

# Egalitarianism, Evolution of

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## Egalitarian societies

The term “egalitarianism” in anthropology is used to describe the social organization of peoples who have been empirically observed to practice a cultural ethos which encourages sharing, peaceful cooperation, and equality, while discouraging property accumulation, status seeking, conflict, and authoritarianism. While the term derives from the Enlightenment ideal of equality between people, in anthropology it refers to a tangible social practice rather than to a utopian ideal. Egalitarian social organization and cultural practices are present to a high degree in most mobile hunter-gatherer societies and a few shifting cultivator societies, although there may be elements of egalitarianism, or egalitarian subcultures, in agricultural, pastoral, and industrial societies. Societies with the most extensive egalitarian practices are sometimes known as “noncompetitive egalitarian” societies or “assertively egalitarian” societies.

Noncompetitive egalitarian societies include, among others: the Hadza hunter-gatherers of East Africa; San hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa; Batwa, BaYaka, and Mbuti hunter-gatherers of Central Africa; Maniq hunter-gatherers of Thailand; Agta hunter-gatherers of the Philippines; Batek and Chewong hunter-gatherers of Malaysia; and Buid shifting cultivators of the Philippines.

The social features that lead to classification as noncompetitive or assertively egalitarian include: relatively equal social representation between different gender and age groups; the absence of hierarchical relations and authoritative leaderships; the absence of wealth accumulation; demand sharing of food and material goods; the absence of particularistic social ties and dyadic relations of indebtedness; mobility; flexibility in living arrangements; and avoidance as the preferred means of conflict resolution. Not all these features are necessarily present in the same ways in different egalitarian societies but demand sharing is crucial to ensure that property-based inequalities and differential access to resources do not develop.

Hunter-gatherer ethnographers interpret and articulate their observations of egalitarian practices in slightly different ways but there are striking commonalities between them. James Woodburn (1982) categorizes human societies into two ideal types: *immediate-return* societies (egalitarian, focused on the subsistence needs of the present) and *delayed-return* societies (politically and economically differentiated, focused on long-term investments of labor in order to acquire a material yield in the future). Immediate-return societies have a system of procurement for immediate use without storage; equal relations in practice and ideology; direct access to resources, knowledge, and skills for all; ongoing freedom to choose one's associates; and entitlement to share

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other people's property. Richard Lee describes a high level of sharing, low tolerance of personal accumulation, relatively equal gender relations, and a constant struggle against selfish, arrogant, and antisocial impulses among egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Alan Barnard has used the term "foraging mode of thought" to describe an ethos found among hunter-gatherers, former hunter-gatherers, Gypsies, and urban beggars in which the social order is premised on sharing. Finally, Polly Wiessner describes egalitarian social structures as resulting from complex cultural institutions and ideologies that empower a coalition of the weaker to keep the stronger in check.

Sometimes the term egalitarianism is applied misleadingly to social organization that involves extreme gender or age-seniority inequality, economic stratification, and authority figures. This has contributed to serious misunderstandings both within social and evolutionary anthropology and across those academic disciplines that have an interest in human evolution, such as archaeology, evolutionary biology, and evolutionary psychology. For example, it is widely assumed that violent male reproductive competition, gender inequality, and warfare are universal features of small-scale societies and characteristic of the evolutionary history of humans. A wider understanding of the characteristics that distinguish noncompetitive and highly mobile egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies from other less egalitarian small-scale societies could forestall some of these misunderstandings.

Delayed-return hunter-gatherer societies (such as those of Okiek and Inuit peoples), big men societies (such as those of Papua New Guinean horticulturalists), and nonstratified lineage systems (such as those of the Tallensi horticulturalists of West Africa and the Yanomami horticulturalists of Brazil and Venezuela) are all *acephalous* societies that are often misleadingly described as egalitarian because of their lack of enduring hierarchies and/or highly centralized leadership. However, a society that lacks a hierarchical leadership structure but does not conform to egalitarian principles in terms of its other features, such as relative gender equality, is better described as acephalous. Acephalous has the root meaning of headless and is thus better suited to describe social organization that is characterized only by the absence of top-down leadership or centralized power structures.

## **The egalitarian disposition and behaviors**

An explanation of the evolutionary emergence of the egalitarian predisposition is required in order to account for the range of political behaviors observed in contemporary human societies (from extremely egalitarian to extremely hierarchical), compared with the consistently present dominance hierarchies of nonhuman primates such as chimpanzees, gorillas, and (to a moderate extent) bonobos. The fact that by way of contrast with these, a wide range of political behaviors exists for humans, indicates that egalitarian tendencies came about due to unique selection pressures on our particular hominin lineage within the Homininae subfamily of the Hominidea (great ape) taxonomic family. An inference of this kind rests on the comparative phylogenetic method in evolutionary biology in which it is expected that related species will exhibit similar adaptations not because they evolved them due to separate evolutionary pressures but because they belong to the same common phylogeny. This phenomenon is known

as “phylogenetic autocorrelation.” Divergence from autocorrelation is what needs to be explained in terms of selection pressures. While there are likely to have been precursor behaviors among early bipedal hominins, cooperative egalitarian behaviors may have emerged due to unique selection pressures during the *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens* phase of the human lineage. Early hominin morphology shows greater sex/size dimorphism compared with the genus *Homo*, which is indicative of higher male–male competition in the earlier hominin species because such an association is observed in nonhuman primates. The selection pressures involved may have been multiple and thus are best understood from the vantage point of various cross-disciplinary and complementary perspectives.

