

Argument

Humans are social and cultural organisms. There are many circumstances where we have to make collective decisions of how to approach certain tasks including hunting, migrating, dealing with a pandemic, etc. And if we look at human societies, we'll see a various array of political organizations and decision-making structures. However, in many cases, there are only a handful of individuals who are responsible for making decisions for the group. We call this hierarchical decision-making since powers in decision-making are delegated to a few individuals (e.g. a president, a prime minister, a king, etc.) instead of being distributed to the entire population. Hence, I'm arguing that we observe the prevalence of hierarchy because it allows society to grow in size and accumulate influence (Perret et al., 2020).

P1: if a society is small, it doesn't grow influence

A small (scale) society is characterized as a society of a few dozen to several thousand people. These societies tend to live by foraging for wild foods, herding domesticated animals, or non-intensive horticulture on the village level. Even though it is true that many small-scale societies still persist until these days, much of their culture doesn't propagate to bigger societies (Bunce & McElreath, 2018; Nagel, 1996).

P2. If a society is large but doesn't have hierarchy, then it doesn't grow influence

As the size of the population gets larger, the cost of coordination among individuals becomes more prominent. When the group needs to make a collective decision, it could take much longer to reach a consensus (Hare, 1952). This means that there's a transaction cost in taking longer to make decisions, and as a result, prevents the group from reaping more resources by spending more time on the actual tasks.

P3. If society is large but has hierarchy, it'll grow in influence

Hence, the opposite case of P2 where non-hierarchical societies take too much time making decisions, the existence of hierarchy will allow the group to make decisions much faster. And the group will spend more time on carrying out tasks and produce more resources. Despite the selection pressure at the individual level for being powerful, the group-level benefits of hierarchy will tend to outweigh the individual-level cost. (Turchin & Gavrillets, 2009; Perret et al., 2020)

P4. Societies that grow influence are the ones we expect to see

Lastly, societies that accumulate more resources will grow bigger in population size and influence allowing them to both become noticeable by others and simultaneously spread their practices as well as their social organizations (Perret, 2020).

C. We expect to see large societies with hierarchies

However, it's worth noting that this argument, specifically P3, ignores some other factors that could play important roles in the prosperity of society through consensus. One of those factors is

the quality of decisions made by individuals in positions of power. There's a body of literature that would suggest that aggregating information from multiple independent individuals will facilitate better decisions (LeVeck & Narang, 2017). This well-known phenomenon is called wisdom of crowds. As a result, this phenomenon could introduce a mechanism that creates an opposing force to hierarchy and prevents hierarchical societies from prosperity.

Reference

- Bunce, J.A., McElreath, R. Sustainability of minority culture when inter-ethnic interaction is profitable. *Nat Hum Behav* 2, 205–212 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0306-7>
- Hare, A. P. (1952). A Study of Interaction and Consensus in Different Sized Groups. *American Sociological Review*, 17(3), 261–267. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088071>
- LeVeck, B. L., & Narang, N. (2017). The Democratic Peace and the Wisdom of Crowds. *International Studies Quarterly*, 61(4), 867–880. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx040>
- Nagel, J. American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture (Oxford Univ. Press, New York, NY, 1996).
- Perret, C., Hart, E., & Powers, S. T. (2020). From disorganized equality to efficient hierarchy: How group size drives the evolution of hierarchy in human societies. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 287(1928), 20200693. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2020.0693>
- Turchin, P., & Gavrillets, S. (2009). Evolution of Complex Hierarchical Societies. *Social Evolution & History*, 8(2), 167–198.