

Mothers and Others
Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

Addressing the biggest of all questions – what made human beings what we are?

"Mothers and Others" is a worthy successor to Hrdy's 1989 "Mother Nature," which provided a sociobiologist's analysis of the relationship between mothers and children. This book examines cooperative childcare or in the human species. This adaptation in humans is unique among great apes, although corporative breeding occurs elsewhere in the animal kingdom.

Hrdy sticks fairly close to her thesis, that humans are unique in the way we employ "alloparents," that is, other caregivers in the nurture of our children, and especially in the vast variety of arrangements that seem to work. In descending order, the most important relationships are the mother's mother, sisters, and daughters. Among the important males are of course the father, but also to a surprising degree other men who might be the father, and brothers.

One of the most unique thing about human beings is the variety of relationships. In other species, if a father is useful in raising children, he is pretty generally useful, such as the father fish which let their mouths be used as a nursery. In people, however, the rules vary from culture to culture and even family to family. It is a matter of, whatever works.

The take-home truth is that human babies are tremendously expensive to raise. They take forever to mature. In the days before we became civilized they were highly vulnerable to predators and to starvation. The child had a vastly superior chance of survival if more than one person was responsible for taking care of him. Cooperation was also a superior use of resources: one person could watch two or three kids, giving other mothers the freedom to cultivate crops or gather food.

Continuing a theme from her first book, Hrdy emphasizes that building relationships is a two-way street, and that evolution has obviously favorite children who are good at building relationships. They know how to be cute, how to babble, how to look deeply into a caregiver his eyes, how to be demanding, coy, or whatever it takes to seduce other humans into taking care of them. And in doing this, they become quite Hrdy calls "emotionally modern." Children become good at reading the intentions of other people, a characteristic at which humans are vastly better than our ape cousins.

Hrdy repeats findings that one reads elsewhere about the timeframe in which human beings developed. It boils down to this. A few million years of slow evolution through the Pliocene after we parted company with the chimpanzees. Then, with the emergence of homo erectus at the beginning of the Pleistocene, about 1.8 million years ago, more rapid development of this emotional modernity. Of course, there is little fossil evidence – mostly speculation. However, the fossil record does show the beginnings of tool use, the use of fire, and gradually increasing brain size evidence. Then, only 200,000 years ago or so, homo sapiens emerged, as did language, modern brain sizes, the modern races of man, and the spread of mankind out of Africa.

Hrdy gently dispatches the notion of a primordial patriarchy. Since their mothers kin were so useful in raising her children, matriarchal societies were more likely than patriarchal, although here as always we are an amazingly versatile species. She offers a now common argument that patriarchy probably became a dominant social form after the advent of agriculture, when men needed to band together to into armies to defend what they had amassed, at which point paternity became an issue because there was property worth inheriting.

Most of Hrdy's examples are taken from well studied groups of primitive humans in Africa and the Amazon. They offer the most probable models of human society as it existed tens and hundreds of thousands of years ago. She asks some interesting questions. Infants today are certain to get enough calories to survive regardless of the society in which they live. However, she asks, is it not quite likely that they did not get the emotional support that they need to develop into fully socialized human adults? Is our society changing, perhaps degenerating, as children are raised in environments in which they have less emotional security than their ancestors?

Both of Hrdy's books should be required reading well outside the field of sociobiology. They throw a bracing dash of cold water on the highflown theories of political scientists, religious advocates, educators, feminists and others who purport to have discovered great truths about how to socialize and educate the human animal.