

Exploring the Evolution of Households and Communities in Homo Sapiens

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For most of human history, our ancestors lived in small, close-knit groups. But how did these early social structures evolve into the complex societies we see today? Esteemed researcher Dr Patrick Manning of the University of Pittsburgh has spent years investigating the development of human households and communities over time. His research reveals how biological, cultural and social evolution shaped our species' journey from small prehistoric groups to today's large-scale societies.

The Origins of the Family Unit

The basic residential household is a cornerstone of human society across cultures. Whether in rural villages or bustling cities, people tend to live in households of around five individuals on average. This consistency in household size has persisted for centuries, even as human populations have grown exponentially and spread across the globe.

But how did this fundamental social structure first emerge? And how has it changed over the long course of human evolution? These are some of the key questions that Dr Patrick Manning has sought to answer through his research on the development of human households and communities.

As an expert in world history at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr Manning takes a broad view spanning hundreds of thousands of years. His work traces how early human ancestors gradually developed more complex social groupings, from small family units to larger communities bound by language and culture. By examining this long evolutionary process, Dr Manning aims to shed light on the origins of human social behaviour and organisation. He explains that the household can now be seen as a basic and biological structure of human life, serving as the centre for feeding, sleep, rest, and the nurture of children, typically headed by a paired female and male. While biological families may spread out in space, residential households include some family members and others who live, eat, and sleep in a shared space. Understanding how this fundamental unit arose and changed over time provides crucial insights into human nature and society.

The Primate Roots of Human Social Groups

To understand the origins of human households, Dr Manning looked to our primate relatives. Chimpanzees, gorillas and other great apes live in small, close-knit groups that provide comfort, protection and social bonds. These 'intimate groups' typically consist of three to seven individuals, often centred around mothers and their offspring. Beyond these core family units, primate species also form larger 'community groups' of around 40 or more members. These provide a framework for wider social connections and defence against outside threats.

Dr Manning argues that early human ancestors likely had a similar social structure of small residential groups nested within larger communities. He notes that the human household is analogous to the intimate groups of the primate species to which we are most closely related. By examining these primate social patterns, researchers can infer how early hominin species may have organised themselves.

The Birth of the Human Household

According to Dr Manning's analysis, the distinctly human household emerged sometime between 500,000 and 200,000 years ago. This coincided with the evolution of our own species, Homo sapiens. The key innovation was the formation of households led by pair-bonded couples – essentially, a pairing that would lead, much later, to human marriage and nuclear families. Dr Manning explains that for Homo sapiens, the intimate group took the form of a household led by a pair-bonded couple. This shift away from the polygamous mating of earlier hominins had major implications. It led first to low-status males



supporting and mating with individual females. Later, males gave support and eventually provided care in terms of child-rearing, creating more stable family units. He hypothesises that once both parents cooperated in caring for offspring, more children could be successfully raised to adulthood. This, in turn, allowed for population growth and, eventually, the spread of humans across the globe.

The Rise of Language and Culture

While the basic household unit was in place by around 300,000 years ago, human social groups continued to evolve in important ways. Dr Manning identifies several key developments that shaped how early humans interacted and organised themselves, including the emergence of more sophisticated stone tool technology around 300,000 years ago. This was accompanied by the development of social learning and cultural evolution from about 300,000 years ago. Finally, the advent of syntactic language and social evolution occurred around 70,000 years ago. The ability to communicate complex ideas through language was a major breakthrough, allowing for larger and more organised social groups.

From Communities to Societies

Dr Manning traces how human social organisation continued to increase in scale and complexity over time. Key milestones included the expansion of community sizes beyond 150 members, starting around 20,000 years ago. This was followed by the development of agriculture and animal husbandry in the Holocene

era, beginning about 12,000 years ago, followed by the rise of towns, chiefdoms, and eventually, states and empires.

Throughout these changes, the basic household unit remained remarkably consistent. Dr Manning explains that households changed little in size, remaining the intimate structure of humanity while changing in their social role over time to support growing communities and societies. However, the relationship between households and wider society did shift in important ways. As communities grew larger, more labour was transferred from the household to community-level activities. Households had to become more productive to supply enough workers to support expanding societies.

Biological, Cultural and Social Evolution

A key insight from Dr Manning's work is that human social development involved multiple, interacting types of evolution. He identifies three main evolutionary processes: biological evolution (genetic changes passed down through reproduction), cultural evolution (learned behaviours and knowledge transmitted between individuals), and social evolution (the development of language and social institutions).

Dr Manning argues that these three processes operated in overlapping but distinct ways to shape human societies over time. Biological evolution laid the groundwork by producing larger brains and the capacity for complex social behaviour. Cultural evolution then allowed for the accumulation and transmission of knowledge and practices. Finally, social evolution enabled the creation of language and formal social structures.



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Implications and Future Research

Dr Manning's analysis of household evolution provides valuable insights into human nature and society. By tracing the development of our fundamental social structures over hundreds of thousands of years, his work sheds light on why humans organise themselves the way we do. Some key implications of this research include the importance of pair-bonding and nuclear families in human evolution, how language and social institutions enabled larger and more complex societies, the crucial role of households in supplying labour for community and societal activities, and the remarkable consistency of household size and function across cultures and time.

Looking ahead, Dr Manning hopes to further clarify the relationship between households and larger social structures. Key questions for future research include how early human groups balanced individual, household and community needs, what factors enabled some societies to grow much larger than others, how households have adapted to major social and technological changes, and what the long-term evolution of households can tell us about human nature. By continuing to investigate these issues, Dr Manning and other researchers aim to deepen our understanding of the social and biological forces that have shaped humanity. This knowledge could provide valuable insights to inform how we structure our societies going forward.



MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Dr Patrick Manning is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of World History, Emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh. His research spans world history, focusing on migration, social movements, and the evolution of human societies. Dr Manning received his PhD in History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1969. He has held positions at several institutions, including Northeastern University and the University of Pittsburgh, where he was Director of the World History Center from 2008 to 2015. Dr Manning has authored numerous books on world history, migration, and the African diaspora. He served as President of the American Historical Association in 2016 and received the Pioneer in World History Award from the World History Association in 2013. His recent work examines long-term human social evolution and the development of scientific knowledge across cultures. Dr Manning continues to contribute to advancing world history research and education.



FURTHER READING

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