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Tribalism

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Synonyms

In-group–out-group dynamics; Intergroup conflict; Parochial altruism

Definition

Tribalism is a word that contains a variety of phenomena that relate to loyalty to and favoring of groups to which one belongs. These phenomena include a number of cognitive and behavioral manifestations of that adherence, which can be seen at every level of human social life from the dyadic interaction to the sociopolitical and institutional structure of a nation.

Introduction

All individuals are embedded within a set of concentric social circles. The first circle contains their immediate family members and close friends. Surrounding that is a larger circle of more distant family members and friends, as well as acquaintances. Around that circle is an even larger circle of strangers that belong to the same community and visit the same groups and locations. But this is just the beginning. People also have affiliations such as group membership to a nation, political group, social club, sports team, religion, that create connections between individuals within these different circles as well as between still larger circles that span national boundaries. Therefore, the human social environment is complex and multifaceted. It contains intersecting and often contrasting loyalties that are at least partly hierarchically arranged. However, one thing is clear from decades of research into how we make groups and cognitively represent them within our social worlds: We tend to prioritize and favor individuals that are closer to us, a tendency known as tribalism (Greene 2013).

This tribal tendency is evident in a wide variety of human behaviors and cognitive mechanisms that works towards the function of cooperating with, and expressing loyalty to one's in-group (i.e., within-group cooperation) or expressing disagreement and hostility toward out-groups (i.e., between-group conflict) (Balliet et al. 2014; Clark et al. 2019; Tajfel 1982). Tribal tendencies manifest in various areas of human social life including politics and warfare, ethnic and racial discrimination, morality, and sports teams. They include in-group favoritism (Balliet et al. 2014; Clark et al. 2019), discrimination and hostility towards out-groups (Balliet et al. 2014; Tajfel and Turner 1979), biased moral reasoning (Ditto et al. 2009; Clark et al. 2019), and ideologically motivated reasoning (Ditto et al. 2018; Kahan

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2013). Many of these tribal tendencies are likely rooted in evolutionary theory. Exploring the evolutionary logic of the socio-ecological conditions that make tribal tendencies favorable along with comparative evidence from apes helps to elucidate the forms and functions of human tribalism.

The Origins of Tribalism

The starting point for the evolutionary argument for tribalism is fairly straightforward: Humans almost certainly evolved in contexts where either (but likely both) within-group cooperation and between-group competition (aka intergroup competition) occurred (Tooby et al. 2006; Tooby and Cosmides 2010; Wrangham 1999). In both cases, individuals are pressured for two different but related processes, toward tribalism. In the case of within-group cooperation, groups that are more cohesive, coordinated, and composed of individuals who are committed to shared goals, are more likely to be stronger competitors in intergroup competition (Tooby and Cosmides 2010). This is especially the case when in-group members penalize free-riding behavior and reward loyalty, which is often the case (Clark et al. 2019). In the case of intergroup competition, individuals who can better identify in-group versus out-group members benefit from intergroup competition (Greene 2013).

Additionally, in order for cooperative groups to be efficient, groups must protect themselves from the exploitation of free riders within the group and from enemies between groups (Tooby et al. 2006). Rewarding cooperators and punishing defectors is one way in which within-group cooperation is maintained. And the ability to distinguish Us from Them, and the tendency to favor Us over Them, is how cooperative groups protect themselves from exploitation from external threats (Greene 2013). Anthropologist Donald Brown identified in-group bias and ethnocentrism as universal in his survey of multiple cultures, which suggests the ubiquity of the Us versus Them mentality (Brown 1991).

The Evolution of Intergroup Conflict

Researchers applying an evolutionary lens to human behavior have argued that tribalism is based on our coalitional psychology – that is, our proclivity to create and support our coalition against other competing coalitions (Tooby and Cosmides 2010; Wrangham 1999). These coalitions can potentially take the form of any kind of group-based formation such as identity-based coalitions (e.g., race and gender), political, and war coalitions, and institutional coalitions. (Pietraszewski et al. 2015; Tooby and Cosmides 2010). Tooby and Cosmides (2010) describe how humans have evolved to join and create alliances and coalitions from the demands of conflict since individuals learned that they could increase their formidability by pooling their strength and formidability into groups.

Perhaps the most obvious implication of tribalism is intergroup conflict and aggression, which reaches its apotheosis in large-scale warfare. While the frequencies of wars have been in decline, war has been a common occurrence throughout human history (Pinker 2011). Some scholars have taken the ubiquity of wars throughout human history and across time frames, cultural arrangements, forms of government, and demographic factors, to be evidence of war having some evolutionary basis (Wrangham 1999; Wrangham and Glowacki 2012).

