

Mammalian and Primate Roots of Human Sociality

Adrienne L. Zihlman and Debra R. Bolter

AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO SOCIALITY

Sociality, the preference for living in a community rather than in isolation, is central to human survival and reproduction. It is as much a product of evolution as is hominid bipedal posture and a large brain. It forms the foundation for maintaining traditions and for developing human language and culture. Indeed, sociality is a necessary prerequisite for culture.

The social nature of *Homo sapiens* has its roots in mammalian and primate biology and behavior. Human social life continues the mammalian system of caretaking, in which females produce milk, infants suckle, and females and young maintain contact through olfactory, tactile, and vocal modes of communication. Primate ancestry elaborates the mammalian base through extended life stages; longer infancy and juvenility, later maturity, and a long life span all increase the potential for intense and long-term social interaction. By keeping close contact with the infants they carry, females remain mobile and integrated into social groups of all age-sex classes that associate throughout life. Primate color vision and vocalizations enhance interindividual communication and group cohesion.

The human lineage further elaborates the primate base, initially through a shift to bipedal locomotion and, later, through an enlarged brain. Compared with other primates, *Homo sapiens*, originating in Africa about 150,000 years ago, added a distinct childhood stage, prolonged adolescence, and lengthened the life span. The fossil, archaeological, and molecular records provide a time dimension and a context for estimating the emergence of modern human life stages, symbolic activity, abstract material culture, and communal life ways.

In this chapter we argue that human culture cannot be disassociated from social life and therefore from humanity's mammalian and primate

foundations. Our approach departs from views of human behavior and culture that bypass the individual and sociality, focus on the coevolution of genes and culture, and treat behaviors as discrete units to inherit (e.g., Boyd and Richerson 1985). In contrast, we stress individual interaction and the evolutionary heritage of sociality, its underpinnings, and development; all are integrated with survival and reproductive behaviors—locomotion, foraging, mating, and caretaking. Although competition and aggression are part of social living, we maintain that these behaviors play a less than dominant force in mammalian, primate, or human social life. Instead we emphasize the development and maintenance of social relationships throughout an individual's life and their positive emotional and social expression. In humans, we further articulate the important connection between sociality and symbolic culture, and make a distinction between tradition and culture in order to reflect the greater reach of culture through generational time and across space.