

Theoretical Explanations of War: Evolutionary and Psychoanalytic Models

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between theory and society, using war as a context to develop explanations for destructive human behaviour and find solutions to conflict. Two theories are explored--evolutionary theory which postulates that man has an inborn tendency towards aggression, and psychoanalytic theory which looks at external factors that cause neurotic or violent behaviour.

Key words: Conflict, Darwinian, environment, evolution, psychoanalytic, war

Introduction

War has been waged throughout human history, and has been studied under a spectrum of disciplines. Psychologists study the phenomena of aggression alongside inter-related fields such as anthropology (Salisbury, 1990), but psychology thus far has not been directly about war. This essay compares possible explanations of war found in two schools of psychology: the evolutionary and the psychoanalytic. These theories have been selected to represent two major threads that run as a common theme throughout most of psychology: the 'biology versus environment' dichotomy. War is used as the basis for comparing the theories because it is ubiquitous but problematic, and therefore a suitable candidate for the application of psychological insight toward improving humanity.

An overview of the two theories is provided, followed by a discussion of war from the evolutionary, then the psychoanalytic, perspectives. Subsequently, areas of agreement or contradiction are highlighted, and the strengths of each theory are elucidated along with what each theory fails to explain. Ultimately, it will be seen that the two theories complement each other because, when combined, they produce a fuller picture and a multi-dimensional view of war. This is desirable because psychological theories can illuminate previously neglected reasons for war and suggest practical measures for preventing future wars.

Overview of the two theories

Evolutionary psychology investigates behavioural patterns in terms of genetic and ancestral determinants (Maynard Smith, 1993). By relating

human and animal propensities to adaptive fitness, prevalent species-typical patterns of behaviour are linked with increases in the species' survival and reproductive success (Roe & Simpson, 1958). After the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, evolutionary theory provided scientists with revealing insights into previously puzzling human behaviour (Pittendrigh, 1958). Organisms' biology is a primary foundation of evolutionary psychology.

Psychoanalytic theory, on the other hand, examines unconscious processes in relation to an individual's response to external events in life (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1995). It generally aims to trace the source and causes of neurotic behaviour. Like evolutionary theory, psychoanalytic theory originated in the 19th century after Freud published his first book, *Studies in Hysteria*, in 1893 (Wyss, 1966). Explaining how an individual's drives are molded during the stages of infancy, childhood, puberty and adulthood is a major aim of psychoanalytic theory.

The two theories have different origins, separate domains, and divergent associations with other disciplines (Schultz & Schultz, 1998). However, they share a common view of behaviour as the result of accumulated past events manifested in the present (Wallace, 1985). Both look to the past as a struggle for survival and security on the one hand, and a shunning of obsolescence and stress on the other. As such, both

theories accord with an implicit view of optimal human existence as an urge toward progress and reduction of suffering, whether across a span of generations or within one lifetime. For example, the concept of *homeostasis* in evolutionary theory (Thompson, 1958) has an equivalent in the concept of *equilibrium* in psychoanalytic theory (Mann, 1994).

Evolutionary explanations of war

Evolution works at the level of the gene; an evolutionary explanation of war therefore amounts to the explanation of how war is an effective strategy for proliferating genes. It traces how organisms exhibiting a tendency to engage in war have a higher chance of surviving and reproducing their genes than organisms that do not (Bailey, 1987). Because of evolutionary theory's prominence in the previous century, the following discussion of war is accompanied by specific application to 20th century wars.

In essence, evolutionary theory sees war as part of an ongoing competition for scarce resources in order to ensure survival (Carpenter, 1958). In animal populations, competition is limited to territorial and mating rights or access to sustenance such as food and water. Among animals, the dominant group does not fight for more than what it needs or can consume (Bailey, 1987), but human competition lacks a finite scope or predictable end.

With humans, competition for resources assumes bigger stakes because of man's ability to project future needs and his technology to preserve wealth (Caro & Mulder, 1987). High intelligence, elaborate planning and sophisticated coordination all give humans a perfect recipe for organised war. By 1991, 63% of the countries involved in 20th century wars did so for reasons that included land disputes due to insufficient space and resources (Diamond, 1991). Famous examples are Japan and Germany during the Second World War, and the spate of Arab-Israeli wars in the Middle East. These concur with the evolutionary tenet of war as a competition for resources.

