

Psychology and Warfare

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Introduction

Why do people go to war, and why do they behave so brutally during warfare? The recent conflict in the Balkans has brought these uncomfortable questions back into focus for people in Europe. Psychology is the study of human behaviour and experience so it ought to give us some answers to these questions. This article looks at what reasons psychology gives for warfare, and also looks at some of the ways that psychology has been used in warfare.

The article

War! What is it good for? 'Absolutely nothing!' says Edwin Starr but I guess it must be good for something because it has been part of human societies since they first appeared. It appears to be an inevitable part of human behaviour because whatever time in history you choose to look at, there will be armies marching across some part of the world in an attempt to gain control over another group of people or another territory. It is also fair to say, however, that living peacefully is another inevitable part of human behaviour, and societies spend much more time at peace than they do at war.

Most recently, this country has been involved in military action in the Balkans, but it was not a war that involved the general population of the UK. The last fifty years has seen a big change in the way people in this country experience warfare. Today we regard war as a specialised activity carried out by expert soldiers with high-tech weapons in far away places. We therefore tend to see war as a dramatic event much like a film, rather than a personal event with real danger for ourselves or our families and property. In fact, during the recent Balkan conflict there were only two casualties in the Nato forces and they occurred when a helicopter crashed during a training exercise. This is not how warfare was conducted in the past, nor how it is conducted in most parts of the world today. For many people warfare is a threat to their personal safety.

Over the last fifty years the Western viewer has been shown images of war that are either amusing (Dad's Army, It Ain't Half Hot Mum), or heroic (A Bridge Too Far, The Great Escape, The Guns of Navarone). For most people who experience war, however, it is neither amusing or heroic. It is made up of frightening events, mass death, mass injury, the loss of loved ones and the loss of property and homes. On the first of July, 1916 during one day at the Battle of the Somme in the First World War (1914-1918) over 20,000 British troops were slaughtered due to the tactics of their commanders (Taylor, 1963). The troops were required to come out of their trenches carrying heavy equipment and charge towards the enemy trenches where they were cut down by machine gun fire. Not content with this, the tactic was repeated the next day, and for the next four months until the battle was finally brought to end with no obvious strategic advantage but at the loss of 420,000 British casualties. By the end of this war, around one quarter of all British men of military age had been slaughtered. It is not possible to convey in this article the horror of war and its consequences. It is worth noting, however, that although the war in the Balkans just meant unpleasant images on our television screens, for the people who live there it meant fear, death, starvation, and homelessness.

In this article we will look briefly at what psychology can tell us about the causes of warfare, and also look at some examples of how psychology has been used to wage war. Readers should note the health warning with this article that psychology is often not on the side of the angels.

What can psychology tell us about warfare?

Are we born to start wars or do we learn to do this? What is it about people that leads us into conflicts that are resolved with mass destruction and mass death? We might start by observing that aggression is an important part of our behaviour and that this attribute has considerable survival value. Aggression, however, is not war. Animals can be aggressive to each other but most of them do not organise into groups to wage an aggressive campaign on another group of the same species. A number of psychologists have looked at the issue of warfare and offered theories about it. I'll briefly mention a few to give a flavour of the debate.

Could it be that war has any benefits for us? William James (1910) wrote an essay entitled 'The Moral Equivalent of War', in which he set out his analysis of war and

how it can be avoided. As part of his argument he suggested that wars bring some benefits and we therefore need to find an equivalent to war that brings about the same benefits. He argued that the military values of strength, bravery, discipline and collective action are the foundation of any successful enduring society. His suggestion of a substitute for war was a mass mobilisation of young men to carry out physical labour and public works for a set number of years.

An alternative view was put forward by William McDougall in his work 'The Instinct of Pugnacity' where he argued that fighting and warfare are an important part of our evolutionary development. According to McDougall the fittest survive and so improve the species, and he saw the removal of war as a dangerous development that would lead to the degeneration of our society. He therefore argued for natural selection to be re-introduced through another means, that of selective breeding where the fittest and best (presumably including McDougall himself) have more children and the weakest and the worst (fill in the list to your taste) are discouraged from breeding or killed.

