

## English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library

July 10, 2025

### The Nature and Future of Work

Work or human labor is essential in providing the basic needs of food, clothing, safety, and shelter for people to survive. For a growing group of people to survive, the organization or management of human labor is also necessary.

For instance, hunting, gathering, and farming requires different degrees of **cooperation** and planning among members of a family, **tribe**, or village in order for them to live and grow. The better a group can manage themselves, the more likely they will survive.

As humans settled, developed agriculture, and society became more advanced, work evolved. This week, we continue our discussion about work and the division of labor. First, review the following vocabulary words.

**Vocabulary:** Match the words to their meanings.

1. <b>anecdotal</b> (an-ik-doht-l)	A. to become known; to rise in importance; to become apparent
2. <b>archaeology</b> (ahr-kee-ol-uh-jee)	B. existing in someone or something as a permanent, natural quality, trait or attribute
3. <b>cooperation</b> (koh-op-uh-ray-shuhn)	C. an idea or opinion formed before enough information is available to draw a fair and complete conclusion; a bias
4. <b>to emerge</b> (ih-murj or ee-murj)	D. the scientific study of past human life by discovering and examining remains such as bones, teeth, tools, pottery, jewelry, buildings, etc.
5. <b>ethnographic</b> (eth-nuh-graf-ik)	E. based on reports or things someone saw rather than on proven facts:
6. <b>inherent</b> (in-her-uhnt)	F. involving little exercise or physical activity; inactive; sitting a lot
7. <b>intentional</b> (in-ten-shuh-nl)	G. the action or behavior of working together for a common purpose
8. <b>preconception</b> (pree-kuhn-sep-shuhn)	H. relating to the scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits, and differences.
9. <b>sedentary</b> (sed-n-ter-ee)	I. a group of people, often related families, who live together and share the same language, culture, and history
10. <b>slew</b> (sloo)	J. done on purpose; deliberate; planned; not accidental
11. <b>tribe</b> (tryb)	K. a large amount or number

ANSWERS : 1 – E; 2 – D; 3 – G; 4 – A; 5 – H; 6 – B; 7 – J; 8 – C; 9 – F; 10 – K; 11 – I

### Dialogue

**Cal:** Mark is going to study foraging **tribes** in Brazil for his graduate research in **archaeology**.

**Kim:** Yes, he's very interested in doing some **ethnographic** studies about the Awa **tribes**.

**Cal:** He especially wants to see if there is **cooperation** among parents to care for children.

**Kim:** He said only **anecdotal** evidence has **emerged** that the whole tribe shares childcare responsibilities.

**Cal:** Yes, he wants to study them very soon because logging companies are **intentionally** endangering them by illegally cutting down trees in their rainforests.

**Kim:** I heard there is a **slew** of efforts to stop logging in the Amazon rainforest now.

**Cal:** Yes, let's hope they work.

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#### Division of Labor

In the earliest stages of human civilization, work was limited to simple tasks involving the most basic of human needs: food, childcare, and shelter. Eventually, work was divided among members of a group. This division of labor may have been based on physical characteristics and experience of individuals in carrying out particular tasks.

#### Labor Divided by Age

The most obvious division of labor arose from differences in age. The oldest people in the tribe may have lacked strength and agility to hunt or forage far away from encampments. As a result, they may have performed more **sedentary** tasks.

Similarly, tasks that the very youngest members of the tribe carried out were limited. They carried out tasks that did not require great strength or experience and knowledge. Young children needed to learn how to hunt and gather food.

#### Men Hunters? Women Gatherers? Labor Divisions by Sex

For decades, scientists believed that early humans also divided labor based on sex. In this view, they believed men generally did the hunting and women did the gathering, child rearing, and cooking. This perspective is common in popular culture as well and is often used to make the case that men and women today have "natural" roles **inherent** to their sex.

The concept of "man the hunter" **emerged** from early 20th-century archaeological research and studies of modern hunter-gatherer societies. But these views were based on **anecdotal** impressions of the accounts scientists had been reading. Many scholars theorized that this division of labor by sex was common among hunter-gatherers.

#### Changing Views of Hunters

By the 1980s, more women entered the field of anthropology. Compared to their male **predecessors**, these women scientists were often able to gain more access to women in current foraging societies. The result was a **slew** of new descriptions of women's activities – including more accounts of women hunting.

The results of a 2023 study carried out by biological anthropologist Cara Wall-Scheffler (Shef-lur) and a team of researchers from Seattle Pacific University and University of Washington supported this **emerging** view of women as **intentional** hunters, not only gatherers.

In their research, they studied historical accounts of 63 different foraging communities across the globe going as far back as the 1800s. They read original **ethnographic** reports of those populations to see what had actually been written about the hunting strategies. The findings revealed that women were hunters in 79 percent of these communities.

Women had their own tool kits with their favorite weapons such as throwing axes and spears. The researchers also discovered that grandmothers were the best hunters of the village in many cases. The women played an active role in teaching hunting and used a wider variety of weapons and hunting strategies than men did.

For example, men tended to hunt alone or in pairs. In contrast, women hunted alone, with a man or with groups of women, children or dogs. Women hunted small game in 46 percent of the studied societies and took down medium or large game in 48 percent of them. In 4 percent of societies, they hunted game of all sizes.

The 2018 **archaeological** finding in Peru of a 9,000-year-old skeleton buried with many weapons and tools for big-game hunts supports these findings. The **archaeology** team automatically thought the person was a man and a great hunter, great warrior, or maybe even a chief.

The lead researcher, Richard Haas, and his team didn't even think to question the person's gender until about a week later, when a co-worker who specialized in analyzing bone structure told them the remains seemed to be female.



A woman aims a spear at nearby prey (illustrated) in Peru's Andes Mountains. Female big-game hunters were more common in the ancient Americas than once thought, suggest new archaeological finds from that region. Matthew Verdolivo/UC Davis IET Academic Technology Services

The team then used a new technology to confirm this assessment. Scraping the enamel from the teeth found in the grave, they found proteins that confirmed it unmistakably: This apparent master hunter was female.

Stunned, the researchers then reviewed records from past archaeological finds. Their analysis revealed that between 30-to-50% of individuals buried with hunting tools in ancient American gravesites are female. In other words, says Haas, "Large mammal hunting during this time in the Americas was a gender-neutral activity, or at least nearly so."

### Biases and Preconceptions

Biological anthropologist Wall-Scheffler says these studies are a reminder of why it's so important to ensure the scientific community includes people of diverse backgrounds.

"The **preconceptions** that we all have when we look at a data set really shape the outcome," she says. "I'm really hoping that people take second looks at some of the data that they already have to see what new questions we can ask."

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#### Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think our assumptions that prehistoric women did most, if not all, of the childcare should also be questioned?
2. What do you think are effective ways to divide labor?
3. Do you think most people still have preconceptions of what women and men are best suited to do for work?
4. Are there certain occupations that are dominated by men nowadays? What are they and why do you think mostly men do these jobs?
5. Are there certain occupations that are dominated by women? What are they and why do you think mostly women do these jobs?
6. Why would grandmothers make good hunters?
7. Did your mother, grandmother or great grandmother work outside of the home? If so, what did they do?
8. Do you believe men are just as suited as women to care for young children?
9. What differences do you think there are between men and women in the way they care for children?
10. How important do you think it is to have different viewpoints on a team?
11. What does the word tribe mean to you? Do you belong to a tribe of sorts?



A group of young women from the Awa people in Brazil hold their bows and arrows as they return from a hunt. A new reexamination of ethnographic studies finds female hunters are common in hunter-gatherer societies.

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