Evolution also sees war as a check on overpopulation (Wilson, 1975). When animal populations reach a tipping point beyond which a species begins to wreak havoc on the ecosystem, deadly combats, famine or female infertility ensue (Thompson, 1958), precipitating the species' attempt to overcome population restrictions through an animal equivalent of 'war', likely to be won by the strongest (Owen, 1975). The principle also operates in the human realm, where gaining land through war is immediately followed by the partial or total killing of the defeated original inhabitants of the territory (Diamond, 1991).

This is closely linked to another exemplification of evolutionary competition: kin selection (Bailey, 1987) for genetic preservation, spurring an 'us versus them' mentality

based on collective similarities and differences among groups. Whereas animal competition is between either specific individuals or different species (Owen, 1975), humans are invariably divided along national or ethnic lines. The conquerors attempt to force their race and spread their culture upon the vanquished, so as to ensure permanent domination for their progeny (Caro & Mulder, 1987). Above this, humans lay an extra dimension of revenge for previous offences, due to their superior memory over animals and their higher-level reasoning power to interpret each others' actions (Simpson, 1958). These factors turn wars into escalating skirmishes, some of which have roots that can be traced back to innumerable generations (Wilson, 1975).

Recent wars in Bosnia (1993), Sri Lanka (1985), East Timor (1975-1976) and Rwanda (1962-1963), just to name a few, were accompanied by massive genocide (Diamond, 1991). The wars all involved mixed populations that had previously co-existed until mounting pressures, due to impending scarcity, caused trivial events to spark off waves of killings, especially against minorities. These aptly illustrate how the evolutionary tenets of population control and kin preference interact. The supreme example of this is indisputably the extermination of Jews during the Second World War, to make way for a purer race purportedly highest on the evolutionary scale (Suster, 1981).

In the Vietnam War (1964-72),

guerilla tactics were used extensively in villages so that, on more than one occasion, American soldiers were mistakenly ordered to attack innocent peasants (McKnight & Sutton, 1994). One of the first actions they took under such circumstances, and by far the most common after outright killing, was the rape of young women which, along with debauchery in city areas, created a generation of Amerasians in Vietnam (Bullock, 1981). The Americans' investment in the war was limited, and their human rights charter condemned war rape. Therefore the only rational inference is that they were compelled by mortal danger to procreate, through forced sex, with the supposed enemy. This strongly supports the evolutionary focus on genetic preservation, especially considering that war rape is nearly universal (Thornhill & Thornhill, 1983).

Psychoanalytic explanations of war

The psychoanalytic school searches for roots of violence in tendencies turning to destructive, instead of constructive, ends in the course of an individual's maturation (Deigh, 1991). The main cause of war, then, is the initiating action of a powerful leader with a neurotic personality trait such as megalomania. He expresses the subconscious dissatisfactions of the populace, garnering a huge base of support in order to precipitate conflict with an out-group (Turkle, 1992). This usually happens in a context rife with internal problems, facilitating the hunt for a convenient

scapegoat (Freud, 1930). Once this entity has been isolated, there ensues a single-minded rampage of torture and extermination, both to punish the wrongdoer and to achieve cathartic ends (Whyte, 1960).

Many features of war contain psychoanalytic elements. A war between countries, due to an ancient feud arising from forgotten offences, can assume a collective force among people who have had nothing to do with the original conflict, but are compelled to make it run its course so as to arrive at a resolution. Alfred Adler's (1930) concepts of anxiety (the lack of affirmation/security), inferiority complex (the feeling that one is worse off than another) or willpower (the desire to be more worthy than others), may be inextricably tied to these sentiments (cited in Dreikurs, 1953).

