

# Universal characteristics of aggressive behaviour in humans



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In what sense are aggressive behaviors, i. e. conflict, competition, and dominance, universal characteristics of humans? What is the evidence that in some cultures aggressive behaviors are rarely observed and strongly sanctioned? How is such an outcome achieved?

Humans are innately social animals, whose existence depends on a continued complex relationship with other human beings. Expressed aggression will inevitably lead to an individual or group as the dominator, and an individual or group as the dominated. Since human origin, individuals and groups have had continuous conflicts in search for the best economic resources, the most fertile land, and the most sustainable reproductive social group. For this reason, human history is full of aggressive conflicts and sanctioned aggressive behaviors. This essay is a brief composition summarizing the outcomes of aggressive human behaviors, specifically focusing on whether dominance, competition, conflict, and war are caused by nature, nurture, or both. This essay also presents case studies of rare amicable, nonviolent societies and their achievements of peace and human security.

It is widely agreed among evolutionary anthropologists and sociobiologists that aggression is a biologically universal human characteristic (Dennen & Falger 1990; Schmookler 1995; Wrangham & Peterson 1996); however, many contemporary cultural anthropologists advocate that aggression is a cultural construct (Kropotkin 1914). Indeed, the historical debate between nature and nurture is vigorous, as the categories of human intrinsic, interactional, and environmental traits are blurred. Hobbes (ed. Tuck 1991) argued that war is a functional part of human nature that maintains a

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balance of power and solidarity. Rousseau (Jonathan 2005) defended the position that war is independent from human nature, and is therefore a dysfunctional social construct invented by states intended to protect societies. In contrast, Malthus (Pullen 1989) believed war to be a functional mechanism imparted by God to humans to reduce populations at necessary intervals through an innate expression of aggression and a need for in-group cohesion to maintain a sustainable equilibrium.

The nature-nurture debate continues still, from early philosophers to contemporary scholars with no definitive answer. The debate however has recently grown more complex with a greater comprehension of biological predispositions that effect human behavior. The most compelling explanation is that many biological predispositions, like aggression and competition, can be distinguished from, but influenced by, the cultural environment (Renfrew 1997). Every living organism, Ridley (2003, p. 236) argues, is an instrument for ' genes to grow, feed, thrive, replicate, and die', but most importantly its primary survival function is reproduction. Reproduction undoubtedly catalyzes a competitive force to create descendants. This essay reputes the position that biological factors influence the cultural, or as Ridley (2003) describes it ' nature via nurture'. More specifically, reproduction and aggression biologically entail phenotypic outcomes.

All humans feel the need to eliminate competitors, or the offspring of competitors to protect reproductive capital such as territory and mates (Low 2000, p. 214). This can be achieved through aggressive non-violent dominance or aggressive violent conflicts. Anderson and Bushman (2002, p. 28) defines human aggression as ' any behavior directed toward another  
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individual that is carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm.' This, however, does not mean that the individual has carried out the harmful conduct. It can be inferred then, that aggression is a means to create an inverse relation to achieve a goal through someone without the use of harm or violence.

The definition of violence, such as war, conflict, competition, and dominance is arbitrary. For example, violence in one culture can be very different to another culture, or even to individuals of the same culture. Anderson & Bushman (2002, p. 29) defines violence as 'aggression that has extreme harm as its goal (e. g., death)'. When comparing the two definitions, it is clear that violence is aggressive expression but, conversely, aggression does not always lead to violence. These definitions lead to the conclusion that aggression is biological and universal among humans and furthermore, violence is nature via nurture. In fact, human expression of violence is minimal compared to aggression. Aggression can be observed in almost every human interaction in the form of non-violent dominance and competition for social capital (Dennen & Falger 1990).

Culture arbitrates in inverse relations with norms, mores, folkways, and taboos to prevent aggression turning into rampant violence. With the mediation of culture, aggression via violence serves multiple functions and dysfunctions within human societies (Dennen & Falger 1990). Established in-out groups create and maintain group identity and boundary lines between societies. This stratification then creates reciprocal hostility between groups and creates the need for social institutions. These institutions often act as social filters preventing impulsive social conflict between in-out groups

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(Dennen & Falger 1990). These filters also act as a mobilization mechanism, unifying the energies of group members, thus increasing group cohesion or reaffirming state sovereignty (Dennen & Falger 1990).

