

Social grooming in humans

Carmen Strungaru

Resumé:

Sociální grooming (výskání srsti aneb sociální čištění, pozn. red.) je důležitou součástí naší dloubé fylogenetické historie a existence jako jeden z elementů neverbální komunikace a hraje klíčovou úlohu ve formování a udržení sociálních kontaktů s příslušníky společenství. B-endorphin je významným elementem v složitém systému mechanismu odměňování, zahrnujícím jak jeho provedení, tak i přijetí groomingu. Fylogeneticky hluboce zakořeněné chování, takové jako sociální grooming, není snadné zničit kulturou. Zdá se že biopsychická frustrace vycházející z redukce allogroomingu v lidských společenstvech vede ke zvýšení autogroomingu, který má často destruktivní, nefunkční formy. Autogrooming, který je pravděpodobně „starší“ než sociální grooming, je často viděn jako zástupná aktivita u lidí ve stressu. Výzkum sociálního groomingu u lidí je neuvěřitelně málo rozvinutý vzhledem k jeho nesporné závažnosti pro náš druh.

Social grooming... (in chimpanzees, is the)... most peaceful, relaxed and friendly of all body contacts

(Jane Goodall)

Why has social grooming (allogrooming) evolved?

Two hypotheses:

1. Because the body can be cleaned more effectively by a conspecific than by autogrooming, especially at parts which cannot, or only with difficulty, be reached easily. This hypothesis is supported by the observation that to be groomed on the head or the back is perceived as particularly pleasant in humans.

2. Because it allowed a more intense interaction between the members of the group.

The hygienic functions, ensuring physical survival, would have been less important in this case than the social and emotional factors ensuring emotional well-being and group cohesion. This hypothesis would be supported in the (likely) case that solitarily living animals are, as a rule, not more infested by parasites than socially living ones.

Also: In a number of animal species kept in captivity and thereby being completely or almost free of parasites, grooming continues despite the absence of a hygienic function. In the course of phylogeny, the medical aspect of allogrooming seems to have been more and more replaced by a social aspect.

Social grooming in humans – Forms and Functions (listed according to estimated frequency of occurrence)

A: Traditional Societies

- delousing (lice and eggs are often eaten – this is true also for other forms of allogrooming and autogrooming)
- removing of other ectoparasites
- removing of foreign bodies (splinters etc.)
- cutting or shaving hair and beard
- removing comedones, pimples, pustules etc.
- draining of abscesses
- treating wounds
- massaging, scratching
- removing skin scales
- applying counter irritants (e.g. stinging nettle)
- painting and decorating skin and hair
- combing

B: Industrialized Societies

- applying cremes, lotions, oils etc.
- washing, combing and otherwise grooming hair
- removing comedones, pimples, pustules etc.
- massaging, scratching
- removing splinters
- removing skin scales, sunburn blisters etc.

- removing dust, hair etc. from dress
- treating wounds
- delousing

In some societies (like that of the Papuan Eipo), social grooming in public is restricted to same gender, whereas in others (like that of the Austronesian Trobrianders) this activity can be carried out across genders.

In humans, like in animals, social grooming is restricted to kin and friends.

In traditional societies new born babies are groomed soon after birth. In the mother-infant relationship social grooming finds its fullest expression and creates, beyond the actual medical benefit, the feeling of being loved and cared for.

Social grooming – an evolutionary entity?

It can be argued that social grooming is just one expression of parental care or of mating and sexual behaviour. In my view social grooming is a functional, motivational and thereby evolutionary entity, partly overlapping with the two other entities.

Social grooming among orphans

Children who grew up without parents and are reared in an orphanage in the Rumanian town of Novila were filmed on several occasions. They exhibit a wide range of intensive grooming behaviours to adults, their teachers or visitors, and towards furry or fluffy toy animals, dolls etc.

Psychophysiological effects of social grooming on hospitalized patients

In an experiment 37 patients, who were recovering in an intensive-care unit, were given, a gentle massage of their backs. Heart frequency as well as systolic and diastolic blood pressure dropped significantly (D. Strecke, 1991).

The data demonstrate the relaxing, antistressor effect of receiving social grooming. This effect is most likely related to the release of b-endorphin and can explain the intrinsically friendly, bonding nature of – Interestingly, exogenous b-endorphin leads also to the onset of active social grooming in some mammals. This represents an intricate two-way action of b-endorphin.

Cultural repression of social grooming

Compared to traditional societies, frequency, duration and intensity of social

grooming behaviours are reduced in industrialized “modern” societies. This can be partly explained by the following observations:

1. To be in need of social grooming (delousing etc.) indicates infestation with ectoparasites and, thus, low socioeconomic status.

Social grooming is, therefore:

- “unhygienic”, “dirty”,
- a sign of being “asocial”
- “disgusting”

for many members of industrialized societies

Individuals will try to avoid this impression and refrain from allogrooming and being groomed. Such culture will reduce social grooming in its original setting and reduce its value

2. Modern societies are characterized by an increasing degree of professionalization and, at the same time, by a decrease of personalized bonds in the partly anonymous society of the urban world

The following professions have taken over small sectors of social grooming and are paid for their services:

- hairdresser
- make up specialists
- beautician
- manicure, pedicure
- masseur
- dermatologist
- surgeon
- general doctor and medical personnel

Still, we find numerous examples of social grooming in our own societies.

Conclusions:

- Social grooming is an important part of our long phylogenetic history and constitutes, like other elements of nonverbal communication, a main pathway to establish and maintain social contact to conspecifics
- b-endorphin is an important element in a probably much more intricate system of reward mechanisms inducing both carrying out and accepting grooming
- Phylogenetically deeply rooted behaviours as social grooming are not easily eradicated by culture
- It seems possible that biopsychic frustration stemming from the reduction

of allogrooming in our societies leads to an increase in autogrooming, which often takes destructive, non-functional forms

- Autogrooming, itself probably "older" than social grooming, is often seen as displacement activity in persons under stress
- Research on social grooming in humans is strangely underdeveloped despite its obvious importance for our species.