These are also related to the drive toward maintaining equilibrium by releasing built-up tension through the use of violence. Warmongers embrace the belief that winning the war will show that their side was 'right' all along, clearly linked to transference: the notion that one can only unravel deeply buried issues by externalising them on a different target (Whyte, 1960). The fact that violence is directed at another party, perceived as the 'enemy', is a reflection of judgment possibly originating from the superego. Thus even in war, the three psychodynamic layers of consciousness (id, ego and superego) fit together neatly - the id being the spur, the ego providing the justification, and the superego

adding a moral edge to the cause (Turkle, 1992).

These features are apparent in the turmoil of the last century. The Chinese civil wars between the Nationalists and the Communists between 1912 and 1949 after colonisation by foreign powers had gone beyond crisis level, were dominated by personality cults like those of Mao, Chiang and the warlords rising to prominence in riotous times (Salisbury, 1990). The same is true of the Bolshevik Revolution (1916-7) conceptualised by Marx and carried out by Lenin, where proletariat uprisings against aristocracy ended with a slew of bloody murders and 'black' days (Lawrence, 1969). In recent decades, the search for scapegoats happened in the United States after its oil sources were threatened by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990), and again when its economy was depressed due to its World Trade Centre collapse (2001). But, once again, the most characteristic illustration comes from World War Two.

Adolf Hitler, considered a defining figure of the 20th century by historians (Bullock, 1981), was adept at appealing to his countrymen's unconscious fear and resentment when the nation was suffering the after-effects of the Versailles Treaty (Walther, 1978). Hitler's ability was complemented by his determination stemming from a childhood and youth full of frustrated ambitions, reinforced by skilful propaganda manipulating the crux of audience emotion. This

scenario contains a potent mix of neuroticism and hypnotism as defined by psychoanalytic theory (Anzieu, 1984). After establishing power, he consolidated it by forming committees to control every aspect of German life with the help of a secret police that acted like the conscience of the people, the substitute superego. It was by these means that he gathered enough force to annex half of Europe between 1939 and 1942 (Suster, 1981).

The leader's personality - how it has been shaped by his life circumstances - is an important aspect of psychoanalytic theory. For example, a study of prime ministers in Britain from the 1890s to 1983 found that 61% of them had come from single-parent homes, grown up with feelings of alienation and unbearable loneliness, or had siblings to whom one or both parents had demonstrated greater affection (Robert, 1983). As a result, it has been hypothesised that most great leaders have an overwhelming need to prove themselves and to dislodge lingering self-perceptions of inferiority, culminating in super-human efforts to pursue prominence and status (Dreikurs, 1953).

Why the masses are willing to follow such a leader also warrants detailed psychoanalytic study. Erich Fromm, a German Jew during World War Two, was the pioneer of this research (Hinshelwood & Zarate, 1997). According to him, elevation of the personality cult to a deified, God-like position is always accompanied by the "brain-death of a nation" (Salisbury,

1990, p.129). Personal will is repressed or relinquished to the organization; to avoid dissonance and disequilibrium, individual accountability for choice or action is abdicated (DeMause, 1982).

This was obviously the case in the former Soviet Union under Josef Stalin (Kochan & Abram, 1990), and the People's Republic of China under Mao (Salisbury, 1990). The people suddenly became dehumanised and stripped of their personal identity - sublimating their passion and hiding under the guise of anonymity in deference to patriotic ideology (Hinshelwood & Zarate, 1997). When people are in this frame of mind, leaders have free rein to mobilise their resources for war (Anzieu, 1984).

Evaluation of theories

Both theories portray war as a result of invisible forces pushing toward pre-defined ends. In evolutionary theory, that end is the elimination of the weak and the survival of the strong. In psychoanalytic theory, it is the release of tension and anxiety, along with the strife for self-assertion, superiority or prestige (DeMause, 1982). These goals stem ultimately from the desire for dominance and resource acquisition.

Both theories subscribe to a mechanistic cause-effect paradigm of war. They see war in relation to both the direction, and the magnitude, of pressures faced by a population facing particular constraints (Maynard Smith, 1993).

The theories describe collective tendencies in terms of a system of intricately calibrated conditions tipping out of balance when circumstances change, whereupon the system then seeks redress to re-establish stability (Thomson, 1968). Neither theory adopts a moralistic stand toward human behaviour.

