

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy Reassesses “Maternal Instincts”

DECEMBER 28, 2017 | KATACHARIN | 2 COMMENTS

Before Sarah Blaffer Hrdy came along, maternal nature had been largely defined by highly romanticized Victorian notions, essentially, wishful thinking. Yet, through her research on other primates and cultures, Hrdy learned that polyandrous matings, abortion, infanticide, and abandoning of offspring occur across the natural world. Motherhood comes with a price and when females don't have the resources or social support they need, they naturally put their own health and the health of the children they already have first. In a crunch they may retrench, or even bail out altogether.

Sarah Blaffer was born in Texas in 1946 to a wealthy family—one that wanted sons but got mostly daughters instead. As their third daughter, she found herself fortunate enough to be ignored and allowed to go to school and study what she found interesting. She graduated from Radcliffe in 1969 and got her PhD in anthropology from Harvard in 1975.

At Harvard she met her husband, anthropologist Daniel Hrdy, a specialist in infectious diseases. They divided their time between Boston and India, where she studied langur monkeys and he rotaviruses. They were extraordinarily happy together. At 31 she became a mother, and twice took infant Katrinka with her to Rajasthan, but the rigors of fieldwork combined with a low point in Indo-American relations, led the Hrdys to abandon work there. “Inevitably motherhood entails compromises,” she said, “but you don't have to give up everything.” She turned to writing and non-field research, and had two more children, who say that she was a fantastic mother. Her third book, *The Woman Who Never Evolved* (<http://amzn.to/2zzpZfQ>) came out in 1981. *Mother Nature* (<http://amzn.to/2jiPvLH>), was published in 1999. Other important works included *Mothers and Others* (<http://amzn.to/2hqP3KL>) (2009). When asked to contribute an intellectual autobiography to the second volume on *Leaders of Animal Behavior* she titled it *Myths, Monkeys, and Motherhood: A compromising life* (2010). With each book, she found herself questioning and challenging traditional ideas of motherhood.

(https://sheroesofhistory.wordpress.com/?attachment_id=2171)

Sarah with newborn Katrinka. Photo by Dan Hrdy

Her central message was how much social support mothers need. Costs of raising a human child to

adulthood are tremendous, not only through calories—some 13 million—but children are also emotionally and financially demanding. Most women experience periods of ambivalence about motherhood. Unlike other apes where mothers exclusively rear offspring by themselves, Hrdy found ancestral humans, who reared even more costly infants after shorter intervals, ill-equipped to do so.

What Hrdy saw emerging from her studies was the importance of allomothers—fathers, grandmothers, aunts, other relatives, and trusted associates who help rear children. Because of this need to engage and ingratiate themselves with others, human children had to learn to integrate varied perspectives and in the process became more empathetic. In contrast to conventional narratives about the evolution of our species that feature cooperative hunting and inter-group warfare, Hrdy stressed the role of cooperative childcare.

An advocate of Attachment Theory, Hrdy also sought to revise and expand it to include the role of allomothers. Instead of debating mother-care versus other-care, she sought ways to improve daycare, as well as make it more affordable. Although, she never set out to be a revolutionary, her views challenged patriarchal family structures, and led social scientists and biologists alike to reexamine the way they think about both motherhood and the emotional needs of children.

Hrdy spent most of her career at the University of California Davis where she is currently an emeritus professor of anthropology who continues to publish research papers. Her most recent work concerns human cooperative breeding (<https://carta.anthropogeny.org/moca/topics/cooperative-breeding>). She's received the Staley Prize from the School of Advanced Research and has twice been awarded the Howell's Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Biological Anthropology. For a complete list of her publications, go here (<http://www.citrona.com/vitae/>).

These days she can be found on her 1,000 acre farm in California, growing walnuts and writing her next book.

Many thanks to Sarah herself for reviewing this blog and providing the photos, kindly sent with permission of the photographers: Sophie Bassouls (publisher's photo) and Dan Hrdy (Sarah with newborn Katrinka).

*Written for *Sheroes of History* by Cathy Haustein. In 1982 Catherine Haustein had her first child. She left a high paying job for one with half the salary and moved across the country to be near her mother. Many times she's questioned the sanity of this and thought herself a weakling. Reading about Hrdy however, assures her that her actions were perfectly normal.*

Find out more...

Here is an interview with Hrdy:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/primate-diaries/raising-darwins-consciousness-an-interview-with-sarah-blaffer-hrdy-on-mother-nature/> (<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/primate-diaries/raising-darwins-consciousness-an-interview-with-sarah-blaffer-hrdy-on-mother-nature/>)

This is her web page:

<http://www.citrona.com/hrdy> (<http://www.citrona.com/hrdy/>)

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2 thoughts on “Sarah Blaffer Hrdy Reassesses “Maternal Instincts””

1. [Catherine Haustein](#) says:
[DECEMBER 31, 2017 AT 6:32 PM](#)

Thank you for posting this! She's a wonderful Shero. Please credit Sophie Bassouls for the black and white photo.

1. **katacharin** says:

DECEMBER 31, 2017 AT 8:27 PM

Thank you Catherine, will do x