The definition of "war" that is being used in this entry is given by Wrangham and Glowacki (2012) as "relationships in which coalition of members of a group seek to inflict bodily harm on one or more members of another group" (p. 8). Therefore, "war" is used interchangeably with "intergroup violence," and "coalitionary killing." War-like behavior can be found in chimpanzee intergroup aggression, which has a similar pattern to human war raids (Wrangham 1999). These similar patterns of human and chimpanzee intergroup conflict have led many researchers to study evolutionary parallels between these two species (Wrangham 1999; Wrangham and Glowacki 2012). For example, in both chimpanzees and humans, violence between members of the same species is often coalitionary, where

members of the species (usually males) band together and engage in intergroup conflict (Wrangham 1999). The capacity to coalesce into coalitions is a necessary condition for intergroup conflict and war-like behavior. Lethal aggression in most other animals is usually dyadic rather than coalitionary (Wrangham 1999).

Wolves are one of the few non-primate species that engage in coalitionary killing, where there are relatively high rates of intraspecific killings mostly as a consequence of territoriality when rival groups meet at the edges of their territories (Wrangham 1999). Similarly, chimpanzee male groups defend their territories and when members of other groups encroach on their territory engage in hostile aggressive displays and behaviors, which can escalate into fighting and often killing (Wrangham 1999). Interestingly, research has shown that the rates of death from intergroup aggression in chimpanzees is similar to the rates of death in human intergroup aggression in small-scale societies, further adding support to the potential shared evolutionary origins of human and chimpanzee coalitionary aggression (Wrangham et al. 2006).

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that no single evolutionary pathway, or set of psychological adaptations is likely to account for the evolution of intergroup aggression. The evolution of something as complex as intergroup aggression is dependent on a multitude of factors including psychological processes, but also cultural, demographic, and ecological factors (Wilson and Glowacki 2017).

Additionally, the similarities between chimpanzee and human intergroup aggression are going to be limited to the type of human societies that better approximate conditions of chimpanzee societies, such as nonstate, hunter-gatherer groups lacking centralized political control and having independence from other societies (Wrangham and Glowacki 2012). But to fully acknowledge the breadth of human tribalism, it is important to take into account its evolutionary origins, starting from its rudiments we see in our close relatives, the Great Apes. Chimpanzees are mainly being discussed here because, while bonobos and chimpanzees are equally related to humans, evidence indicates that bonobos are in many ways the odd-ape out, the one that is most derived compared to the common ancestor of chimpanzees, humans, and bonobos (Muller et al. 2017).

Intergroup Conflict in Humans and Chimpanzees

There is ample evidence that chimpanzees distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, and engage in intergroup conflict (Wilson and Glowacki 2017). Wilson and Glowacki (2017) describe a set of similarities between chimpanzees and humans that have a strong influence on their patterns of intergroup aggression and likely are key features for tribalism more broadly: (1) fission-fusion societies, (2) intergroup hostility, (3) male coalitions, (4) territorial behavior, and (5) coalitionary killings. Wilson and Glowacki (2017) also address striking differences between humans and chimpanzees that likely have had an effect on their development of intergroup aggression: (1) weapons, (2) the types of benefits gained by aggressors, (3) multilevel societies, and (4) language.

Humans likely differ in tribalistic tendencies from chimpanzees because unlike chimpanzee societies, human forager societies possess multiple distinct levels of social organization that form overlapping loyalties and affiliations for individuals. For example, individuals belong to families, collections of multiple families known as bands, and collections of bands that constitute ethnolinguistic groups. Of course in modern developed societies, there are even more layers, such as the nation, the ethnic/race, the cross-national religion, the continent, all of which provide different ways in which humans can and do draw circles around "Us" and exclude "Them."

The most common form of coalitionary killing is the ambush also known as the lethal raid, which also results in the most deaths from warfare in forager societies (Gat 1999; Wrangham 1999). It is an unusual form of aggression compared to the rest of the animal kingdom because it is proactive rather than reactive and is usually unprovoked (Wrangham 1999). It involves small groups of males getting together and silently and quickly

invading enemy territory to attack and then swiftly leave minimizing the potential for danger.

Wrangham (1999) highlights group territoriality and a fission-fusion system along with an asymmetry in power between groups, as being features that favor an evolved behavior of lethal intergroup killing, known as the imbalance-of-power hypothesis. Group territoriality limits access to resources and therefore favors behavior that leads to dominating neighboring groups and a fission-fusion system allows individuals to assess when attack is most likely to be successful (i.e., when the power asymmetry is in favor of the aggressors) (Wrangham 1999; Wrangham and Glowacki 2012). Doing so, increases reproductive and survival benefits to the successors as they now have greater access to food and potentially mates (Wilson and Glowacki 2017). Wrangham and Glowacki (2012) assess warfare among nomadic hunter-gatherers and compare them to the chimpanzee model expectations, which are hostility to other groups, attacking out-group members and doing so when safe, and benefitting from such attacks. They find many consistencies between human intergroup conflict and the chimpanzee model, suggesting the model provides an accurate foundation for understanding the biological and cultural evolution of war (Wrangham and Glowacki 2012).

