

The Natural History of Mothers and Infants: An Evolutionary and Anthropological Perspective

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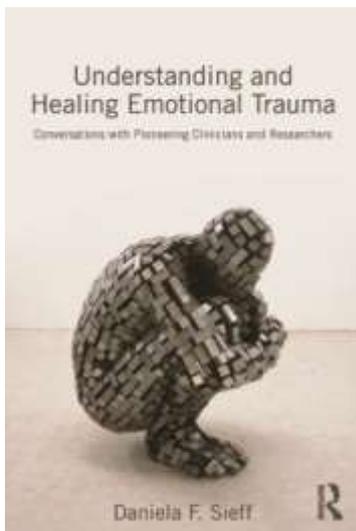
Chapter Summary

Humans are a product of evolution. To understand the relationship between mothers and infants we need to understand how evolution has shaped this relationship, and to identify the challenges that ancestral mothers and infants faced.

Modern society defines mothering as caring for children, but for ancestral women mothering encompassed everything that contributed to leaving descendants: choosing mates, procuring food, building shelters, striving for high rank and creating a supportive social network. The allocation of time between these tasks was also part of mothering, and a matter of life-or-death for both mothers and their children.

The allocation of limited resources between children was an equally crucial part of mothering for our ancestors. Today we see mothering as synonymous with unconditional love, but this is a relatively modern concept. During our evolutionary history, when resources were scarce, when mothers had insufficient social support, or when children were spaced too closely together, if women were to have any surviving descendants they needed to favour some children over others. During particularly difficult times, that meant nurturing some children whilst abandoning others to die. Most at risk of abandonment were infants. This ancient facet of mothering, which is at least a quarter of a million years old, was visible in European societies until relatively recently, and remains part of life for many of today's hunter-gatherers.

Knowing this, helps us to understand why human infants are so exquisitely sensitive to signs of maternal abandonment and why they experience a mother's lack of commitment as genuinely life-threatening. It also deepens our understanding of some of the dilemmas that mothers face by rooting those dilemmas in the context of our inherited legacy.



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