From the perspective of behavioral ecology and optimal foraging theory, some aspects of the egalitarian ethos are adaptive in that they are effective risk-mitigation strategies. Behavioral ecology works from the premise that organisms have risk-sensitive adaptations that help them to survive. The risk-reduction strategies adopted by mobile hunter-gatherers tend to be: (1) the pooling of resource harvests within a sharing network, (2) mobility and/or fluid local-group composition that allows people to distribute themselves in accordance with resource distribution, and (3) future discounting in which receiving a smaller reward immediately is preferred to the potential for a greater reward in the future. These strategies match with the egalitarian practices of immediate-return hunter-gatherers in: (1) their demand sharing, (2) the avoidance mechanism, which allows people to move away from sources of conflict, and (3) emphasis on the subsistence needs of the present alongside a lack of storage and investment.

The risk-mitigation strategies of mobile hunter-gatherers are plausibly associated with the evolution of genus *Homo* because of the archaeological evidence of medium- to large-game procurement commencing in the Pleistocene. Large-game hunting is a relatively risky subsistence strategy. It provides a food source that is worthy of sharing but its acquisition requires cooperation. In addition, there is evidence that the Pleistocene brought climate change—specifically increased dry seasons with associated resource scarcity. These are the environmental conditions in which sharing is most beneficial.

Cognitive science also brings its insights. Developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello suggests that *shared intentionality* or intersubjectivity in pursuit of a common objective is the hallmark of human interaction as opposed to that of other apes. For example, the gesture of pointing requires a mutual understanding of the intention of the pointer to share information. In support of this, the “cooperative eye hypothesis” proceeds from the corollary that only the genus *Homo* has a specific physiology—eyes that are almond-shaped with white sclera—that make it easy to see others’ focus of attention and suggests that this evolved to facilitate communication and cooperation. Shared intentionality requires high levels of trust between people in a social group and the ability to understand another’s intention to help or to share. The skills and motives of shared intentionality have transformed the individualistic and competitive primate social behaviors such as gaze following, manipulative communication, group action, and social learning into the human cultural behaviors of joint attention, cooperative communication, collaborative action, and instructed learning. Shared intentionality is thus the cognitive capacity that makes egalitarianism and related cultural capacities

possible. In principle, specific mutations to eye shape and color could be traced genetically to historical social changes in the Pleistocene.

Cognitive psychologists Whiten and Erdal (2012) use the term “counterdominance” to describe the practice whereby coalitions come together to curb dominant individuals, thus creating more egalitarian social conditions. They argue that the unique selection pressure involved in human evolution was the formation of a sociocognitive niche that included multiway positive feedback loops between five elements: (1) cooperation, (2) egalitarianism, (3) theory of mind, (4) language, and (5) cultural transmission. Within this adaptive niche, which the authors call “deep social mind,” there is tight interlinkage between egalitarianism and cooperation, which allowed hunter-gatherers to successfully pool together to procure and share resources. Cooperative egalitarianism in turn supported cultural transmission of knowledge. The acquisition of language and mind reading that could then be created through sharing knowledge in turn allowed for interpersonal coordination of activities and ultimately for the reinforcement of the egalitarian cultural ethos. They argue that maximum egalitarianism was achieved during the period from the origins of *Homo sapiens* up until the emergence of farming at the end of the Pleistocene.

Evolutionary anthropologist Christopher Boehm (1999) uses the terms “reverse dominance” or “reverse dominance hierarchy” to describe the outcome of egalitarian practices, with the implication that egalitarianism evolved by means of the majority in social groups coalescing to rebel against the tyranny of alpha males. Boehm proposes that human morality is the product of egalitarian behaviors over the course of 6 million years during which social controls such as punishments exerted against antisocial and selfish individuals created selection pressure that worked in favor of altruistic behavior and against despotic or antisocial behavior. The egalitarian social organization of hunter-gatherer bands thus led to the emergence of a social conscience, including feelings of virtue and shame. Gintis, van Schaik, and Boehm (2015) have argued that a mixture of factors such as the domestication of fire, availability of lethal weapons, and cooperative breeding constitute a niche in which egalitarian social structures overturned typical primate-style hierarchies.

