

Why is Simon Cowell so full of spite? It's in his genes

By **Tim Utton**
Science Reporter

POP producer Simon Cowell has made it his trademark.

But being spiteful is about more than making toe-curling television.

Nasty behaviour is 'hard-wired' into our genes, a study has found.

The findings suggest that people who act out of spite are only doing what comes naturally.

And it evolved back when we were living in caves and hunting mammoths, according to scientists.

Spite is a crucial instinct that has helped us survive – and ensures close family members get an edge over the competition.

The 'spiteful gene' makes some animals deliberately harm others in order to help their closest relatives. This is the best way to make sure family genes survive and are passed on to the next generation.

And it could well explain some unsavoury aspects of human behaviour, Scottish scientists believe.

Although it evolved as a survival instinct, its use persists in the present day – particularly for judges on reality TV pop shows.

The study, by Edinburgh University, provides a convenient excuse for those who can't stop spreading malicious gossip about colleagues, and for those who feel compelled to steal the last car parking space.

The findings also give backing to the saying that someone would 'cut off his nose to spite his face'.

Many creatures, it seems, actually harm themselves in the pursuit of spiteful behaviour – they know they will get hurt but they still carry on.

Researcher Andy Gardner, of the university's Institute of Cell,

Animal and Population Biology, said: 'Spite has been neglected by social evolution theory, but we have shown that when there is strong competition between individuals it becomes a lot easier for spite to evolve.'

'This means that individuals are happy to hurt others, even if they hurt themselves in the process.'

The existence of spiteful behaviour in nature has previously been dismissed as an implausible idea.

But the study, which looked at species including ants, wasps and bacteria, has found the behaviour to be much more common than previously thought.

Researchers identified several examples of spiteful behaviour, including a trait previously described as 'altruism'.

One example is where female insects kill their own brothers so that their sisters – to whom they are genetically more closely related – can survive and pass on genes to the next generation.