Riggio, Brianna: The Historical Conception of Man as Hunter

In Western society, the belief that the ancient ancestors of men were powerful hunters and providers continues to shape expectations for men to be physically strong, economically successful, and sexually dominant. Yet, this conception of our history as a species may not be as uncontested as many believe. Many scholars point to the egalitarian nature of most hunter-gatherer societies and the fact that women often engaged in small-game hunting even if large-game hunting was a predominantly male endeavor (Roosevelt 2002; Noss & Hewlett 2001; Brightman 1996). The question of which gender truly provided the larger amount of calories for these societies is hotly contested, however, with wildly different claims appearing. Though A. C. Roosevelt claims that women provided over 90% of the calories for these societies, Michael Gurven and Kim Hill estimate their contribution to be about 35% compared to men’s 65% (Roosevelt 2002; Gurven & Hill 2009).

One possible explanation for these different numbers is the climates that different societies lived in. German Loeffler points out that the role of gathering is directly related to relative temperatures, with biomass comprising an extremely small part of diets in arctic areas versus the largest part of forager diets in tropical environments (Loeffler 2015). However, women in environments with low biomass are not less active; they take a larger role in practical skills such as house-building and making nets, which might be more equally shared in warmer climates. Robert Brightman also emphasizes that a major obstacle to women participating in big game hunting was not physical constraints as much it was a persistent, inexplicable taboo surrounding the practice. In many forager societies, women were not able to own their own weapons, which constrained them to performing secondary roles in big game hunting or focusing on trapping with nets (Brightman 1996). There has been much speculation that women are somehow physically ill-prepared for hunting because of their role as mothers or their relatively smaller size, but this claim has been disproved numerous times by the existence of some societies in which females hunted often without detriment to their roles as mothers (Loeffler 2015; Brightman 1996). Overall, it seems to be inherent biases against women joining in big game hunting to be the only thing really preventing this role to be shared equally along with the rest of the roles in their societies.

The implications of men not truly being the only ones biologically fit to hunt are far-reaching. First of all, this situation speaks to the systemic discrediting of women’s roles throughout history. Though some scholars are more willing to discuss the egalitarian aspects of these societies in more recent publications, androcentric readings of forager lifestyle are common even in the last decades (Lee & Devore 1968; Gurven & Hill 2009). Claims that women are rendered ineffective at virtually anything important because of the constraints of childrearing are common even in apparently egalitarian sources. The role of women has been conceptualized as simply one more form of prey that men hunt (Lopez Maestre 2015).

Brightman, Robert.

Geary, David C., Benjamin Winegard, and Bo Winegard.

Gurven, Michael, et al.

Kuhn, Steven L., and Mary C. Stiner.

Lee, Richard B. and Irven Devore (editors)

Lippa, Richard A.

Loeffler, German.

Lopez Maestre, Maria D.

Noss, Andrew J., and Barry S. Hewlett.

Silverman, Irwin, Jean Choi, and Michael Peters.

Sussman, Robert W.
Roosevelt, Anna Curtenius


Waguespack, Nicole M.


Appendix: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/19nGdQ_wCX0a121MM6WhN5bwSt6nSpQia5iYP6Ga7Pol/edit?usp=sharing