Freud's thoughts on war are summarised in a letter he wrote to Albert Einstein as part of an academic exchange on the subject. It was written in 1932 when the horror of the killing fields of the First World War were still having an effect on the way people thought and acted. In the letter he pointed out that aggressive behaviour by one strong individual can only be challenged through collective action. A community can come together and overthrow a tyrant, though it will only avoid a new tyrant if the community stays together and is well organised. These communities can be aggressive towards each other and this is the basis of warfare.

Freud argued that some wars have a positive effect because they establish large empires. In our recorded history these empires have often imposed order within their boundaries and provided a peaceful existence for their citizens. There are sometimes, however, a few unfortunate down sides to large empires, such as the persecution of minorities and the suppression of civil liberties. Freud wondered whether the development of international organisations would allow nations to develop a world order that removed the rationale for warfare.

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead wrote extensively about the customs and behaviour of different peoples around the world. She argued that warfare is not inevitable and not part of our nature, but a human invention (Mead, 1940). She argued that many institutions such as marriage are almost universal amongst peoples

but we must have originally lived without marriage and then at some point invented it. She suggested the same is true for warfare and cites the Eskimos as evidence for this.

The Eskimos are a nomadic people who have no concept of war even though they can not be described as pacifists. Mead described how fights, theft of wives (!), murder and cannibalism were a part of Eskimo life. What was not part of Eskimo life was the organisation of one group of people to maim and kill another group of people. It might be possible to argue that Eskimos do not have war because they are nomadic and because they have few possessions. (It also might be because they are so chuffing cold.) However, to challenge this, Mead presented examples of other nomadic groups with few possessions who have developed all the rituals of warfare.

Summary

The above historical contributions on the nature of human warfare present a largely pessimistic view of the future. The general picture appears to be that war is likely to continue because we have natural tendencies to be aggressive or we have, at least, learnt how effective warfare can be. The theories produce few, if any, testable hypotheses and they turn around whether we are the victims of our biology or whether we are able to shape our own destiny through the development of better ways of living. I believe in the second view and I'm prepared to fight anyone who disagrees with me (weak ironic humour).

How has psychology been used in warfare?

The simple answer to this is that psychology was used extensively in warfare throughout the twentieth century. The first mass IQ testing was conducted on recruits for the US Army in the First World War (1914-1918) (see Gould 1981), and some of the early work on health education was carried out by Lashley and Watson (1921) to reduce the level of venereal disease in the US army. Psychology has also been extensively used in the ergonomic design of weapons and machines. In the second half of the century, psychology came to be used in the conduct of war and I've chosen two examples, from the many that are available, to illustrate this.

Psy-Ops

During the 1950's 60's and 70's, USA and sometimes European troops were involved in military conflicts in South East Asia. During that time the US invested a lot of money into psychological techniques in warfare and set up a number of Psy-Ops units. An example of their techniques is provided by Watson (1980) who describes how Psy-Ops would draw up a social profile on a range of countries. These profiles included such information as

- who were the prestigious people
- what were the common gifts used by people to get to know each other
- what were the waste and disposal patterns
- what were their attitudes to leaders
- what were their opinions of these leaders

They also collected information on social and religious customs including such items as what smells each culture found most offensive. The propaganda tactic was then to target particular attitudes, particular prominent people and particular customs and beliefs. One example of this approach concerned the grieving practices of the Vietnamese. It was the Vietnamese custom to remember deaths after 49 days and after 100 days as well as on anniversaries. Leaflets were dropped by the Americans on these dates after big battles in areas where people would have been likely to have lost relatives. The aim was to increase the misery of those days and undermine the morale of the Vietnamese. They also flew over Vietnamese villages booming out messages from ghosts in attempt to convince the Vietnamese that their ancestors thought they should give up any resistance to the USA. Strangely enough this was unsuccessful largely because the Vietnamese were able to tell the difference between a ghost and a military helicopter with a loud speaker.

