

Interview

“Some never gain trust – they gain respect, they gain subservience, but not trust.”

Primatologist Jane Goodall has spent a lifetime studying chimpanzees. In an interview with THE FOCUS, she talks about self-assurance, relaxed relationships and what makes a leader in the jungle.

Trust is so hard to acquire and so easy to lose. But how did this interpersonal factor come into being and how did it remain among the survivors on the battlefield of evolution? Over several decades, the British ethologist Jane Goodall observed the behaviour of wild chimpanzees in Tanzania, aiming to improve our understanding not only of these remarkable animals but also of their closest relations – humankind.

The Focus: When you first went to Gombe National Park in 1960, what were you hoping to achieve?

Jane Goodall: Personally I was interested in learning about chimpanzees and their behaviour. But for Louis Leakey, my mentor, it was the links with human behaviour that counted. He was searching for the fossilised remains of the first humans in Africa, in the “Cradle of Man”, and he felt that if we found behaviour that was the same or similar in humans and chimpanzees today, then possibly this behaviour would have been present in a common ancestor. That, Leakey thought, would help us to imagine how early stone-age people behaved. That was his premise. Back then, we didn’t know how close humans and chimpanzees really are. We now know that the structure of the DNA in humans and chimpanzees differs by only just over one percent. You could even have a blood transfusion from a chimp, provided you have the same blood group.

The Focus: So studying chimpanzees was like looking through a window into our past.

Goodall: For me, the window was simply into this wonderful world of the wild chimpanzees, who are so much like us biologically and yet obviously so different. Other people have talked about them being a window into the past, which I suppose is true, in a way.

The Focus: Still, back then, people felt rather uncomfortable with that kind of parallel.

Goodall: At that time the study of animal behaviour was pretty reductionist. You had to look always for the simplest solutions to even very complex behaviour. But I had never been to college. So when Leakey arranged for me to go to Cambridge University to get a Ph.D. (“no time for a B.A.,” he said!) and I described the chimpanzees as having personalities, minds and emotions, I



RESUMÉ Jane Goodall



Jane Goodall was born in London in 1934. Her father was an engineer, her mother a writer. “The Woman who redefined Man”, as a biographer called her, embarked on professional life as a secretary in Oxford. She saved up money and in 1957 travelled to Africa, where, in Nairobi, she met the palaeontologist and anthropologist Louis Leakey (1903-1972). In 1960, Leakey entrusted her with the observation of a group of chimpanzees on the Eastern shores of Lake Tanganyika.

Goodall, who had no university training, devised her own style of research: instead of hiding from the chimps, she sat quietly and let them get used to her. As a result she was, eventually, able to observe behaviours that had previously remained unknown. She obtained new insight into the social life of chimpanzees, including cases of infanticide, cannibalism and violent conflict, as well as compassion and altruism. In 1965 she obtained a Ph.D. in Ethology from Cambridge University and over time her work gained increasing recognition. In 1977 she founded the Jane Goodall Institute, to help protect primates threatened by extinction. Today, with her Roots & Shoots programme for young people, she endeavours to promote environmental protection and compassion for all life among the younger generation. In 2002, the UN named Jane Goodall a Messenger of Peace. She was made a Dame of the British Empire in 2004 and in 2006 received the French Legion of Honour.

was told that only human primates had these attributes. I knew this was wrong – my dog Rusty had taught me that!

The Focus: When you began working in Gombe, how did the chimpanzees react to your presence?

Goodall: First they just ran away. When they got over that fear and realised I wasn’t going to hurt them, they were belligerent.

The Focus: So how did you gain their trust?

Goodall: Basically it was thanks to one chimpanzee who lost his fear. He came to my camp because a palm tree had ripened and he took some bananas. I asked my cook to put bananas out, and he continued coming back for them. As I watched, I realised he was the one I knew from the forest and had named David Greybeard. Later, in the forest, he would wander up to me, to see perhaps if I had any bananas. The others were all ready to run, but they saw David and obviously thought, well, she can’t be so bad after all. And that’s how David gradually led me into his world.

The Focus: He was the mediator.

Goodall: Yes. He wasn’t a dominant male, but he was a leader. The others chose to follow him. Sometimes, if he left the group, they would follow, which they don’t always do with the dominant male. Especially females and the younger ones like to be with somebody who is wise.