Without group unification, powerful charismatic people cannot rally a society toward a collective interest. Social order is achieved through rules and commands issued by these powerful people to maintain a normative system of society and influence the weaker people to represent their will (Dennen & Falger 1990). The example of aggression (nature) via dominance (nurture) complies with the laws of mutual aid and mutual struggle (Wrangham & Peterson 1996; Kropotkin 1914 ). Through these two laws humans directly benefit from achieved power, status, and resources through competition; however, as a result, 60 percent of all human societies engage in warfare at least yearly (Low 2000, p. 223). War would be inevitable if the genetic basis alone dictated human action.

The above arguments have uncovered that the universal character of human conflict, competition, and dominance is contingent on biological aggressive behaviors. Ethnographic records and historical accounts tell a clear story of hominid catalyzed aggression (Carmen 1997). From primate pack raiding, to *Homo habilis* tribal skirmishes, to *Homo erectus* group battles, to Neandertal societal armed conflicts, to *Homo sapien* civilization wars (Schmookler 1995 p. 74-87; Otterbein 2004), humans have perpetually constructed cultural systems to solve the recurrent problem of violent aggression via mutual aid and mutual struggle.

Through history, humans have been actively altering their environments through problem solving to best suit intellectual development, which has caused an inevitable in-group/out-group competition (Schmookler 1995). The more humans mutually support each other, the more intellectual development occurs; conversely, the more human intellect increases, the larger civilizations become, and more blood is shed (Schmookler 1995). That is, greater levels of population pressure are associated with a greater likelihood of warfare. Furthermore, 'warfare is more likely in advanced horticultural and agrarian societies than it is in hunting-and-gathering and simple horticultural societies, and that it is also more likely in hunting-and-gathering and agrarian societies that have above-average population densities' (Nolan 2003). Thus, the denser human population becomes, the laws of mutual aid and mutual struggle become more imposed. This is evidence that culture can intensify or suppress expressions of aggression. For the most part, however, culture has been unsuccessful at eliminating violence.

Since mutual aid and mutual struggle has failed to resolve the problem of universal conflict, surely something must provide a solution. Kropotkin (1914, p. 74) argues that, 'better conditions are created by the elimination of competition by means of mutual aid', thus establishing a cultural ecology of pacificism. This argument fails because, as presented above, innate aggression induces competition for optimal human survival. To completely eliminate competition, aggression must first be entirely suppressed.

Complex human culture is unable to hinder aggression to the degree of elimination, but Kropotkin inadvertently made a good point. Once

competition is reduced, social disparities and meritocracy will also decrease, thus preventing the less dominant group from obtaining the subordinate position (Schmookler 1995). The latter part of this essay will draw upon case studies to argue that competition reduction has been the primary objective for many tribal societies and welfare states.

Kropotkin (1914) uses numerous examples to argue that societies with intra-group cohesion rarely encounter intra or inter-group conflict. Among them is a Papuan tribe located in Geelwink Bay, studied by G. L. Blink (1888).

Kropotkin (1914, p. 94) interprets Blink's account as, 'never having any quarrels worth speaking of' and 'never had he any conflict to complain of' which is unsupported because Blink, in his field notes writes, 'war prisoners are sometimes eaten'. Kropotkin does not completely overlook this statement of warfare, but this case study fails to prove his point that inter-group peace is achievable. Kropotkin, therefore, makes a detrimental mistake in his argument for exemplifying paramount sociability and inter-tribal peace. It seems Kropotkin was attempting to persuade readers through an anarchist agenda by centering on the Papuan peaceful in-group relations and describing the Papuan tribe as having a primitive communist system (Kropotkin 1914, p. 93-95).

By using examples of Inuit tribes, Kropotkin once again glorifies in-group mutual aid, but abandons emphasis on inter-group conflict. In summarizing Veniaminoff, Kropotkin (1914, p. 100) writes, 'one murder only had been committed since the last century in a population of 60, 000 people',

irrespective of mass infanticide to maintain a sustainable population. In

truth, Inuit tribes rely heavily on cooperation and reciprocity for intra-group  
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survival; however, they are not exempt from inter-group hostility as Kropotkin omits (1914, p. 95-104; Gat 1999, p. 26). Anthropologist Reynolds (1985, p. 24) asserts that, ' Eskimos had limited their aggressiveness in past fights with other Eskimos, but had been more brutal in fights with other North American Indian peoples'. Although restrained and ritualized, Inuit did wage combat against each other and engaged in inter-ethnic conflict (Gat 1999, p. 26). Even Veniaminoff, whom Kropotkin (1914, p. 99) quotes, writes that for Aleoutes ' it is considered shameful to...ask pardon from an enemy; to die without ever having killed an enemy'. Once again, Kropotkin relates the primitive society with his anarchical communist agenda to prove in-group solidarity and peace is achievable, but avoids out-group enmity.

