

# Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

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Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is an American anthropologist whose contributions to the field of evolutionary psychology revolutionized modern understanding of mothers and motherhood. Her perspectives on maternal behavior in humans have influenced fields from public policy to cultural anthropology to ethnopediatrics.

Hrdy was born into a wealthy family in Texas and left for college at age 16. She earned a bachelor's degree from Radcliff College in 1969 and a doctorate degree from Harvard in 1975. In 1972, she married Daniel Hrdy and together they had three children, Katrinka (born 1977), Sasha (born 1982) and Niko (born 1986). In 1990, she was elected to the National Academy of Sciences and became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1992. She spent a majority of her career at University of California at Davis and is now an emeritus professor of anthropology. Hrdy currently lives on her 1,000-acre walnut farm in northern California.

As a graduate student at Harvard, Hrdy spent several years studying the langur monkeys of India. From her observations that female monkeys were often quite promiscuous, she proposed that this promiscuity was actually a political strategy on the part of mothers. When a new male monkey entered a tribe, he systematically killed unweaned infants, forcing their mothers to ovulate again and thereby creating reproductive opportunities for himself. To circumvent this infanticide, some mothers would mate furiously with a new male tribe member in the hopes of confusing him into thinking the infant was his own.

Her proposal that sexual promiscuity could be an adaptive strategy of good mothering was met with criticism. At the time, sociobiologists generally accepted Darwin's notion that females are coy, submissive sexual partners. Over time, however, her hypothesis proved true for a variety of species: mothers are not passive care takers, but are in fact aggressive, manipulative managers of their reproductive success.

Among her other controversial theories, Hrdy suggested that the behavior of primate mothers can explain human behavior as well. This assertion was consistent with the understanding of human evolutionary history. Since caring for a human infant is energetically expensive, mothers throughout history have chosen when, how, and whether or not to rear them. This trend is exemplified by modern-day birth control which gives women power over their reproductive options, and also

explains why a woman who does not want to be a mother at one point in her life can also be a devoted, dedicated mother when she chooses an appropriate time for her to have children.

According to Hrdy, a mother's love can vary depending on how old she is, her physical condition, and how much social support she has. Many primates rely heavily on allomothers (non-mother care providers) and choose not to rear infants if sufficient social support is unavailable; she suggests this phenomenon might explain why some young mothers abandon their infants. Hrdy advocates that mothers are entitled to excellent daycare and childcare options, which she considers a modern-day equivalent of tribal allomothers. Hrdy's work has reshaped the way scientists and the public view female participation in reproduction, from conception on.

Hrdy's work is foundational to the developing understanding of evolutionary psychology and revolutionized the accepted theory of sexual selection. She has authored several best-selling books including: *The Woman That Never Evolved* (Harvard University Press, 1981, a New York Times Notable Book); *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (Pantheon Books, 1999, finalist for a Pen (West) Literary Award); and *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Belknap Press, 2009). She is a prolific author of primary research and publishes regularly for the general press.

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SEE ALSO: Feminist Theory of Mothering; Infanticide;

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