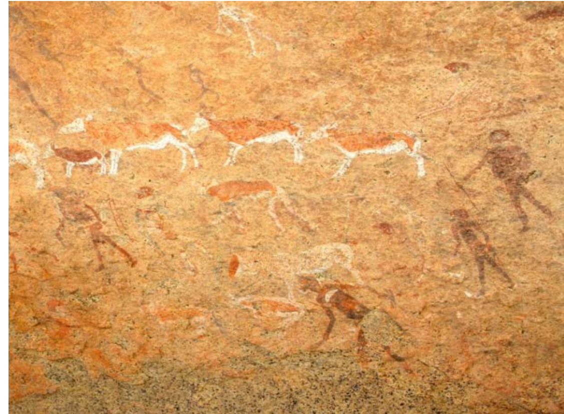
Explaining Human Culture

Hunter-Gatherers (Foragers)

Carol R. Ember

In the quest to explain human culture, anthropologists have paid a great deal of attention to recent hunter-gatherer, or forager, societies. A major reason for this focus has been the widely held belief that knowledge of hunter-gatherer societies could open a window into understanding early human cultures. After all, it is argued, for the vast stretch of human history, people lived by foraging for wild plants and animals. Indeed, not until about 10 thousand years ago did societies in Southwest Asia (the famous Fertile Crescent) begin to cultivate and domesticate plants and animals. Food production took over to such an extent that, in the past few hundred years, only an estimated 5 million people have subsisted by foraging.



Rock paintings, like this undated example of human figures and antelopes by the San in Namibia, southern Africa, provide rare graphic evidence of earlier hunter-gatherer life. Rock art exists throughout the world but is difficult to date. The oldest dated example, found in Australia, is believed to be 28,000 years old.

What can we infer about our distant ancestors by looking at a few well-known hunter-gatherer societies of recent times? To draw reliable inferences, we would need to believe that pockets of human society could exist unchanged over tens of thousands of years—that hunter-gatherers did not learn from experience, innovate, or adapt to changes in their natural and social environments. Even a cursory look at the ethnographic record, however, reveals that many foraging cultures have changed substantially over time. Moreover, recent hunter-gatherer cultures share some traits but are also quite different from one another.

Because cultures change through time, we cannot simply project ethnographic data from the present to the past.

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How can we draw better inferences about the past? Cross-cultural researchers ask how and why hunter-gatherer societies vary. By understanding what conditions predict variation and also using the paleoanthropological record to make educated guesses about past conditions in a particular place, anthropologists may have a better chance of inferring what hunter-gatherers of the past was like. (Hitchcock and Beisele, 2000, p. 5; C. R. Ember, 1978; Marlowe, 2005)

Cross-cultural research reveals general similarities among cultures and explores how and why they vary.

Below we summarize the cross-cultural literature in the last half century on hunter-gatherers. We generally restrict the discussion to statistically supported hypotheses based on samples of 10 or more cultures. We also discuss what is not yet known and questions that invite further research.

What We Have Learned

We know about hunter-gatherers of recent times from anthropologists who have lived and worked with hunting and gathering groups. Some of the best recently known cases are the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest (central Africa), the San of the Kalahari Desert (southern Africa) and the Copper Inuit of the Arctic (North America). These hunter-gatherers live in environments that are not conducive to agriculture.

San Hunters in the Kalahari Desert, Namibia.

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What are hunter-gatherers of recent times generally like?

Based on the ethnographic data and cross-cultural comparisons, it is widely accepted that recent hunter-gatherer societies

- are fully or semi-nomadic.
- live in small communities.
- have low population densities.
- do not have specialized political officials.
- have little wealth differentiation.
- are economically specialized only by age and gender.
- usually divide labor by gender, with women gathering wild plants and men fishing and almost always doing the hunting. (Textor, 1967; Service, 1979; Murdock and Provost, 1973)

A Himba boy cooks lunch.

Some cross-cultural findings are less widely discussed:

- Compared to food producers, hunter-gatherers are less likely to stress obedience and responsibility in child training. On the other hand, hunter-gatherer cultures that emphasize hunting are more likely to stress achievement in children. (Barry, Child, and Bacon, 1959); Hendrix, 1985)
- Compared to food producers, hunter-gatherers show more warmth and affection toward their children. (Rohner, 1975, pp. 97-105)
- The songs of hunter-gatherers are less wordy and characterized by more nonwords, repetition, and relaxed enunciation. (Lomax, 1968, pp. 117-28)
- In contrast to food producers, hunter-gatherers are less prone to resource unpredictability, famines, and food shortages. (Textor, 1967; Ember and Ember, 1997: 10)

Because terms can be arbitrary, descriptive generalizations about hunter-gatherers are less meaningful than an understanding of how and why they vary.

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Tlingit women and children cleaning fish on beach, southeastern Alaska, ca.1907.

Are hunter-gatherers more peaceful than food-producers?

Some cross-cultural findings contradict each other, inviting further investigation:

- It is widely agreed that, compared to food producers, hunter-gatherers fight less (Ember & Ember, 1997). But are hunter-gatherers typically peaceful? Different researchers have arrived at different answers to this question. For example, Ember (1978) reported that most hunter-gatherers engaged in warfare at least every two years. Another study found that warfare was rare or absent among most hunter-gatherers (Lenski & Lenski, 1978; reported in Nolan, 2003).

