

Effects of War on Social Preferences: Prosociality and [Parochialism: favoring members of one's own group to outsiders; increased hostility toward individuals not of one's own ethnic, racial, or other group]

Economic games reveal that people affected by war exhibit more pro-group behavior, but are also more selfish towards outsiders.

Do humans who have experienced war become more selfish, or are they more “groupish”? Michal Bauer, Alessandra Cassar, Julie Chytilová and Joseph Henrich study how exposure to war affects social preferences. Using simple economic experiments with hundreds of children and adults in the Republic of Georgia (Caucasus) and Sierra Leone (Africa), they show that experiencing war during childhood and adolescence increases both within-group egalitarianism and parochialism – a tendency to favor members of one’s own group to outsiders. These effects seem to be persistent and are observed six months after war, as well as ten years later. The findings are important for understanding several phenomena from post-conflict countries, such as rapid recoveries in some, or persistent parochialism and cyclical conflicts in others.

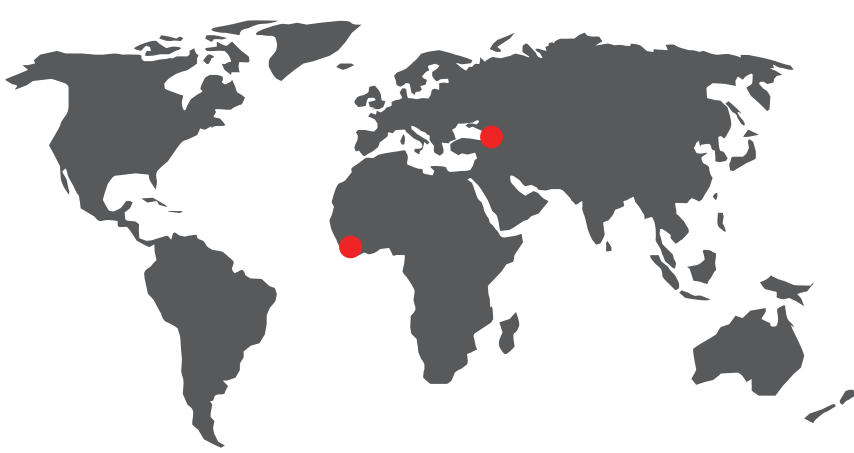
research: Georgia and Sierra Leone

RESEARCHERS

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH

where: Georgia
research sample: 543 children, 4-11 years old
when: February 2009, 6 months after the war with Russia
where: Sierra Leone
research sample: 586 adults
when: 2010, 8 years after the war



CONTEXT

Georgia

An armed conflict between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia took place in August 2008. The war lasted one week and intensive fighting, indiscriminate to civilians, resulted in substantial human losses and devastation of livelihoods in South Ossetia and bordering districts. Most of the fighting involved aerial, artillery and tank-fire strikes. More than 100,000 civilians had to flee their homes, most of whom were still displaced at the time the research was conducted.



Sierra Leone

The 1991-2002 war has been one of the most brutal and horrific civil conflicts in the history of Africa. The civilian population became the victim of brutal attacks, including public executions, rape, amputations and abduction of children to serve in the rebel army. It has been estimated that more than 50,000 people died during the conflict while more than one-third of the population (two million people) were displaced.



