

Why Grandmothers May Hold The Key To Human Evolution

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A hunter with bow and arrow, in a steamy sub-Saharan savanna, stalks a big, exotic animal. After killing and butchering it, he and his hunt-mates bring it back to their families and celebrate.

This enduring scenario is probably what many of us have stuck in our heads about how early humans lived. It's an image with drama and danger. And it happens to coincide with Western ideas about the division of labor and the nuclear family that were prevalent in the 1960s when this so-called "Man the Hunter" theory first emerged.

A newer body of research and theory, much of it created by women, has conjured a very different scenario. It probably looks a little more like a quirky indie film than a Hollywood blockbuster. The star of this new film? Grandma.

[Michael Tomasello](#) is a developmental psychologist at Duke University and the Max Planck Institute. After a career of comparing cognitive differences between babies and apes, he has found that other apes don't show anywhere near the level of interest in the sharing and cooperative behaviors that emerge so early in humans: "Humans as individuals aren't that much cleverer than other apes. It's the fact that we can put our heads together with others and communicate and collaborate and learn from others and teach others. Human children are adapted for cooperation and shared intentionality in ways that apes aren't."