

War is not inevitable: Aggressiveness can be tamed

Despite the end of the “cold war”, war continues to be pervasive throughout the world, and there are those who see war as an inevitable consequence of human nature. With increased understanding of the relations between genes and environment behavioural scientists have acquired a deeper understanding of the bases of aggression than was previously possible. We accept that humans have a propensity for violence, but that does not indicate that war is inevitable.

A. On War between industrialised sovereign states

1. **War is not a necessary consequence of the human condition.** Humans have used wars as a means to obtain resources or satisfy their ambitions, but we are fully capable of finding other ways to settle disputes. Conflicts of interest between peoples or nation-states have been, and should be, resolved by peaceful negotiation, without inter-state violence.

The United Nations and its agencies were set up deliberately to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations and to achieve international cooperation in order to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. They have enormous potential for constructive intervention.

2. **Wars between nation-states are rarely initiated by human aggressiveness.** Wars involve acts of *aggression* (acts directed towards harming other individuals), but wars are seldom caused by *aggressiveness* (the propensity or motivation to show aggression). Every war starts as the result of multiple interacting causes. The invasion of one country by the army of another is an act of aggression, but it may be initiated by political leaders or dictators, perhaps with their cognitive abilities distorted by stress, frustration or fatigue, acting on the basis of what they believe to be best for their country or themselves, and only rarely motivated by aggressiveness.

3. **Aggressiveness is of minor importance in the conduct of international war.** For the most part individual combatants are simply doing what they are told to do or need to do. In striving to harm an enemy, the primary motivation of both combatants and those who support them is usually duty, fear, loyalty or revenge, and aggression is a tool. When aggressiveness becomes primary, it is seldom condoned.

4. **International war is an institution,** with numerous constituent roles, each associated with specific rights and duties. These roles include the politicians, the commanders, munitions workers, transport workers and many others as well as combatants. Influences from many directions may cause politicians to believe that it is their duty to lead their country into war and in doing so they create duties for the generals, who create duties for the combatants, and so on. **Each does what (s)he does primarily, though not entirely, because it is his/her duty in the role that (s)he occupies in the institution of war.** The institution of war is supported by the military-industrial-scientific complex, whose power even politicians may not be able to resist.

5. **Acts of aggression are shown more readily to strangers and members of other groups than to members of the same group.** The world is divided into sovereign states and members of one state tend to see members of others as less deserving of being treated decently than their fellow group members. In war, this tendency is dangerously exaggerated by propaganda intended to make out-group members seem strange, dangerous and even sub-human.

6. **Except where legitimized by societal consensus, killing is morally forbidden in virtually all human societies.** However, the proscription applies primarily to members of the same group. Killing of individuals seen as “enemy” is sanctioned and even praised because it is the duty of combatants to kill enemies and because they are portrayed as non-persons by propaganda. Similarly in many societies it is permissible to kill individuals who are seen as outsiders because of their behaviour or mental state. Given the genetic uniformity of the human species there is no biological justification for feelings of in-group superiority. The increased connectedness of peoples around the world inspires a vision of a future in which the common humanity of all peoples will be globally recognised.

B. On Lesser Wars, small scale conflicts and violence within states or between individuals

7. **Aggressiveness does contribute to the violence of gangs, some civil wars, tribal wars and conflicts between groups and individuals.** Aggressiveness is not a necessary consequence of human nature. All humans have a propensity to be kind, helpful, cooperative and loving (“prosocial”), and all humans have a propensity to be selfishly assertive and even aggressive to their fellows: neither inevitably results in behaviour. The media report anti-social and violent behaviour, but seldom refer to the many acts of kindness that most people experience every day: this contributes to the impression that strangers may be dangerous.

8. **Prosociality is directed primarily towards the group to which the individual belongs.** Selfish assertiveness, held in check by prosociality within the group, is much less inhibited towards out-group members. Thus much depends on where the boundaries between in-group and out-group are perceived to lie. Expanding the scope of the in-group can be expected to continue to promote increased prosociality.

9. **The balance between prosociality and selfish-assertiveness/aggressiveness is crucial.** In behaviour to in-group members, the boundary is influenced to some extent by constitutional factors, but mainly by experience and by the moral rules and conventions of the culture. Rearing by a parent-figure sensitive to the child’s needs and exercising firm but reasoned control is especially potent in promoting prosociality. Virtually all data on the genetic control of aggression show that the genetic contribution to aggression is strongly modulated by environmental factors.

C. Conclusion

To reduce violence we need to (a) create a culture, especially within societies, that recognises the value of human life and is less conducive to aggression (e.g. by reducing wealth differentials, emphasizing achievement rather than competitiveness, reducing the availability of weapons and removing other triggers for aggression) ; (b) foster public understanding of conflict and violence prevention; (c) promote a more just distribution of the world's resources within and between societies; (d) provide training in preventive diplomacy to national governments and non-governmental organisations; (e) undermine the institution of war by eliminating military metaphors from our speech, down-playing violence in the media, showing that it is possible to love one's own culture without denigrating others, and opposing the arms trade; (f) provide better education which does not gloss over the horrors of war and gives greater emphasis to our common humanity than to cultural differences, thereby continuing to extend the perceived boundaries of the in-group; (g) promote recognition that human males are susceptible to being led into support of violent causes by charismatic leaders; (h) help parents to improve their skills, and ensure that parent-less children are supported by others.

Robert A. Hinde
St. John's College
Cambridge, UK

Randy J. Nelson
Dept. Neuroscience
Ohio State University

Richard Wrangham
Dept of Biology
Harvard University