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War



Francis T. McAndrew
Knox College, Galesburg, IL, USA

Synonyms

[Battle](#); [Combat](#); [Conflict](#); [Hostilities](#); [Invasion](#);
[Raiding](#); [Warfare](#)

Definition

“War” is an armed conflict between nations or organized groups such as tribes, gangs, kin groups, or political factions.

Introduction

It is obvious that warfare is a highly cooperative activity that requires good communication and cooperation with allies and intelligent self-control (Tooby and Cosmides 2010), but there has been a long-standing disagreement among historians and social scientists regarding the origins of human warfare. In the last couple of decades, evolutionary scientists have brought yet another perspective to bear on this issue.

The first point to be emphasized is the extent to which war is almost exclusively a male activity. In spite of the diversity to be found across human

societies, there has been no historically documented case of organized fighting and killing by groups of women against other groups of women. The consistency with which males are the organizers and perpetrators of group conflict has led many scholars to conclude that the male propensity for group violence is rooted in more than the learning of culturally prescribed gender roles. Most evolutionary psychologists believe that the roots of warfare can be traced to the competition between males for status and access to women (McAndrew 2017).

Male Competition for Mates Is Intense

The adaptive problems faced by men and women throughout history were quite different, and aggression proved to be a more adaptive response for males than for females. Sexual competition for mates has always been more intense among males than among females, especially in the polygamous societies that appear to have been typical in the prehistoric human world.

The stakes were very high for men in this environment, as the winners of this competition would come away with the greatest number of women (and the most desirable women). The losers ran the risk of genetic annihilation by their failure to successfully win the status and resources necessary to attract mates. Historically, powerful men have always enjoyed greater sexual access to women than men lower in the pecking order, and

violence, including war, can often be traced to this grim struggle for status and mates among men.

Violence committed against the right people at the right time has commonly been a ticket to social success. For example, among the Yanomamo of South America, men who had killed other men, especially during wars and skirmishes with other villages, acquired significantly more wives than men who had not yet killed anyone (Chagnon 2013). Because having killed someone in war was usually good for one's reputation, many societies developed ceremonies for recognizing such accomplishments. In modern societies, these take the form of prestigious awards such as the Congressional Medal of Honor in the United States, and many countries have national holidays to celebrate the heroism of those who have fought and/or died in wars.

To insure that public recognitions of valor during war serve as honest signals of heroic behavior, sanctions may be brought to bear against individuals who falsely claim to have attained military honors. For example, in the United States, the "Stolen Valor Act of 2005" was signed into law by President George W. Bush to prohibit the unauthorized wear, sale, or manufacture of military decorations and medals. This law was extended by the "Stolen Valor Act of 2013" signed into law by President Barack Obama. The 2013 law makes it a crime for a person to fraudulently claim to have received military medals and decorations.

Could War Heroism Be Adaptive?

Evolutionary psychologists believe that even apparently selfless impulses such as volunteering to fight in a war must provide some adaptive advantage for individuals. Costly signaling theory (Berezkei et al. 2010; Bliege Bird et al. 2005; Grafen 1990; McAndrew 2002; Zahavi 1977) suggests that conspicuous war heroism may be a way for individuals to advertise desirable personal qualities that increase the likelihood that they will be chosen as a mate or an ally and be positioned for access to future resources.

Many studies demonstrate that people who sacrifice for the group by engaging in costly altruistic activities do in fact achieve elevated social status, respect, and recognition as a result of their public selflessness (McAndrew and Perilloux 2012a, b; Willer 2009). For a costly signal to be effective, it must honestly convey valuable information about the individual sending the signal, and it must be impossible to fake. No researchers suggest that heroes consciously sit down and calculate all of the benefits that will come their way if they survive the heroic action. Rather, it is thought that such impulses have been selected for because heroic behavior has provided competitive advantages for men throughout human history.

Have Men Evolved to Make War?

Dutch psychologist Mark van Vugt proposed the *male warrior hypothesis* as a way of explaining the results of research demonstrating that men show stronger group identification and more cooperation with ingroup members than do women during times of threat from outside groups (Van Vugt et al. 2007). His theory suggests that men have evolved a predisposition to engage in collective cooperative aggression against outgroups, a tendency that has likely been strongly reinforced through culture traditions and socialization. Puts (2010) has also pointed out that men tend to form more hierarchical same-sex coalitional groups than do women and that they are more likely than women to make strong ingroup/outgroup distinctions that result in the dehumanization of outgroup members (Buss 2015).

A team of European psychologists explored the proposition that war provides an arena for men to compete and impress both their male rivals and females who might be potential mates (Rusch et al. 2015). In one study, they found that 464 American men who had won the Medal of Honor during World War II eventually had more children than other US service men who had not been so heroically distinguished. This is consistent with the idea that heroism gets rewarded with greater reproductive success.

