

## We Are Family

A review of *Mothers and Others: the Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, by Sarah Hrdy, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (2009), 432 pages, £19.95 (\$29.95), ISBN-10: 0674032993, ISBN-13: 978-0674032996 (hardback)

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Sarah Hrdy's new book proposes a new hypothesis for the evolution of the human mind. She extends her previous work on cooperative breeding to argue that the very flexible form of cooperative childrearing that our species engages in has been an important force during the evolution of what makes us so different, and so successful, compared to other primates. Specifically, it is this strategy which has resulted in the evolution of our remarkably extensive mind-reading abilities, our understanding of, and empathy with, others. While her previous book *Mother Nature* focussed on motherhood and child-raising from the mother's point of view, this book focuses much on the perspective of the infant. She argues that, as human childhood extended and the period of dependence on adult care grew longer, children progressively needed to rely on care from adults other than the mother, since maternal care alone was no longer sufficient, until allocare became obligate. Such juvenile dependence, somewhat counter-intuitively, created mothers whose maternal investment was rather more facultative than that seen in other apes: if appropriate help was not available to rear children, any children born were at risk of abandonment or infanticide, activities rarely seen in other primates (except, not coincidentally, cooperatively breeding marmosets and tamarins). Such facultative maternal care, and the need to obtain care from many individuals other than the mother, created incentives by which infants developed advanced cognitive skills in mind-reading and understanding others, in order to persuade mothers and others to care. Mothers and other adults too had to become more tolerant of, and cooperative with, others for such a reproductive strategy to work.

In terms of the academic canon, this book is somewhat unusual. It is written for a popular audience, and will no doubt achieve a wide readership. It is expertly crafted and beautifully written, and contains a fair amount of quiet humour (not least the nods to popular culture in chapter titles such as 'Apes on a Plane' and 'Meet the Alloparents'). Her ability to communicate her ideas effectively to a wide audience is clear from the opening paragraphs, in which she illustrates the cooperative nature of own species by inviting us to imagine the mayhem that would ensue if 300 chimpanzees were confined together in a Boeing jet; a scenario that the human species appears to cope with relatively easily, or at least without outright bloodshed. It is also a work of scholarship, however – meticulously researched and firmly based in science which stems from a wide array of disciplines, much from anthropology, primatology and psychology but also palaeontology, genetics, endocrinology and others. The book is therefore likely to be, and deserves to be, highly cited among the academic community.

The book's grand overarching aim of proposing a theory which explains why humans are as we are inevitably results in a certain amount of speculation, and at times Hrdy's language

veers further into her personal journey of discovery on the road to her proposed hypothesis than is usual in academic texts. But this is part of what makes the book so engaging, and such provocative ideas which attempt to come up with answers to the really big questions in the human sciences are vital in ensuring the health and vitality of the discipline. All the more so if such grand theories are based on thorough and integrative research, as here. 'Pop' evolutionary psychology publications have attracted something of a bad reputation for containing too much speculation based on either no evidence, or very limited and biased evidence, frequently including only studies from a very narrow section of the human evolutionary sciences. One of the main strengths of *Mothers and Others* is its wide-ranging and integrative approach to human evolution. Hrdy seamlessly blends both the developmental psychology and anthropological literatures, for example, to generate an argument based on empirical evidence from both modern and traditional societies, a trick which has proved difficult to pull off by other authors. Such integration of data from both kinds of society is, however, essential if we are to make genuine progress in understanding human behaviour.

Forays into the speculative are in any case a small price to pay if the popular appeal of the book does result in it attaining a wide readership. It is likely to attract an enthusiastic audience amongst evolutionary anthropologists, but should also be read widely in disciplines as diverse as evolutionary psychology and social policy, since it is a very useful antidote to arguments frequently trotted out in both communities about the importance of the nuclear family as the only appropriate milieu in which to raise children. Hrdy's argument suggests that, while paternal input is frequently substantial and important to child-rearing, mothers and children do best to adopt a very flexible strategy in which they persuade a wide range of individuals to help care for children. Care from others than the mother, while demonised in parts of the social policy community and indeed the popular press, is therefore far from a new development. Indeed, her argument is that not only does such a flexible, group approach to childcare result in the best outcomes for children, it is actually what makes us human.

She ends the book by reflecting on what may happen in the future given that such kin-based cooperative networks of childcare are now breaking down. In modern environments, children can get by with much less hands-on care than in environments where mortality rates are much higher. Care also tends to come from a much smaller range of individuals in modern environments, where the expectation is that mothers will bear most of the burden of childcare, and alloparental care, where it does exist, is frequently bought in or provided by the State. Combined, these developments mean children in some societies at least are not now receiving care from many different, highly motivated individuals. Hrdy concludes that these dramatic changes in childrearing patterns could seriously compromise our ability to communicate and cooperate with others: "*If empathy and understanding develop only under particularly rearing conditions, and if an ever-increasing proportion of the species fails to encounter those conditions but nevertheless survives to reproduce, it won't matter how valuable the underpinnings for collaboration were in the past. Compassion and the quest for emotional connection will fade away as surely as sight in cave-dwelling fish*" (p293). Despite this somewhat downbeat ending, I would have no hesitation in recommending this book to colleagues and students as a valuable source of ideas and literature, with the added bonus of being an entertaining read. I also hope it achieves a wide readership outside that small band of us working on the cooperative breeding hypothesis, as it provides an excellent example of integrative human evolutionary behavioural science in action.