

Feb. 5, 2004

## LECTURE 2: ORIGINS OF THE FAMILY

Read: Skolnick, Introduction. 1-14  
Giddens: The Global Revolution in Family and Personal Life  
Coontz: Introduction, and Getting Past the Sound Bites 1-32

- I. Housekeeping
  - A. Where materials are in anthropology office
  - B. New students sign form
  - C. Readings to be done for class are located *under* the date on syllabus
- II. Origin of the Family
  - D. What is the usual depiction of early families—“cave man” families?
    - 1. Man clubs woman
    - 2. She stays in cave, tending the fire, cooking, childrearing
    - 3. He goes out with his club (what he used to get her)
      - a. Kills saber-toothed tiger—and “brings home the bacon”
      - b. Defends the family
    - 4. Monogamous
      - a. A previous year a student asked whether early families were characterized by men with more than one wife. The argument was made that this increased number of births, helped to populate the land
      - b. Think about the logic here; what’s going on?

- E. What are the resemblances here to Scarsdale (i.e., traditional middle-class suburb family arrangements)?
1. Nuclear family image: no one else around
  2. Or, if someone else is around, it's friends
    - a. As depicted in the comic strip in newspapers called "the Flintstones"
  3. Patriarchal—male is superior
    - a. It's the man who goes out and gets his wife (with the club)
  4. Man goes out, man supplies the food
    - a. Woman stays inside, processes the food, takes care of kids
    - b. Woman in charge of children, or at least until the sons are ready to be taught to hunt and defend
    - c. Woman's only roles are wife and mother, nothing else
      - 1) Not sister, not daughter
      - 2) No productive work (she doesn't produce food)
    - d. Only the man was involved in choosing a mate, no one else
- F. Other assumptions?
1. Meat eaters, of large mammals

III. How can we find out about early families? Three types of sources

- A. Fossil evidence
- B. Primates
- C. Contemporary hunter-gatherers

### III. Problems with these sources?

- A. Fossil evidence:
  - 1. Not much left
  - 2. Especially of the things we're interested in:
    - a. Social organization
    - b. Demography
    - c. Gender division of labor
    - d. Beginnings of the incest taboo and other beliefs
    - e. Authority structures
    - f. Monogamy, polygyny, polyandry
  - 3. Important findings in archaeological record
    - a. Bipedal long before brain capacity enlarged significantly
      - 1) Adapted to terrestrial life out of trees
    - b. Tool-using
      - 1) But many tools aren't left in the archaeological record
        - a) An important example: baby sling

- c. Social groups:
  - 1) On the ground, savanna grasses
  - 2) Became active hunters
    - a) But ate mostly vegetables, or gathered small animals
    - b) Fossil record of dentition shows that lots of roots and seeds were eaten—a gritty diet
    - c) Primates are not hunters
    - d) Will eat meat if it's easily acquired
  - 3) Language
    - a) When? We don't know
    - b) Estimates of when *homo sapiens* emerged keep getting pushed back
  - 4) The territorial range was greater than other animals
    - a) Current debate about extensiveness of males' versus females' range
      - (1) Probably engaged in collective hunting at times
    - b) Although solitary hunting, too—there is a debate about this
- d. They had a camp, a “hearth”—home base
  - 1) Never a pattern of a nuclear family by itself
    - a) Interdependence, sharing, cooperation

clearly an adaptation

- 2) This point is crucial in our definition of the family
  - a) For our understanding how and why it evolved (i.e., why it was adaptive)
  - b) And part of the reason why *h. sapiens* was so successful
- 3) *Sharing* is a crucial point
  - a) Nearly opposite of popular cultural images of early humans

#### IV. Primates: What we know about the primate substratum

##### A. What do we share with them?

1. The young are helpless, they need prolonged care, they suckle for several months or years
2. Mate at all times of the year
  - a. But non-human female primates have a period of estrus when they're attracted and attractive
  - b. Human females also have a period of fertility, there is debate about how it relates to sexual attraction
  - c. But other primates, like us, can be considered to be sexual all the time
    - 1) It is hard to define "sexuality"—primates other than humans use it for non-sexual ends
3. A highly social species
  - a. Grooming behavior, etc.

4. Rudimentary sexual division of labor
  - a. But does not appear to be culturally determined, as with humans
  - b. Females have prolonged offspring care
  - c. Males more of a role of defense
  - d. And a generalized “fatherliness”— protective role of the adult males
    - 1) But there is no social role of “father” as there is of “mother”—this is a human invention
  - e. No real economic division of labor

B. The sexual bond: what are the forms it takes?

1. Varied
  - a. Some primates have enduring sexual bonds (gibbon)
  - b. Research, now long-term, seems to show a de facto incest prohibition
    - 1) In that male chimps do not mate with mothers
      - a) Females will mate with fathers
      - b) Although with chimps it is very difficult to know who father is (for both researcher and chimps)
      - c) Some exceptions occur in chimp groups— pair bonding
  - c. Variety in social relations:

- 1) Chimps: low degree of male dominance and male hierarchy
    - a) Indiscriminate sexuality
  - 2) Gibbons: fidelity, no dominance or hierarchy
  - 3) Howler monkeys (not apes) are sexually indiscriminate and lack male hierarchies or dominance
  - 4) Gorillas have a very low sexual activity level and a harem arrangement
2. Dominance and hierarchy seem to be adaptations to specific environments
- a. At times it's genetic, at times not
  - b. E.g., we find in very closely related baboon populations but only one kind will be highly hierarchical
    - 1) Difference seems to be due to ecological niche they occupy
3. Humans: dominance is almost certainly learned
- a. Because there's such a great variety in the cross-cultural record
4. Where defense is important, sexual dimorphism and hierarchy and dominance are found in primates
5. Humans have little sexual dimorphism
- a. Especially some populations

V. How do humans differ from apes?

A. Physical?

1. Upright posture
2. Larger brains
3. Less hair
4. Mate all the time, no visible estrus
5. Think about: upright posture plus larger head=*neoteny*
  - a. Developmentally earlier birth
6. This was the **main pressure** toward developing families, whatever they were like

B. Socio-cultural evolution

1. Language
2. Use of symbols very pronounced
3. Social role of the father
4. Institutionalized sharing
5. Universal gender division of labor (economic)
6. Incest taboo
  - a. A big issue; a lot of debate about why it developed
    - 1) Why it originated is not necessarily why it's maintained
    - 2) Possible reasons? (discuss)

- a) One suggestions: preserve order in the family as a cooperative unit
  - i) Example of Brigham Young's family: full of rancor, and this was only a case of polygyny
- b) Another: create bonds *between* groups

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.230J / WGS.456J The Contemporary American Family  
Spring 2004

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.