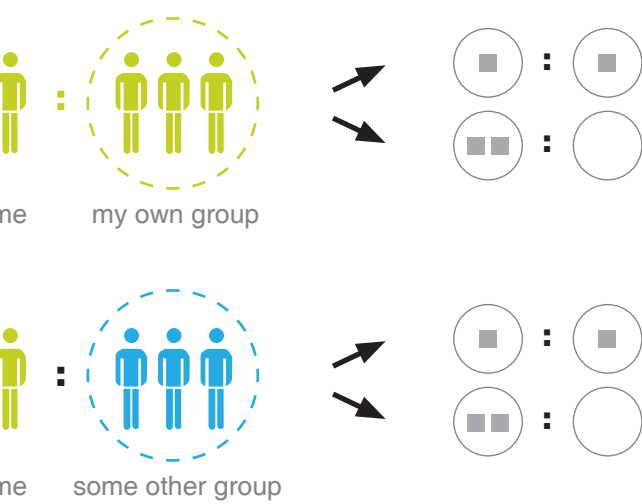
War and altruism

Wars and violent conflicts between groups have pervaded human history. Yet, at the same time, people often cooperate and are willing to help others even if it comes at cost to them. The puzzle is why the evolutionary pressures have not eliminated such prosocial behavior? Since Darwin’s times, social scientists have been preoccupied with the distasteful idea that these phenomena are intertwined. Inter-group violence may act as a catalyst in evolution of human prosocial behavior and ultimately affect human psychological responses to survival pressures. During warfare each group’s survival hinges on its ability to cooperate.

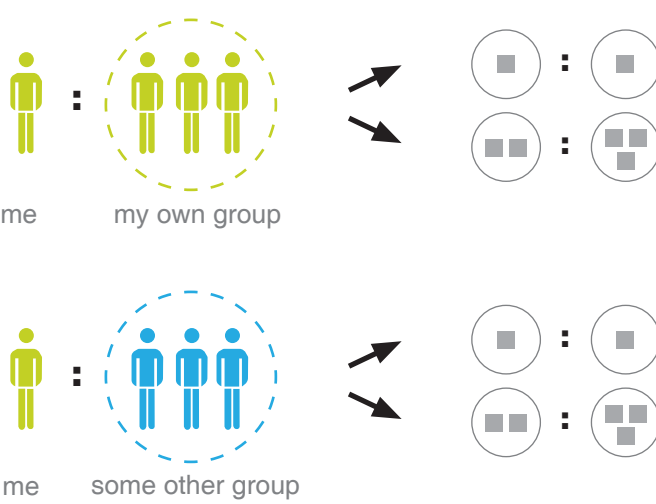
The theory predicts that warfare should intensify altruistic or egalitarian behavior because it suppresses competition and conflicts within groups, and parochialism, a tendency to favor in-group members to outsiders, because it increases group’s ability to outcompete other groups. The question is whether warfare experience indeed changes individual preferences in the predicted way. ■

METHODS

A) Sharing game



B) Envy game



Participants of the experiment played a series of games in which they had to choose between two alternative allocations of tokens between themselves and an anonymous partner. The partner came either from the same village, or class in case of children (“in-group”) or from a different village/school (“out-group”). After the experiments, tokens were exchanged for cash in Sierra Leone and for variety of sweets and toys in Georgia.

The games will show

The researchers looked for an answer in two very different post-conflict countries – Georgia and Sierra Leone. Individuals within each sample were exposed to war to a varying extent. Characteristics of the two conflicts suggest that both children in Georgia and adults living in rural Sierra Leone were to a large extent inflicted randomly. This implies that the affected individuals can be compared to those non-affected to identify the effect of violence.

In the Sharing game (A), children in Georgia chose between the equal allocation (1:1) - one token for the participant and one for the partner - and the allocation (2:0) - two tokens for oneself and zero for the partner. The game pits self-interest against equality. In the Envy Game (B), the player chooses between (1:1) and (2:3). Here, the unequal choice pays more to both participants, but it also creates disadvantageous inequality: “I would have less than the partner”. In Sierra Leone, the choices were similar. ■

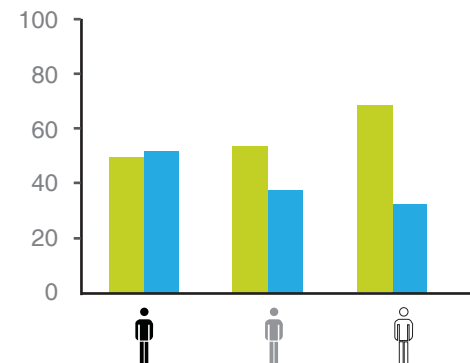
RESULTS

- ▶ War experience increases egalitarianism within a group. This may support cooperation at local level and rapid recoveries of post-conflict societies.
- ▶ Increased within-group social cohesion may come at the expense of hostility towards outsiders. Post-conflict societies may tend to polarize and may suffer from cyclical conflicts.
- ▶ The effects of war on human social behavior are most profound if violence is experienced during childhood and adolescence.

