

Why War?

Corrections and Additions

Courtenay Young

In the last issue of this journal (Vol. 21, No. 2, 13-22), I commented on warfare in the human species, *Homo sapiens*, as follows:

“... *The human animal is possibly the only animal on the planet that conducts sustained aggression (warfare) against others of its own species.*”

I have since discovered that this statement is factually incorrect; I present my apologies. There is at least one other species that regularly conducts a form of warfare: one of our nearest relatives, the chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes*.^[1]

I recently watched a four-part Netflix series, *Chimp Empire*, about troops of chimpanzees in the Ngogo forest in Uganda's Kibale National Park (which contains the largest known group of chimpanzees in the world). This group has been studied for 20 years.^[2] The makers of the film spent years filming facets of chimp life that have never before been seen on film – including the first film about Ngogo chimpanzees, *Rise of the Warrior Apes*, by the same filmmaker, James Reed, in 2017.

While aggression between rival groups of chimpanzees was fairly well-known, what was exceptional and captured in these films was that the original central group had split into two or three other groups occupying neighboring territory.

Chimpanzees are extremely territorial, and so there arose a great rivalry between the larger central group and the more closely-bonded western factions of these chimpanzee groups. They have an incredibly complex society, and can form very strong and sophisticated social politics and familial relationships – forming alliances, building trust, caring for one another, and often going head-to-head in never-ending fights for power.

These films, made over a 20-year period, give new insights about the violence, brutal power struggles, rivalry, enmity, friendship, and diplomacy within the strictly hierarchical primate group, and also about the territorial rivalry between neighboring groups. There exists actual warfare against other chimpanzee groups, and severe aggression towards conspecifics (members of the same species) on a regular basis.

Chimpanzees are very dependent on their food sources – mainly fruit trees. Since different types of fruits come in season at different times, there is a territorial imperative to access these trees. Competition is rife, and there is no sharing outside the resident

1. Chimpanzees share about 98% of their DNA with humans.

2. For more information about the Ngogo Chimpanzee Project, see campuspress.yale.edu/ngogochimp/project/

group. The most important source is the giant fig tree, *Ficus mucoso*, which does not fruit seasonally, and which produces enormous fruit crops, some of which are available most of the time. The brutal group hunting of other monkey species is common. Monkeys (especially the red colobus) who also eat this fruit are regularly chased away, and are often caught, killed, and eaten.

An emergent property of between-group competition is evolutionary group dominance, which increases the size of the chimps' territory and reduces neighbor pressure in wild chimpanzees (Lemoine *et al.*, 2020; Amsler, 2009). Increases in the number of males in a group lead to territorial increases, suggesting the dominant role of males in territory acquisition. Males regularly go out in groups on patrol to maintain – and extend – the boundaries of their territory. If they meet a single chimpanzee from another group, they will kill. Patrolling chimpanzees cover long distances, and patrols are likely to involve energetic costs for participants, as well as considerable dangers.

Meeting up with a smaller number from another group results in warlike behavior (with the use of weapons – stick and stones – and individuals will be hurt and killed until the smaller group flees, which results in territorial extension for the larger group. However, cohesion within a group is also significant, as a closely-knit group will work together better than a group with inherent rivalries, even if that group is larger.

These sorts of anthropological observations have stimulated numerous comparisons between chimpanzee violence and human warfare over neighboring groups. Male chimpanzees compete with males in other groups over territory, food, and females, and base their decisions to attack strangers on assessments of numerical strength. They strive for dominance over neighboring groups (Wilson & Wrangham, 2003). This is, in effect, a form of warfare:

Humans inherited a propensity for violence from our primate ancestors, a new study says, making it easy to think, “Ah, see – we really are just animals.” But that doesn’t give animals enough credit. The first humans were about as violent as could be expected based on their family tree, researchers report (<http://nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/nature19758>) September 28 in the journal Nature. The scientists pored through examples of lethal violence – not animals killing other species, such as predators and prey, but killings within a species, whether by cannibalism, infanticide, or aggression.