The Focus: Where would you say the foundations of trust can be found?

Goodall: I think we have to go right back to early childhood. In chimp society we’ve realised the tremendous importance of early experience, including the kind of mother you have. There are good mothers and bad ones, but most of them are somewhere in-between. A good mother is protective but not over-protective. She’s patient, she’s affectionate, she’s playful, but above all she is supportive. A chimp I called Flo was an example of the good mother and her offspring grew up to be assertive, confident and relaxed in their relationships with others. They all played a major part in the reproductive history of their community – the males became alpha and the females were prolific. And a major factor was their relaxed relationships with others.

The Focus: Did you take any special measures to win the chimpanzees’ trust?

Goodall: I always wore clothes of the same colour. I never tried to get too close too quickly and for a long time I didn't even try to follow them. I didn't make any sudden movements. I didn't talk loudly. I was just there. I didn't interfere with them. I was just part of the landscape.

The Focus: So what made them want to mix with you?

Goodall: They didn't. They just allowed me to approach. And later they came to my camp because they learned – from David – that they could get bananas there.

The Focus: How did your relationship with David Greybeard evolve?

Goodall: It was with him that I experienced one of the two most important moments of trust I can remember. One was when David Greybeard allowed me to groom him – you have to realise that touching is a real violation of personal space. The other moment was when Flo allowed her infant to reach out and touch me. That's real trust, because nothing is more precious than your baby.

The Focus: The trust you enjoyed from the chimps allowed you to observe their aggressive behaviour as well. What triggers that aggression?

Goodall: Almost everything that triggers it in humans. They compete for food; they compete for attractive females; and the males compete for dominance. That probably is the most significant factor for them.

The Focus: Everybody wants to be the boss?

Goodall: To be the boss, or to be high up in the hierarchy. But they're not all motivated in that way; some of them don't want to be the boss.

The Focus: That sounds very human.

Goodall: Yes, and like humans they also form alliances. Some alliances are for the most part stable, like those between brothers. On the other hand, there are times when things change. For instance, when the male who's been the number one is overthrown, for a while there is hostility between the defeated male and the new dominant individual, but after a couple of years they can become very close.

The Focus: Like the wise chairman who helps the new boss to acclimatise.

Goodall: That's right, and chimpanzees can be quite political. But having said that, the new boss has to suppress the previous alpha so vigorously that there's never any

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doubt who's in charge and that particular relationship gives him no further cause for concern.

The Focus: How does the new leader of a group of chimpanzees gain the trust of his tribe?

Goodall: There is no simple answer to that. They have such different personalities. Some of them never gain the trust. They gain respect, they gain subservience, but not trust. Others, with a different kind of personality, definitely become trusted leaders.

The Focus: Could you describe the main differences in personality between these two kinds of leader?

Goodall: Perhaps the best example was provided by the two brothers, Freud and Frodo... Freud was the elder one. He was big and strong, but not too aggressive, very laid back. Frodo, on the other hand, was not so smart and a real bully. He was five years Freud's junior, and as kids they had been really close and supported each other. Freud almost fell into the top ranking position because he was big and he wanted to get there, and he was very good at forming alliances. But when Frodo got bigger and stronger and began throwing his weight around, Freud realised that here was some competition and he had better watch out. So he started terrorising his younger brother. Quite literally. Frodo would rush away from him up to the top of a tree and sit whimpering for an hour or so, while Freud would calmly groom on the ground below, not paying him any attention. The picture changed when Freud got sick, very sick, and Frodo found him and attacked him brutally. And then a strange thing happened. It is hard to say how much thought went into this, but Frodo started insisting that his sick brother follow him.

The Focus: How did he do that?

Goodall: The males insist on females following them by shaking branches, and if the female fails to follow, the male may attack her. Frodo behaved exactly like that. He led his brother back to the group that had turned on him because he was sick. And when the others started



threatening Freud again, his younger brother protected him and then took over as leader. It was easy enough to take over because Freud was still sick and Frodo could rely on his size and strength to maintain that position.

The Focus: Did you sense something more than self-interest in Frodo's behaviour? A sense of caring for his brother?