Specifically, Kropotkin takes a Rousseauian social Darwinist stance on aggression and conflict by arguing that humans are innately peaceable and cooperative. Nevertheless, Kropotkin shares a commonality with Rousseau, Malthus, and Hobbes; each has constructed two functional and universal explanations for aggression and conflict (Dawson 1996, p. 7). Firstly, interspecific aggression occurs when one group attempts to exclude another group through competitiveness and dominance. This can be achieved with or without violence and is distinguished from predation, when an individual or group dominates the other for the economic gain of a food source. Secondly, group cohesion results in a synergistic in-group relationship, consequently producing an ethnocentric view of superiority toward other groups (Pope 2000, p. 161; Dawson 1996, p. 7). Although Kropotkin downplayed group ethnocentrism and rallying, he realized it is inevitable, as explained above.



Indeed, the laws of mutual aid and mutual struggle universally obligate humans.

As explained above, innate competition and group solidarity has, throughout the history of man, led to conflicts. With the rise of large-scale societies, these conflicts evolved into primitive warfare. During the early Paleolithic, *H. sapiens* began to spread rapidly across the earth's surface (Dawson 1996, p. 26). Fissionings and fusions occurred often, and competition intensified because of seasonal scarce resources. According to Dawson (1996, p. 26) 'all theories of primitive warfare have recognized that whether or not it [war] is "innate" it has to be triggered by competition'. Warfare is certainly not innate, but it may account for the wide dispersal of early Paleolithic humanity. Conversely, it would have limited the possibilities for offensive/defensive competition because early humans most likely fought for land and resources and the winner would assume 'ownership', while the other group found new economic capital (Dawson 1996, p. 26). This method would prove effective until groups could no longer diffuse due to a limit of land and resources.

At the beginning of the Neolithic culture, large groups could no longer easily avoid neighboring groups by seeking new land, therefore resource limitations compelled people to live in larger, more cohesive societies (Dawson 1996, p. 26-27). Dense populations compelled groups to become territorial, with semi-permanent settlements. Human societies, consequently, were forced to create caches of food to survive. In order to protect these caches, defensible resources became a defensive strategy against raiding groups, especially for agricultural societies (Dawson 1996, p. 26-27). Defensive logistics were <https://assignbuster.com/universal-characteristics-of-aggressive-behaviour-in-humans/>

designed to deter war but, according to the archeological evidence, war was more often and more brutal (Dawson 1996, p. 26-27). As a result of militarism, the individual became an expendable resource for the good of the group.

The democratization of warfare among states is the current solution to the consistent and universal competitive strive for dominance. The democratic model originated during the French Revolution, when states were not yet nation-states and nationalism had not yet developed as a significant political force (Baylis, Smith, Owens 2008, p. 546). For the first time, humanity mustered an enormous and unprecedented amount of human energy into one single national service and mutual protection (Schmookler 1995, p. 99-100, 287-288; Baylis et al. 2008, p. 546). When France democratically handed over this vast army to Napoleon, neighboring nations were compelled to enhance and enlarge their military to deter domination. However, Napoleon was able to dominate Europe because of the newly devised national political system, enabling him to conjure unequalled armies (Schmookler 1995, p. 99-100, 287-288; Baylis, et al. 2008, p. 546). Once again, the laws of mutual aid and mutual struggle intertwine.

In conclusion, Hobbes, Malthus, Rousseau, and Kropotkin all had a static view of competition. Competition inevitably leads to war and peace. The laws of mutual aid and mutual struggle are innate, universal, and are not mutually exclusive. They secure orderliness and allow humans to act freely to preserve their genes, however, the knowledge and values shared by a society influence and, to some degree, determine the thoughts and actions

of an individual to behave synergistically and symbiotically (Schmookler 1995, p. 13).

Through time, humanity has used solidarity, anarchy, fissioning, defense, militarism, social institutions, and democracy to sanction or repel conflict and violence with no prevail. In each case study presented, intra-group solidarity brought on inter-group competition and conversely, inter-group conflict caused intra-group solidarity. Because humans are social creatures and are dependent on each other for culture, conflicts are inevitable. The laws of mutual struggle and mutual aid operate within the law of natural selection - gene survival of the fittest individual or group. In/out groups will always be present; however, conflict and war are not innately biological. They are an outward expression of acculturation. That is, human biological aggression is stimulated by cultural norms, mores, folkways, and taboos. A group's cultural sanctions determine the social consequence for overt aggression.