More often, though, people think animals are more violent than they really are, says animal behavior expert Marc Bekoff, an emeritus professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. “Violence might be deep in the human lineage, but I think people should be very cautious in saying that when humans are violent, they’re behaving like nonhuman animals,” Bekoff says.

Bekoff has long contended that nonhumans are predominantly peaceful, and he points out that just as some roots of violence can be found in our animal past, so can roots of altruism and cooperation. He cites the work of the late anthropologist Robert Sussman, who found that even primates, some of the most aggressive mammals, spend less than one percent of their day fighting or otherwise competing.

These differences among primates matter, says Richard Wrangham, a biological anthropologist at Harvard known for his study of the evolution of human warfare. In chimpanzees and other primates that kill each other, infanticide is the most common form of killing. But humans are different – they frequently kill each other as adults. “That ‘adult-killing club’ is very small,” he says. “It includes a few social and territorial carnivores such as wolves,

lions, and spotted hyenas.” While humans may be expected to have some level of lethal violence based on their family tree, it would be wrong to conclude that there’s nothing surprising about human violence, Wrangham says. When it comes to murderous tendencies, he says, “humans really are exceptional.” (Engelhaupt, 2016)

Wrangham’s book (1996) explores, in a meticulous manner, some of the controversial issues about human aggression when examined anthropologically. It unfolds a compelling argument that the secrets of a peaceful society may well be, first of all, power-sharing between males and females, and second, a high level and variety of sexual activity (both homosexual and heterosexual). The authors “... present evidence that most dominant human civilizations have always been likewise behaviorally patriarchal, and that male humans share male chimpanzees’ innate propensity for dominance, gratuitous violence, war, rape, and murder. They [also] claim that the brain’s prefrontal cortex is also a factor, as humans have been shown experimentally to make decisions based both on logic and prefrontal cortex-mediated emotion.”

They quote an example of primate behavior in bonobos (*pan paniscus*), sometimes called pygmy chimpanzees, who live in a predominantly matriarchal system and are unique for their female-biased dispersal relationships, which encourage resolution and peacemaking tactics among the group, and discourage violence and war. Bonobo social structures reject aggression, and focus on the power of cooperation, and how it benefits the group’s overall survival. Since male violence is, by most counts, evolutionary undesirable (as well as being morally reprehensible), and – given modern weapons – it threatens the existence of the whole species. While they quote some figures that suggest that violence has been decreasing in some human societies, they also make the case that human males are genetically predisposed to violence, but that the human species also has the intellectual capacity to override this flaw – if society recognizes it’s in the interest of our survival to do so.

Given this background and the evolution of humans from a chimpanzee-like ancestor five million years ago, we can begin to look at human aggression in a different light. James DeMeo, an author from a Reichian tradition, has written a fairly massive tome “proving” a geographical basis to human aggression. He seems to ignore its biological and evolutionary basis, and his conclusions are thus somewhat debatable.

The basis of his theory is that the much harsher environment to be found around the world’s major desert area, which he calls *Saharasia*, the title of his 500+-page book) seems to provoke a much more violent and misogynistic culture. That may well be true, but it is not the whole picture. I am not questioning his detailed research, but, when combined with the evolutionary perspective dating back over the past five million years or more, the conclusion he reaches about the cultural developments of the last 6,000 years is perhaps incomplete.

Given the territorial imperative that we have almost certainly inherited from our common ancestors, and ably shown in this film series about chimpanzees, it is more than likely that when environmental conditions are harsh and food supplies short, as in desert and near-desert environments, our inherited aggressive potential becomes exaggerated.

In my own article on the theory of evolution (Young, 2010), I try to look at the significant physiological developments that distinguish us from all other primates – not just hairlessness, but also subcutaneous fat, salt tears, the ability to control our breathing, etc. – and weave them into an environment that can create and account for all these distinguishing features, as well as for the variety of other hominids that evolved and then

disappeared over the last five million years. Latent aggression may even account for the occasional interbreeding between Cro-Magnons and Neanderthals and Denisovans, and yet their inevitable extinction.

Again, my apologies for the informational mistake, and my thanks to the IBPJ editors for the opportunity to correct and add to my previous article.

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