

SELFISH GENE – SOCIAL SPECIES

By Rod Matthews

Are we a deeply social species? Let's look at sociability as a continuum.

Zoologically speaking

Perhaps one way to examine the question above is to focus on the word 'species'. By doing this we can compare and contrast with other species, and create a continuum of species from 'sociable' at one end to 'solitary' at the other. With this in mind, we are clearly not at the blue-tongue lizard or polar bear ends of the spectrum. But why is this? Several reasons come to mind:

1. We live with others of our species in close quarters.
2. We gather in large numbers closer to the 'bee' end of the sociability continuum than the average armadillo.
3. We share food with others of the same species.
4. There is a dramatic difference in the quantity and quality of communication with our own species.
5. We engage in trade with others of our species.
6. We engage in acts that put the welfare of others in our species ahead of our own (altruism).

When we look at it this way, we are most definitely a social species. Where individuals sit on that continuum will vary for a variety of reasons. For example: Culture plays a role as to whether we are brought up in an individualistic or a more collectivist culture.ⁱ

Psychologically speaking

Robert Cialdini wrote a landmark book called *Influence – The Psychology of Persuasion*.ⁱⁱ In it he lists influence patterns that his research suggests are hard-wired into us as humans.

These patterns include:

1. *Reciprocation*. By giving something to another person, we create a feeling in that person of indebtedness – the recipient will feel as though they should pay us back.

This is why when people invite us over for dinner we feel the need to invite them back to our place at a later date.

2. *Commitment and consistency*. Once we have made a public commitment about something we are more likely to behave in a manner that is consistent with that commitment. This is why smokers are often told to tell as many people as possible that they are intending to quit.
3. *Social proof*. This is the herd mentality. We like to think that we are individuals and yet research suggests that we are sheep. (I recommend *Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert,ⁱⁱⁱ or indeed any of the growing number of books on choice architecture – it's a frightening concept!)
4. *Liking*. Rapport is about minimising differences and increasing similarities. When we like someone we are more likely to behave in a manner that is consistent with them.
5. *Authority*. I have a number of clients in the health-care industry who will not believe anything until it has appeared in *The Lancet* or *The New England Journal of Medicine*. This is persuasion by authority.
6. *Scarcity*. Watch a group of grown-ups play musical chairs. At first when there are plenty of chairs available, people play it cool ... but as the chairs become more scarce their behaviour changes. People play far more fiercely.

The interesting thing about Cialdini's research is that five out of his six influence patterns support the idea that we are a deeply social species, and that we make decisions by involving or watching others. The only exception is that of scarcity. This is fascinating. (For more information, read *The Tragedy of the Commons*.^{iv})

Social disorders

Consider this as an extension to the ideas covered above: Most of us would believe that sociopaths and psychopaths have a disorder. Therefore, being able to empathise with and read the thoughts of others is considered to be normal and healthy.

The power of the flame

There is a wonderful documentary that was screened on SBS called *Becoming Human*.^v One of the ideas it proposed looked at the time we left the trees for the savannah. It was considered to be quite dangerous to be a monkey/ape/human on the savannah at night, when they were the creatures that hunted during the day and it was the carnivores (such as the lions, cheetahs and hyenas) that hunted at night. What kept us safe? It was the fact that we could start fires. It was suggested (and this is purely hypothetical as there are no genes or archaeology that will ever be available to support the idea) that we learned to be social with others outside our family but within our species, because we all needed the protection of the fire.

ⁱ www.geert-hofstede.com

ⁱⁱ Cialdini, Robert (1995), *Influence – The Psychology of Persuasion*, Quill Publications, New York

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilbert, Daniel (2005), *Stumbling on Happiness*, First Vintage Books, New York

^{iv} *The Tragedy of the Commons* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons Last updated on the 8th of July 2012

^v *Becoming Human– Episode 1: First Steps* (2009), Documentary produced by Shining Red Productions for NOVA, WGBH Educational Foundation