A) Sharing game

percentage of participants choosing (1:1) (2:0)

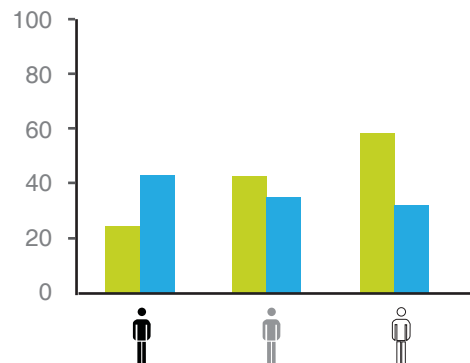
Georgia, children ages 7-11



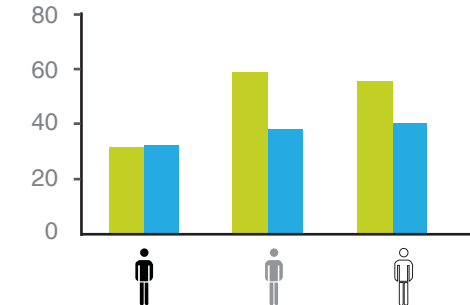
B) Envy game

percentage of participants choosing (1:1) (2:3)

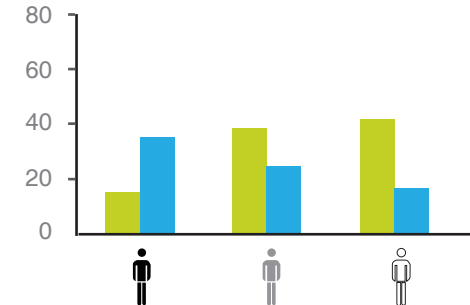
Sierra Leone, adults (ages 7-20 during the war)



Sierra Leone, adults (ages 7-20 during the war)



Sierra Leone, adults (ages 7-20 during the war)



Legend: A game with in-group partner (green bar), A game with out-group partner (blue bar), Least-affected by war (black bar), More-affected by war (grey bar), Most-affected by war (dark grey bar)

Permanent effects

The experiments in Georgia reveal that children who were more war-afflicted are more egalitarian towards members of their social group and more selfish towards those from outside their group. In Sierra Leone, adults affected by war during their childhood behave the same, even a decade after the conflict. Meanwhile, behavior doesn’t seem to change for those who were younger than age 7 or older than 20 during the conflict. Social preferences thus seem to form mainly during primary school to adolescence. Results from both Caucasus and Western Africa indicate that people experiencing a violent conflict during childhood develop a stronger sense of their group identity. These changes seem to happen fast after the conflict and are long-lasting. The results are not isolated: A recent study of Maarten Voors and his colleagues found stronger sharing behavior towards neighbors among farmers who experienced more violence during civil war in Burundi. A 2009 study of John Bellows and Ted Miguel presents evidence from Sierra Leone suggesting that conflict exposure increases participation in local collective actions such as road brushing. ■

INTERESTED IN THE RESEARCH? DETAILS CAN BE FOUND HERE

>>> Bauer, M., Cassar, A., Chytilová, J. & Henrich, J. (2011): Warfare during Ontogeny Increases Egalitarian and Parochial Motivations. Working paper.

RELATED LITERATURE

- > Choi, J.-K. & Bowles, S. (2007): The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War. Science.
- > Voors, M. et al., Violent Conflict and Behavior: A Field Experiment in Burundi. American Economic Review (forthcoming).
- > Bellows, J. & Miguel, E. (2009): War and Local Collective Action in Sierra Leone. Journal of Public Economics.

Authors thank