As a postscript to the above it is worth thinking about the stories we are told about the Vietnam War compared with what really happened. The war ended in 1975 when the Americans were finally driven out of the country by the peasant army of the Vietnamese. At least 1,300,000 people were killed in the conflict and many thousands more were maimed. Of the dead, 58,022 were Americans (less than 5%), the rest were Vietnamese (Pilger, 1989). It is one of the triumphs of Western propaganda that this war is seen today as America's tragedy. Our view of this conflict is seen through the eyes of the Americans and we rarely hear the voice of the Vietnamese people telling us how a poorly armed, rural people managed to endure mass destruction and mass murder, and go on to defeat the greatest fighting force on the planet.

Interrogation techniques

Prisoners are interrogated mainly when someone believes that they have information of value to the captors. The prisoners might well be under instruction to disclose nothing, and therefore the captor might employ a range of techniques to encourage disclosure. In many armies it is a military offence to collaborate with the enemy, and soldiers who talk too readily are prosecuted when they return home. Many of the interrogation techniques involve pain or discomfort, though they have only a limited effect. A lot of interest has centred on ways of making people more talkative using psychological techniques.

One of the most prominent of these techniques is **sensory deprivation**. This involves reducing the amount of perceptual stimulation that a person has to a minimum. This might involve solitary confinement in a warm room with low or no light and little or no sound. Some people find this very stressful, and most people find that it creates some sensory distortions. Watson (1980) refers to the extensive work carried out in this field for the American and Canadian military. He reports how, under sensory deprivation conditions, people often experienced hallucinations, an inability to distinguish between sleep and wakefulness and a distortion in their sense of time. Moreover, when they were released from the sensory deprivation they often felt overwhelmed by the colours and noises of everyday life, felt light-headed and were rather talkative (key point this). The sensory deprivation studies included investigations on the effects of the experience on conformity to group pressure (depended on intelligence, with lower IQ scorers becoming more conformist and higher IQ scorers becoming less conformist) and response to propaganda (no obvious effect).

A variation on the sensory deprivation technique was used by the British Army in Northern Ireland in the early days of The Troubles. Shallice (1973) reported on twelve internees who were subjected to a horrifying interrogation technique. In the gaps between direct interrogation, the men were hooded in a black woven bag, subjected to very loud white noise and forced to stand against a wall with their hands above their heads. They were required to stand there for up to 16 hours and if they moved they were beaten. The internees were required to wear loose boiler suits, were sleep deprived and put on a restricted diet. This treatment had a devastating effect on the men who had major physical, cognitive, and emotional responses.

In summary, it would appear from the range of studies that disorientation of prisoners is effective in increasing their willingness to talk. This disorientation can be achieved through, among other means, unpredictable torture, sleep deprivation, drugs, hunger and sensory deprivation.

The atrocity question

In the light of the current conflicts in the Balkans we should look at why people behave in murderous and bestial ways. The discovery of mass graves that contain the bodies of civilians whose only crime was that belonged to a particular ethnic group sends shock waves through Europe. This question was at the heart of the work on conformity and obedience by Asch (1955) and Milgram (1963), among others. Their research found that ordinary people are capable of following murderous instructions with no more pressure than the politenesses of everyday encounters. The frightening truth from this work is that it is not just Nazis or Serbs or whoever is the latest demon that can do this. These atrocities can happen anywhere, and you and I might well take part in them, or allow them to take place, if the circumstances arise.

Conclusions

So, War, what is it good for? Well it has to be said that it is good for liberation struggles and for challenging powerful and destructive enemies. Maybe it is also good for personal development as suggested by William James. Whatever it is good for, we will have to live with it and try to contain its worst excesses. I leave it for you to decide whether you think psychology makes a positive or negative contribution to our experience of war.

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