

# Hunter-gatherers teach us that supporting mothers has deep roots

## How can we apply their lessons?

**Nikhil Chaudhary**

*Assistant Professor in Human Evolutionary and Behavioural Ecology  
University of Cambridge, UK*

**Annie Swanepoel**

*Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist  
North East London NHS Foundation Trust  
London, UK*

**Humans lived as hunter-gatherers for more than 95% of our history. Evolutionary psychiatrists believe that several contemporary mental health challenges can be better understood by reflecting on how “WEIRD” societies – meaning Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic – diverge from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle that human psychology may be adapted to. We call this idea “evolutionary mismatch”.**

Many of us today live in countries that have come to be known among social scientists as “WEIRD”. The acronym helps us to remember how extremely unusual these societies are in the context of human social structures across time and space.

The nuclear family system is especially WEIRD and places a particularly heavy burden on mothers. Furthermore, “intensive mothering” narratives – the idea that women should be able to manage caretaking, primarily alone, using their maternal instincts – remain pervasive. Many people assume this is the “natural” human way, except it isn’t. My own [Nikhil Chaudhary’s] work with contemporary

hunter-gatherer communities<sup>1</sup>, and my discussions with my co-author Annie Swanepoel who is a practising psychiatrist (page 89), have deepened my appreciation of how the differences between WEIRD and hunter-gatherer child-rearing practices may underpin many of the mental health difficulties mothers experience today.

I was previously unaware that guilt surrounding struggling to cope with child rearing was such a frequent burden on maternal mental health, and that the corresponding self-shame actually discourages mothers from seeking help, exacerbating the problem. From an evolutionary and anthropological perspective, struggling to cope is a predictable result of mothers lacking the kind of support structures that they have been shaped by natural selection to expect<sup>2</sup> and rely on.

We need to rethink social support structures and adjust our perception of childcare: it should not just be replacement care for children when their mothers are at work, but should aim to give mothers true respite from caregiving.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to stress that contemporary hunter-gatherer societies are modern human populations, they are not “living fossils”. It is only because their subsistence relies on hunting and gathering that aspects of their social and economic life can offer insight into how humans lived for much of our evolutionary history as a species.

<sup>2</sup> We are not referring here to conscious expectations, but rather the fact that our psychology has been shaped by natural selection to function under certain conditions. These are the conditions that our brain is “prepared for” or “expects”.

# An evolutionary perspective from a WEIRD-country psychiatrist

by Annie Swanepoel

Understanding what we evolved to expect can help us see that many mothers are doing the best they can in very difficult circumstances. I grew up in South Africa and was familiar with the saying “It takes a village to raise a child”, but it was only when I discovered Nikhil’s research that I appreciated what it really means. It made me think differently about my own work as a consultant child psychiatrist in the UK. I realised that when mothers need psychiatric support, often the cause is not individual, but rather a societal failing.

I remember the total shock and overwhelm of having a newborn baby myself. Being a qualified doctor had not prepared me on a personal level for how needy babies are and how often they cry. While I had support from my husband and my parents, at the time I shared the widespread assumption that it is “normal” for a mother to be able to look after her baby on her own.

When Nikhil showed me his data, many years later, I was astonished by the idea that half the time, when a baby cried, someone other than the mother would step in. Can you imagine what a difference having that kind of support available would make to so many mothers – in how they feel, sleep, cope and can respond to their baby?

It is important for all of us to learn about this evolutionary context because of the shame and blame that often attaches to mothers who are finding it difficult to cope with caregiving. For example, I treated a 16-year-old girl called Tracy for behaviour problems. Her boyfriend had left her when she became pregnant, and Tracy decided to have the baby as a single mum with no family support.

Tracy struggled to handle or respond to her newborn, Poppy. She thought that Poppy’s cries meant one of two things: either that Poppy did not like her, or that Poppy was being naughty. I explained to Tracy that babies cannot yet think about whether they like someone and cannot yet be naughty, and that Poppy was only expressing how she felt moment by moment. However, I could see that Tracy was not taking it in and that it didn’t make sense to her.

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Tracy asked to be admitted to a psychiatric unit, which was led by a highly experienced psychiatrist who arranged for the staff to model how to approach Poppy – to wonder aloud why she might be crying, while demonstrating how to soothe her. After two months of inpatient care, Tracy’s change in attitude towards her daughter was clear. She had a much better understanding of how to interact with a baby.