Goodall: Of course we're all programmed genetically to some extent. But the "selfish gene" thesis doesn't explain everything. Even in chimps there is true altruistic behaviour; behaviour that doesn't fit into the sociobiological model that says you either help a close relative and thereby your own genes, or you help somebody else now in return for their help in the future. When a very high-ranking male chimpanzee rescues a little orphan, saving his life, that kind of explanation doesn't work.

The Focus: Nevertheless you found a dark side in chimpanzees – and insisted on your findings, despite meeting with initial denial and scepticism among your peers.

Goodall: What I met were certain scientists who reprimanded me for publishing this at all. They said I was giving a foothold to people who wanted to maintain that aggression and who claimed that war and violence are part of our genetic make up and therefore inevitable. And of course we do have aggressive tendencies. But I

believe that we have more capability than any other creature to control our biological inheritance – and we do so most of the time. Chimps act the way they feel unless they are afraid of reprisal if they do so. But that doesn't apply to humans. We can learn to suppress our feelings for other reasons. We learn the social norms of our society and modify our behaviour accordingly.

The Focus: So you provided a fuller, more realistic picture, allowing us to see both sides in animal behaviour?

Goodall: Much more realistic. The idea of the noble savage was gone. But I see that within each human being there are two extremes: there's the loving, the passionate, altruistic side that has evolved with us, and then there's the violent, brutal side that has evolved with us. The question for each individual is: which side is going to come out on top? Even when it comes to things like wars over oil, which may seem like a whole different ball game, there are still comparisons one can draw: chimps fight for their territory; they fight for the resources within that territory, so it does relate in a way.

The Focus: You have described in the past how the individual chimps in a group stick together, but have a tendency to differentiate themselves, sometimes violently, from other groups. Does trust within a group thrive on enemies outside?

Goodall: I suppose it helps to build in-group trust. Just think of the trust that often exists in soldiers. Within their own unit, you could say they have to trust each other. A spirit of camaraderie builds up and, in the end, they will risk their lives for each other. They may even go so far as to dehumanise the other, enemy group – a mechanism you can also observe in chimps.

The Focus: That's a very real downside of trust.

Goodall: It's a downside to us now. But from an evolutionary perspective it meant that, by doing so, you secured your own territory. You looked after your own females so that they and their young would have enough food. So you were thinking about the future of your own particular group.

The Focus: Is there a parallel here with the business world? What kind of behaviour would you expect from leaders of global corporations?

Goodall: I sometimes wonder how some people can live with themselves in some of the big companies today. So many far-reaching decisions are based on how they will affect the next shareholders' meeting. Our brain is almost the same as the chimps', but we have language, we have electronic communications, we've put people on the moon – we are immensely more intelligent. And yet: how come the being with the most extraordinary intellect ever is destroying its only planet?

The Focus: Do you have an answer?

Goodall: In a very unscientific statement, I feel that there's been a disconnect between this clever brain and the heart. Without the heart to ground it and open it to who we really can be as human beings, the brain is a very dangerous machine. A machine that is saying: we've got to have economic growth; we've got to have unending economic growth, otherwise societies will collapse. And yet there should be something saying: wait a minute, this isn't going to work. E. O. Wilson once said that if everybody on the planet today had the same standard of living as the average European or American, we would need three new planets. But we don't even have one new planet. We have this one, and with the way we're polluting it, the shrinking water resources, the climate change, the experimentation with plants... the outlook is grim.

The Focus: Faced with such a situation, what inspires your trust that humanity can change for the better?

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Goodall: It's youth – the young people we meet. That is why I have now dedicated my life to working with youth. We have our Roots & Shoots programme in 97 countries now. Young people want this. We have just started two different Roots & Shoots Youth Leadership programs, one in high schools and one at university level. When you meet these outstanding leaders who have been through a programme that empowers them to take positive action, to make things better for people, for animals and for the environment – when you watch them interact and they start brainstorming, you realise you can relax, because they have got it right. They understand that there's more to this life than just money.

The Focus: So you can rest assured that your ideas will spread and live on?

Goodall: It may sound trite, but young people really are the future. You know the old expression “We haven't inherited the world from our parents, we've borrowed it from our children”? Well it's just not true. We haven't borrowed anything. When you borrow you plan to pay back. We're stealing from our children – so many people have no intention of paying back.



The interview with Jane Goodall was conducted by Philipp Harmer, Egon Zehnder International, Vienna, and Ulrike Mertens, THE FOCUS.