Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer

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Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (b. 1946) is a highly recognized pioneer in modernizing our understanding of the evolutionary basis of female behavior in both nonhuman and human primates. Hrdy earned her B.A. (1969) from Radcliffe College and her Ph.D. (1975) in anthropology from Harvard University. Her early work (Hrdy 1977), anchored by a field study of Hanuman langurs (*Semnopithecus entellus*) in India, argued that infanticide in primates (including humans) is an adaptive behavioral expression of sexual selection acting upon individuals, rather than a maladaptive behavior occurring at high population densities. Hrdy reasoned that males can increase their breeding opportunities by killing unweaned, unrelated infants because the cessation of lactational amenorrhea often brings females into estrus earlier than if the infants had survived. Controversy erupted in response to Hrdy's argument and led to her edited volume on infanticide with Glen Hausfater (1984). The controversy has largely subsided now that infanticide has been confirmed in many species of primates and is most often committed by males unrelated to the infants killed, as Hrdy predicted.

Using langurs as exemplars, Hrdy (1981) also argued that females are not the coy, passive creatures Darwin described, but are highly competitive as well as cooperative with each other in matters of interest to them. Hrdy described prime reproductive females rising and then falling in rank as they got older, with similar rising and falling interest in the infants of others with increasing age. Nonetheless, it was the older females who fought hardest against infanticidal males to protect the infants of their female relatives. She also considered female sexual behavior toward males strategic, with females actively mating with multiple males to confuse paternity, thereby reducing the risk of infanticide.

In her two later books, Hrdy focused on mothers and infants. Hrdy (1999) explored why humans can reproduce again before the previous offspring is nutritionally independent, a feat not accomplished by other hominoids. She concluded that such rapid reproduction could have only evolved in species that are cooperative breeders, who, by definition, obtain help from others to care for and feed their young. This book won the W. W. Howells Book Award from the Biological Anthropology Section of the American Anthropological Association in 2001. In her next book, Hrdy (2009) pursued the implications of helpers for child development. She argued that natural selection would have favored children who could more easily monitor, assess, and engage with helpers, and that this led to the uniquely human ability to be interested in the thoughts and intentions of others, which itself was a precursor to other unique human abilities, including language and well-developed coordination toward common goals. In 2012, the book won the W. W. Howells Book Award and the J. I. Staley Prize from the School for Advanced Research.

Hrdy has received many honors for her intellectual contributions, including being elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences (1990), induction as a fellow of the California Academy of Sciences (1985), the Animal Behavior Society (1990), the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1992), and the American Philosophical Society (2011), being listed among Discover Magazine's "50 Most Important Women in Science" (2001), and receiving the Human Behavior and Evolution Society's Lifetime Career Award for Distinguished Contribution to Science (2013) and the National Academy of Sciences Award for Scientific Reviewing (2014).

SEE ALSO: Alloparental Behavior; Infanticide; Sexual Selection

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FURTHER READING

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