When I hear about Akaya and Ndima [see Nikhil’s case study below], I think about Tracy and Poppy and so many other families I have worked with. I can see how much they would benefit from having other experienced and willing people around them all the time to help them.

<All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.>



↑ BaYaka hunter-gatherers preparing a meal together

### Life for hunter-gatherer mothers

To be sure, hunter-gatherer life is far from a utopia for mothers. Typically, 30%–50% of children in such communities do not survive to adulthood (Apicella and Crittenden, 2015). A study of Hadza hunter-gatherer mothers in Tanzania found that this high risk of infant mortality was a source of significant anxiety, as you would expect (Herlosky et al., 2020).

**“The idea that women should be able to manage caretaking using their maternal instincts remains pervasive ... this [isn't] the “natural” human way.”**

Nonetheless, in day-to-day life hunter-gatherer mothers have access to a high degree of child-rearing support. Evolutionary anthropologists and ethologists often refer to humans as “cooperative breeders”, because it is well established that extensive “allomothering” – childcare provided by caregivers other than the mother – has been at the heart of our success as a species.

During my field work with BaYaka hunter-gatherers in Congo, I mentioned that I was interested in observing how infants were cared for. One mother, Akaya, invited me to observe her son Ndima, who was born about eight moons (months) ago.<sup>3</sup> Over three days, I observed him for 12 hours, covering each hour of daylight (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.). I took note of anyone who directed any form of caregiving towards him.

In these 12 hours, as many as nine allomothers provided attentive, hands-on care to Ndima – such as washing him, playing with him, or carrying him around the camp. I counted 16 allomothers who spent some time in very close proximity to Ndima, such that they could watch over him and intervene if required. Ndima cried frequently, and would be soothed by Akaya, her husband, or one of four other friends and relatives.

My colleagues and I found that Akaya was responsible for only about half of Ndima’s care, including supervision, holding, attentive care, or responding to his cries. It became even more evident to me just how invaluable Akaya’s strong support system was when she became ill a few weeks later. She was able to spend her days resting and focusing entirely on her recovery, without having to worry whether Ndima would be looked after. Her friend Mondama nursed Ndima during this period.

Having observed almost 20 other children and compared the results with those of other anthropologists, we can say unequivocally that extensive child-rearing support is routine among hunter-gatherers (Chaudhary et al., 2023).

### Policy options for WEIRD societies

Across the USA and Europe, post-natal depression rates often exceed 10% (Wang et al., 2021). Lack of social support is one of the most well-established risk factors (Hutchens and Kearney, 2020). In contrast, the study of Hadza mothers mentioned above found no association between women’s scores on a post-natal depression scale and their level of

<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

social support, presumably because *all* women had substantial and sufficient support.

Guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy are common among mothers who are struggling to manage to look after their children, and this reduces the likelihood that they will seek help. The vague but persistent concept of maternal instincts has inadvertently warped the perception of what is “natural” and what mothers really need. We believe that understanding that it is not unnatural to struggle alone can have a therapeutic and destigmatising effect in itself. We are currently working with a team from the UK’s National Health Service to produce information sheets conveying the importance of allomothering in human evolution.

However, reducing self-shame and stigma is really only a band-aid solution. Fundamentally, we need structural changes to realign levels of support in WEIRD cultures with those that mothers have been shaped by natural selection to expect and rely on. When childcare is used mothers for work, it means

women are simply reallocating their energy from one task to another, rather than getting the chance to recover and rebuild their energy.

In hunter-gatherer societies, and many others, elderly women are key caregivers; Germany plans to trial placing childcare facilities and retirement homes together. Hunter-gatherers also reside in multi-family camps; co-housing projects – where residences consist of multiple self-contained structures connected to shared spaces and facilities – are becoming increasingly popular in Europe.

Such solutions can help reduce the evolutionary mismatch that results in mothers feeling overburdened by their childcare responsibilities, and the corresponding guilt arising from the expectation that they ought to be able to care for their child alone. But it is also the duty of researchers, policymakers, employers, families and friends to provide the social infrastructure so that mothers receive the support they deserve and need.

➤ Find this article online at [earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-19](https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-19)

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