In a second study, 92 women rated the sexual attractiveness of men who had behaved heroically in war as being higher than that of soldiers who had served but not been identified as heroes. Tellingly, women did not show this increased attraction toward men who had behaved heroically in sports or business situations. A third study revealed that behaving heroically in war does not increase the attractiveness of female war heroes to men. In summary, heroism in time of war is sexier than any other kind of heroism but only for men. Similarly enhanced access to females has been documented for males who join violent street gangs (Palmer and Tilley 1995).

Young men are particularly concerned with status and heroic opportunities for sound evolutionary reasons. In early human societies, competitive success or failure in early adulthood determined a man's standing in a social group for the rest of his life. It wasn't possible to simply hit the "reset" button and join another group, so what happened during the teen years mattered a lot. For this reason, high-risk competition between young males provided an opportunity for "showing off" the abilities needed to acquire resources, exhibit strength, and meet any challenges to one's status (Iredale et al. 2008; McAndrew 2009). Consequently, heroic or even recklessly daredevil behavior was rewarded with status and respect – assuming, of course, that the young man survived the ordeal. Displaying heroism in time of war was a primary way of accomplishing these goals. Hence, it should not be surprising that historical data confirm that the proportion of a population made up of young men is one of the best predictors of when a society is most likely to go to war (Mesquida and Wiener 1996).

The relentlessness of risky, aggressive behavior by young males has prompted Wilson and Daly (1985) to label this behavioral tendency the "Young Male Syndrome."

The results of the annual "Darwin Awards" competition offer a tongue-in-cheek confirmation of the tendency of young males to behave recklessly. The Darwin Awards feature those individuals who have lost their lives in dramatic fashion during the previous year by taking pointless risks.

For the 5-year period from 2010 to 2014, the Darwin Award winners were skewed toward men by a margin of 38–5, with two of the five women who made the list getting there by being talked into having sex with men under less than rational circumstances (DarwinAwards.com).

Men are sensitive to signals that advertise the physical strength, fighting ability, and aggressive inclinations of other men (Sell et al. 2009, 2010) and actively assess the likely outcomes of violent encounters between themselves and other men (Fox 1997). Today, the proliferation of sports undoubtedly developed as a constructive alternative for dealing with the proclivities of young males that evolved in a very different time. In a legally sanctioned gladiatorial arena, young men compete to exhibit the same skills – throwing, clubbing, running, wrestling, tackling, and eye-hand coordination – that would have made them successful fighters and hunters in the ancestral environment. The popular appeal of spectator sports, especially for men, probably occurs at least in part because it taps into an innate interest in the physical capabilities of other men.

The idea that men use war as a way of competing with each other to impress women has clearly been around for quite some time. For example, the Sioux warrior *Rain in the Face* once commented on the fact that the presence of women in a war party caused his warriors to vie with one another more intensely in displaying their valor (Philbrick 2010).

What Are the Necessary Precursors to War?

In addition to the aforementioned prerequisite of having a sufficient number of young men in a group who are able to fight, evolutionary social scientists have long recognized that a number of other conditions predict a group's willingness to wage war. (See Shackelford and Weekes-Shackelford (2012) for a comprehensive overview.)

For example, it is essential that armies marching into battle have clearly distinguished their "sympathy groups" (often overlapping with

kin groups) from their enemies for whom they hold little or no sympathy. Ideologies and religion can facilitate this process by creating certainty about holding the moral high ground in a conflict, which bolsters both a strong ingroup identification and a callous disregard for the fate of outgroup members. A recent study indicates that individuals may be more likely to participate in a defensive war if clear benefits accrue to their group as a result of the war, but participation in offensive wars (i.e., one's own group initiates the conflict by attacking another group) is more likely when the individual benefits personally from the war (Lopez 2017).

Because war is so costly and risky, for male psychology to have evolved a predisposition for going to war, several essential conditions must have been met. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (2010) have identified four conditions that would be particularly important. First of all, successful soldiers must have greater sexual access to women than noncombatants. Secondly, coalitions of fighters must believe that they will be victorious. Thirdly, the rewards that each warrior receives must be proportionate to the risks he has taken and the importance of his contributions. In other words, cheaters should never prosper. And finally, men going to war must not know for sure who will live and who will die; there must be a protective “veil of ignorance.”

Conclusion

Males have evolved adaptations for warfare over time because the benefits of displaying valor and genetic fitness by participating in war have outweighed the costs associated with such behavior. These adaptations include cognitive and coalitional predispositions that increase the effectiveness of violent, coordinated group behavior. In short, going to war in general and displaying war heroism in particular may be a way for males to advertise desirable personal qualities that enhance status and increase the likelihood that they will be chosen as a mate or an ally and be positioned for access to future resources.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Altruism](#)
- ▶ [Benefits of Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Costly Signaling and Altruism](#)
- ▶ [Evolved Psychology of Warfare](#)
- ▶ [Heroic Rescue in Humans](#)
- ▶ [Individual-Level Reputational Consequences of Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Intergroup Competition](#)
- ▶ [Men Riskier, More Aggressive](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Young Male Syndrome](#)

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