

WAR- ROOTS IN ANIMALS AND EARLY SOCIETIES

War has been an exponentially increasing scourge throughout human history. According to the World Health Organisation, around 200 million people lost their lives due to collective violence in the 20th century. Today war threatens our species.

Wars have spawned traumatology to a large extent. One of traumatology's greatest challenges is to understand its progenitor and prevent its destructiveness in the future.

Aggression has been with us since earliest evolution. In this section we will examine its presence in animals and early societies. Other entries will examine war in civilised societies and wars for symbols.

Ethology and anthropology noted different forms of aggressiveness. Drawing on these disciplines and on his own observations in traumatic situations, Valent explored three agonistic (aggressive) survival strategies that humans shared with animals. The way these survival strategies radiated through the evolving brain and evolving society could help us to understand motivations for war.

The three agonistic survival strategies are hunting/obtaining resources (otherwise called assertiveness or goal achievement), competition/struggle, and defence/fight.

These survival strategies will be considered in animal warfare and primitive warfare. Their manifestations in civilised societies and in symbols for which humans fight wars are considered in separate entries.

Animal Warfare

Unicellular organisms already devour prey, compete for best access for food, and defend through encystment and attack through pseudopodia and poisons. Our own cells can devour, compete with, and kill foreign cells. In this sense it could be said that hunting, competition and fight, the three agonistic survival strategies already exist in our most primitive structures.

In fact hunting, competition, and fight are ubiquitous throughout the animal kingdom. The last of these is most striking as far as war is concerned. The sociobiologist Wilson in his classic *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975) says, "The strongest evoker of aggressive response in animals is the sight of a stranger [of the same species], especially a territorial intruder."

From ants to primates, nothing coheres a group and energises it to aggression as much as intrusion by strangers. Pavement ants may kill, dismember, and eat each other in territorial wars. Suspicion of foreigners (the "xenophobia principle") is ubiquitous among social animals.

Territorial intruders may in fact be dangerous. Lions and chimpanzees may kill neighbouring males, cannibalise them and their progeny, and impregnate their females.

We see that inter-species hunting and intra-species cannibalism, competition, and offensive-defensive wars already exist in animals.

Mitigating aggression are hierarchies and territories. Initial contests for dominance and formation of "pecking orders" obviate later intra-group struggles. Respect for territories prevents external wars.

Primitive Warfare

Archeological findings indicate that our genetic forebears and our own species murdered, warred, and massacred each other wherever they were in the world (e.g., Keeley in *War before Civilisation: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (1996)). Indeed, attrition rates due to conflict among primitive people were comparable to our modern wars.

Let us look at the agonistic survival strategies among primitive societies more closely.

Hunting; Obtaining Resources

Primitive man hunted other species, though at times he hunted humans as he would other animals. Cannibalism has been geographically ubiquitous, though cultures have varied and alternated between accepting and rejecting it. Human meat was sold in Batak markets in Indonesia as late as the 19th century.

Hunting mobilises 'instrumental' (assertive, cold) aggression toward a survival goal- in this case to kill in order to eat. Ethologists such as Ardrey in *The Hunting Hypothesis* (1976) point out that *Homo sapiens* has been a hunter for 99% of his evolutionary history. The genetic substrate for hunting therefore must still manifest in the biological, social, and psychological aspects of our species. For instance it can be directed toward goals that provide food indirectly, such as work.

Competition/Struggle

Competition, as in other social animals, is two-fold: internal contest for dominance and external struggle for resources. Internal competition is in part also for resources, as winners, just as is the case among animals, have first access to food, shelter, and females. However, hierarchies maintain peace, and the dominants pay for their privileges by leading in hunting and defending, and administering distribution and justice within the group. Revolutions against chiefs can occur as they age or if they do not perform their duties properly.

Struggle between groups may manifest in open warfare for waterholes and pastures, especially in harsh environments. For instance, the extent of fighting among Nuer tribes of the Nile was able to be gauged by the reading of the depth of the Nile whose floodings damaged the Nuers' pastures. Similarly wars waged by the Iroquois League were associated with the scarcity of beaver.

Wars were typically raids in which food, cattle, camels, or territory were stolen from other clans or tribes.

Women were another scarce resource due to preferential infanticide of girls and polygamous practices of dominant males. Abduction of women was one of the commonest causes of tribal wars.

Defence/Fight

Just as for 99% of human evolution humans were hunters, they were also prey. This meant that genetic fear of predators has also been shadowing our biological, social and psychological selves. Because the most dangerous predators and robbers were other humans, xenophobic fears of outsiders was common in hunter gatherer societies.

Warfare often started with the killing in the forest of a member of another group who was interpreted to be a threat. This would result in a revenge killing. Revenge killings and feuds could last over generations. Alternately, a genocidal action could be mounted in order to rid the enemy once and for all.

Like in animals, territorial respect was a means of maintaining peace between groups, and akin to animals, intrusions into territory coerced a group into retaliatory aggression akin to fending off predators (Ardrey, R. (1967). *The Territorial Imperative. A Personal Inquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations*).

The aggression in defence is called hot, of “kill or be killed” nature. It could spread from revenge killings to total war.

Radiation of survival strategies into myths and symbols

Along with evolution of the brain, the human mind evolved capacities to think, imagine, create, and symbolise. Humans around the world created similar myths to explain death and catastrophes. Survival strategies were integral to this psychological expansion (Valent, P. *Trauma and Fulfilment Therapy; A Wholist Framework*; Valent, P. *Trauma and Fulfilment Therapy; A Wholist Framework*).

Killing of hunted animals became a sacred act. Some animals were elevated into totems. Similarly, enemies’ brains and marrow, skulls and bones, became revered parts of the group.

In order to explain their universe, clans and tribes invented similar myths around the world. Each clan and tribe saw itself as unique and superior. Its members considered themselves to be descendants from primal ancestors who created the group in special magical circumstances. One’s own dead were elevated into revered ancestors who protected and guided the group.

Death and catastrophes were perceived as willed- either as punishment by ancestral forces, or by enemies who used evil magic. The former demanded sacrifice to appease the ancestors. The latter required counter-magic or elimination of the malevolent enemies.

Shamans were specialists in magic and myths, while chiefs were political heads. The two cooperated in times of war.

In conclusion, roots of war go deep. They stem from hunting, struggling for resources, and defending against enemies. These are survival strategies, but when they lead to war they result in killing, destruction, and self-destruction. We saw that tribal warfare can also be influenced by myths and magic, which may contradict survival needs.

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See Also: Survival strategies; Wars in civilised Societies; Wars for Symbols;
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FURTHER READINGS

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Wilson, E., O. (1975). *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (p 249).