How we define terms will affect the sample and determine the outcome of a cross-cultural study. When asking if hunter-gatherers are typically peaceful, for example, researchers will get different results depending upon what they mean by *peaceful,* how they define *hunter-gatherers,* and whether they have excluded societies forced to stop fighting by colonial powers or national governments.

Most researchers contrast war and peace. If the researcher views peace as the absence of war, then the answer to whether hunter-gatherers are more peaceful than food producers depends on the definition of war. Anthropologists agree that war in smaller-scale societies needs to be defined differently from war in nation-states that have armed forces and large numbers of casualties. Also, within-community or purely individual acts of violence are nearly always distinguished from warfare. However, there is controversy about what to call different types of socially organized violence between communities. For example, Fry (2006: 88, 172-174) does not consider feuding between communities warfare.

How and why do hunter-gatherers vary?

Hunter-gatherers vary in many ways, but cross-cultural research has focused on variations in types of food -getting, contributions to the diet by gender, the degree of nomadism, the frequency of external and internal warfare, and marital residence.

- The closer to the equator, the higher the effective temperature, or the more plant biomass, the more hunter-gatherers depend upon gathering rather than hunting or fishing. (Lee, 1968, pp. 42-43; Kelly, 1995, p. 70; Binford, 1990, pp. 132)
- The lower the effective temperature, the more hunter-gatherers rely on fishing. (Binford, 1990, p. 134)
- Males contribute more to the diet the lower the effective temperature or the higher the latitude. (Kelly, 1995, p. 262; Marlowe, 2005, p. 56)

Tlingit Chief Charles Jones Shakes, pictured at home in Wrangell, Alaska, with an array of his possessions, ca. 1907. The Tlingit, a culture dependent on fishing, exemplify the hierarchical structure of complex hunter-gatherer societies.

How and why do hunter-gatherers vary? (continued)

- In higher quality environments (with more plant growth), men are more likely to share gathering with women. Greater division of labor by gender occurs in lower quality environments. (Marlowe, 2007)
- Fully nomadic lifestyles are more likely as the growing season lengthens. (Binford, 1990, p. 131)
- Among hunter-gatherers, in contrast to other kinds of societies, division of labor predicts marital residence. The more a foraging society depends upon gathering, the more likely the society is to be matrilocal. The more dependence upon fishing, the more likely a society is to be patrilocal. Degree of dependence on hunting does not predict marital residence. (Ember, 1975)
- Patrilocal hunter-gatherers do not have more warfare than those that are matrilocal. Among foragers, as in other societies, patrilocal residence is predicted by internal (within society) warfare or a high male contribution to subsistence; matrilocality is predicted by a combination of purely external warfare and a high female contribution to subsistence. (Ember, 1975)

Hunter-gatherer cultures differ from food-producing cultures in childrearing practices and vocalization. Food-producing cultures are more vulnerable to famines and food shortages.

- Bilocal residence, rather than unilocal residence, is predicted by community size under 50, high rainfall variability, and recent drastic population loss. (Ember, 1975)
- Hunter-gatherers with higher population densities have more warfare than those with low population densities. Similarly, more complex hunter-gatherer societies have more warfare than simpler hunter-gatherers. (Nolan, 2003, p. 26; Kelly, 2000, pp. 51–52); Fry, 2006, p. 106)
- Hunter-gatherers with a high dependence on fishing are more likely to have internal warfare than external warfare. (Ember, 1975).
- In New Guinea, foragers with a high dependence on fishing tend to have higher population density and large settlements. Some of the foragers in New Guinea with a high dependence on fishing have densities of 40 or more people/square km and settlements of over 1000 people. (Roscoe, 2006)

What We Do Not Know

- Why do some foraging societies share more than others? Is meat consistently shared more than plants? Does sharing differ by gender?
- Why should division of labor predict residence amongst hunter-gatherers, but not among food-producing cultures? (See Ember, 1975)
- Do foragers with a high dependence on fishing tend to have higher population density and large settlements, as is the case in New Guinea? (See Roscoe, 2006)
- How different are foragers with a little agriculture from those who lack agriculture?
- Are foragers with horses more like pastoralists than foragers lacking horses?
- Recently, discussion of the differences between complex and simple hunter-gatherers has increased. (See, for example, Fitzhugh, 2003; Sassaman, 2004). Complex hunter-gatherers generally have considerable inequality and more political hierarchy.
    - a) What other differences are there between complex and simple hunter-gatherers?
    - b) What implications do such differences have for the emergence of complex foragers?

Credits

Special thanks to Kate Cummings and Megan Farrer for assistance in preparing this module.
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Glossary

Bilocal residence
A pattern in which married couples live with or near the wife's or the husband's parents with about equal frequency

Ethnographic record
What is known from descriptions written by observers, usually anthropologists, who have lived in, and carried out fieldwork on, a culture in the present and recent past

Matrilocal residence
A pattern in which couples typically live with or near the wife's parents

Multilocal residence
A pattern in which married couples may be bilocal and unilocal, with a frequent alternative.

Patrilocal residence
A pattern in which married couples typically live with or near the husband's parents.

Unilocal residence
A pattern in which married couples live with or near one specified set of relatives (patrilocal, matrilocal, or avunculocal)