The main difference between the theories is along the personal-impersonal continuum. Evolutionary psychology concentrates on impersonal aspects of war like territory and resources (Carpenter, 1958); psychoanalytic theory focuses on personal factors such as cult figures and social inadequacy (Wallace, 1985). As demonstrated in this section, evolutionary theory accounts for more reasons why war is started, and a considerable portion of the deaths and rapes that happen during a war (Diamond, 1991). Psychoanalytic theory focuses, in a more limited sense, on a 'visionary' leader (Storr, 1968), the people of a country, and the relationship between the two. The theories also contradict each other on issues such as population. In evolutionary theory, scarce resources have a constraining impact on maximum numbers (Diamond, 1991); but in the psychoanalytic model, a leader enjoins the nation to multiply, foreseeing power in numbers (Salisbury, 1990; Walther, 1978).

Ultimately, both theories fail to explain the astounding levels of cruelty in human wars (Suster, 1981). Current theories of aggression, whether evolutionary or psycho-

analytic, are ineffectual in accounting for senseless cruelty (Bailey, 1987). For example, the claim that a contributing reason why Hitler carried out his 'Final Solution' was because his father had regularly beaten him mercilessly in his childhood (Walther, 1978) would nullify the atrocity of his crime. It also ignores the fact that many people who were abused as children do not commit similar deeds. To shed more light on cruelty requires a holistic analysis that would necessarily encompass the biological and humanistic schools of psychology.

Other effects of war are explained by neither evolutionary nor psychoanalytic theory. One is why humans torture when the opponent has already been denigrated and no longer poses a threat; animals in aggressive settings hardly ever do so (Storr, 1968). Another is why wars in the 20th century have been voluntarily waged by both males and females, whereas in wars before that and in most animal societies, war has been seen solely as a male domain (Alcock, 1993).

These problems with explaining modern wars imply that the paradigms operating in the past are no longer applicable. Indeed the hallmarks of warfare today are unique, as evidenced by the rash of conflicts we routinely witness: first, it is conducted on a wider scale and results in more deaths (Suster, 1981). Second, it involves the participation and slaughter of civilians, unlike earlier wars which were confined to soldiers on the battlefield (Bullock,

1981). Third, regional wars take place with more regularity and break out simultaneously in more parts of the world (Diamond, 1991).

Whereas tribal wars in the ancient past might have been a reliable, perhaps even necessary, way of winnowing the weak from the strong, or a practical and effective method to acquire resources and demonstrate superiority, modern wars have become arenas of mass destruction, to the detriment of all parties. Vast casualties along with material and social decimation (Bailey, 1987) attest to the fact that war no longer involves any winners. Theories cannot explain the damage, except to say that technology has evolved too quickly for us to keep up with it.

Conclusion

In the last century, war multiplied and escalated at unprecedented rates: genocide, torture and other crimes against humanity assumed previously unimaginable proportions. It is no coincidence that this was also the time when psychology, a relatively young subject, flourished—researchers strive to explore whatever is relevant to their society. Furthermore, the evolutionary and psychoanalytic theories examined here are poised to be an integral part of an 'academic rescue team' to solve the problems we now face. They explain much of how humans function, but within these principles also lie the seeds of how we can become *dysfunctional*. As Freedman and Roe (1958) pointed out, "man's endowment, successful though it has

made him, contains within it hindrances to his social evolution as well as self-destructive potential" (p.455). For these reasons, it is imperative that psychology turns its lens more directly on war.

The usefulness of the theories discussed above lies in their capacity to make people see themselves objectively. War is a symptom of social illness, and humans are carriers of those illnesses, having the propensity to prevent them or to perpetrate them depending on a constellation of factors-genetic and environmental (Diamond, 1991). Everyone has some responsibility for what happens in the world; theories do not make excuses for these events just because they attempt to explain them (Moir & Jessel, 1995). Instead, theories make us aware of why they happen, which helps us exercise control over our impulses. In psychology more than in any other field, individual knowledge translates into individual power. We can thus look at root causes, attacking reasons rather than merely redressing outcomes after the fact.

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