substitute for data. It only makes sense that a male risking injury for another must be serving his own genetic interests. The male must be the likely (p. 321) father of an infant, or a former or future mate of a female. Services and favors and reciprocity in different currencies are used to explain asymmetries in the behavior of dyads. Extensive cognitive ability is implied. Is this more satisfactory than stating that alliances benefit both partners in their joint responses to environmental problems?

Judge demonstrates that neither spatial nor social density is simply or linearly related to measures theorized to be influenced by crowding. People in sparsely populated regions, cities, stadiums, space capsules, or elevators, do not show linear increases in aggression. Nor is the probability of reconciliation a linear function of partner value. Although friends are more likely to reconcile than non-friends, closely-bonded dyads may only reconcile after extreme altercations.

This book has numerous strengths. Cross-cultural and developmental themes, and correlates of stress, are well handled. I was fascinated by Yarn’s history of the legal profession in Britain and the United States. We may like the lawyer who is our ally in adversity, while despising the profession that seems to profit by exacerbating every conflict that ever occurs. The model used in law assumes that when two sides take extreme positions, a blind Justice, weighing distorted arguments, discovers truth. Winning is paramount, but rules take priority over justice. Opponents are judged right or wrong, the legal system imposes solutions to resolve disputes, but differences are not reconciled. International law fails because the Roman peace is enforced only when it is in Rome’s interest to force disputants to accept the law. Yarn champions alternative dispute resolution.

My differences may reflect my personality; whereas I respect the intellect, energy and scholarship of the principal contributors, where they see