Psychological and game-theory experiments demonstrate the existence of “inequity aversion” among both human and nonhuman primates and the specifically human tendency to punish those who behave inequitably even if administering the punishment incurs a cost to the punisher. For example, Sergey Gavrilets (2012) has used agent-based modeling to show that each individual benefits if within-group competition is reduced and that strong coalitionary action against bullies could have reduced within-group competition in prehistoric hunter-gatherer bands to the extent that conditions would have favored selection for a psychological disposition called the “egalitarian syndrome,” including empathy, altruism, and egalitarian morals. Recent studies in neuroscience show that economic inequity is evaluated in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. The prefrontal cortex controls executive functions of the brain, which suggests that inequity aversion is related to a phylogenetically recent reorganization of frontal cortical circuitry in the human lineage.

## Gender egalitarianism and female reproductive strategies

Turning to the question of how gender egalitarianism may have evolved, evolutionary anthropologist Kristen Hawkes and colleagues have suggested that the reason postmenopausal women survive long past their reproductive years is that their role in helping to care and provide for the offspring of closely related kin was adaptive. This is known as “the grandmother hypothesis.” Anthropologist and primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (2009) has extended the grandmother hypothesis to form a broader “cooperative breeding hypothesis.” She argues that the human cognitive capacity for intersubjectivity is the evolutionary legacy of caregiving interactions between infants, mothers, and other kin. Cooperative caregiving was required to support the heavy energetic demands of evolving human offspring. Emerging in *Homo erectus* as brain sizes increased, this is initially likely to have been provided mostly by female kin due to variable male commitment to child rearing. This theory is supported by studies which show a high level of alloparenting in contemporary hunter-gatherer societies.

Evolutionary anthropologist Camilla Power links the cooperative breeding hypothesis with the emergence of egalitarianism and symbolic culture in her “female cosmetic coalition” (FCC) model (2009). She suggests that egalitarianism, ritual, and symbolic culture came about as the result of the new female reproductive strategies that began with cooperative breeding. If Power’s model is correct, female kin coalitions would have used deceptive or cosmetic sexual signals to secure the increased male investment necessary to bear the escalating costs of producing large-brained infants. Reduced reproductive competition between males was a precondition required to afford the levels of prosociality, intersubjectivity, and male investment in childcare required for the final phase of rapid brain expansion and the emergence of language 300,000 to 200,000 years ago. Thus, by the logic of Power’s theory, dominance leveling between males was driven initially by female collective ritual strategies aiming to minimize female reproductive stress. These conditions would have facilitated also the creation of those aspects of gender equality observed among extant immediate-return hunter-gatherers—for example, female alliances, lack of reproductive coercion, and relatively high male investment in child provisioning and childcare. Male reproductive strategies would have also changed in response to the new female strategies, with investing males becoming choosier about their mates as their reproductive efforts became more costly.

Cooperative breeding theories and Power’s FCC model suggest a mechanism whereby the dominance of alpha males could have been neutralized. They are consistent with Boehm’s reverse dominance hypothesis. Rituals which propagate egalitarian gender relations play an important role in maintaining the political equilibrium of extant noncompetitive egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies. For example, Lewis (2014) describes how Congo Basin hunter-gatherers employ extensive ritual practices based on gendered coalitions to support gender-egalitarian relations in everyday life.

The fact that humans do not follow the usual male competition/female choice (MCFC) model of sexual selection has been argued for by evolutionary psychologists Steve Stewart-Williams and Andrew Thomas (2013), who propose instead an MMC (mutual mate choice) model. There is strong justification for such a shift in terms of the sexual selection pressures that would have come about with increased encephalization,

including heightened female reproductive costs and a concomitant increase in male provisioning. Furthermore, the increased effort to males in obtaining sexual access, in terms of the theory of parental investment and sexual selection, means that males should have become choosier and females more competitive.

The reemergence of gender inequality can form the basis by which other types of social inequalities are established—for example, due to an increase in male reproductive competition that comes about with differential property ownership and polygyny. This includes two domains of potentially important insights into human political behavior, namely (1) the mechanisms whereby noncompetitive egalitarianism first arose and then became firmly established among early *Homo sapiens* in the African Middle Stone Age and (2) the mechanisms whereby inequalities may have reemerged with the cultural evolution of politically complex societies from approximately 40,000 years ago onward. David Wengrow and David Graeber (2015) suggest that alternation between egalitarian and hierarchical political organization was an emergent property of hunter-gatherer societies in the highly seasonal environments of the Upper Paleolithic in Europe.

SEE ALSO: Bride Service; Cooperation, Evolution of; Cooperative Child Rearing: Evolution of Alloparenting in Hominins; Game Theory; Grandmother Hypothesis, Grandmother Effect, and Residence Patterns; Hunter-Gatherer Models in Human Evolution; Language, Social Origins of; Liminality and the Liminoid; Optimal Foraging Theory; Paternalism; Sexual Conflict Theory; Sexual Dimorphism in Hominin Ancestors; Sharing

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