Tribalism in Social Perception: In-Groups Versus Out-Groups

The degree of human tribalism present in human nature is evidenced by how early on we begin to slice our social worlds based on morally relevant behaviors. In an experiment of social evaluation of behavior, researchers demonstrated that long before infants can walk or talk, they are making value judgments about appealing and aversive individuals (Hamlin et al. 2007). The researchers show that 6-month-old infants prefer helping individuals over hindering individuals, prefer helping individuals over neutral individuals, and prefer neutral individuals over hindering individuals.

They show this with the use of geometric shapes with googly eyes where a red circle attempts to climb a hill and is either pushed up the hill by a nice triangle (helper) or pushed down the hill by a mean square (hinderer). Importantly, in one of their experiments, they run the same set up but without the eyes and without self-propelled motion to take the animateness out of the shapes. In this case, the pushing up or pushing down of the red circle can no longer be called "helping" and "hindering," respectively, and so, the interaction of shapes is no longer social. And strikingly, in this case, infants do not choose the pusher-up shape significantly more than the pusher-down shape. Their choosing behavior differs significantly from the first experiment that used animated shapes (Hamlin et al. 2007).

This result shows that infants are not just making mere perceptual preferences but are making social evaluations in particular. Additionally, the fact that such social evaluatory behavior emerges so early in life suggests how important cognitive mechanisms of social evaluation are and how fundamental they are to perceiving and slicing our social worlds based on valuations of agentic behavior. While this social preference in itself is not evidence of tribalism in infants, it does show that categorizing morally relevant behavior is a fundamental process of social evaluation, which later on in life becomes a key feature in forming and joining tribal alliances (Pietraszewski 2016; Tooby and Cosmides 2010).

An important feature of human social life is that people sometimes discriminate between in-group and out-group members. They tend to evaluate in-group members more positively than out-group members, reward in-group members more than out-group members, and work harder to accomplish in-group goals (Tajfel 1982). The favoring of in-groups is often likely to be an impediment to organizations, communities, and societies, which to a large degree rely on in-group–out-group cooperation and coordination around common goals.

On the other hand, in-group favoritism may help the overall functioning of a group and promote the in-group individual's long-term benefits including increased survival and reproductive benefits, because cooperating with groups is often necessary to achieve social goals that are necessary for human life (Clark et al. 2019).

Favoring in-groups and disfavoring out-groups creates intergroup bias and conflict (Balliet et al. 2014; Schiller et al. 2014). This can lead to hostile tensions and competition between groups that express themselves in different domains of social life, such as war and politics (Pietraszewski et al. 2015; Wrangham 1999).

Evidence from studies using the implicit association test have shown how rapidly and automatically people assign negative qualities to out-group members, for example, people of a different race and gender (Greenwald et al. 1998). But these studies have not only shown how inclined humans are to assign negative qualities to out-group members but also how automatically we slice the social world into Us and Thems in the first place. These studies show how automatically and unconsciously people are perceiving (and inventing) group differences and imbuing these differences with meaning. However, one has to take some of these studies with a grain of salt as some have failed to replicate in recent years (Boniecki and Jacks 2002), and some researchers have advocated caution in interpreting these overt, explicit discrimation and prejudice from evidence of implicit associations (Arkes and Tetlock 2004; Boniecki and Jacks 2002).

Many social psychology studies have examined the nature of cooperation and competition with in-groups and out-groups (Schiller et al. 2014; Tajfel 1982). Such research has assessed how intergroup bias manifests in decision-making, trust, reciprocation behavior, and rewarding in-group versus out-group members (Balliet et al. 2014). However, research has been divided over the question of how intergroup discrimination emerges. Some studies have stressed the importance of in-group favoritism while others have stressed the importance of the presence of out-groups against whom in-groups can aggress. It is also plausible that both are at play (Balliet et al. 2014).

Theories of Social Cooperation

Findings from classic studies in social psychology have shown that people will engage in intergroup discrimination to, for example, maximize differences in rewards between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel et al. 1971; Balliet et al. 2014). Tajfel and colleagues pioneered the use of what is called the minimal group paradigm, which are the minimal conditions that would create in-group behavior, to study in-group–out-group dynamics (Hogg 2016; Tajfel et al. 1971). In such conditions, group adherence alone is enough to create intergroup discrimination even when members are randomly assigned to groups, have no personal connection or information about the members of one's in-group or out-group, and no communication with them (Hogg 2016). This central finding has stood the test of time and has been replicated numerous times with varying methodological procedures, across a variety of participant characteristics (Hogg 2016).

Balliet et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of intergroup discrimination and in-group favoritism in cooperation and assessed multiple predictions from two theoretical perspectives. One is social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and the other is bounded generalized reciprocity (BGR) (Yamagishi et al. 1999). They offer predictions regarding moderating conditions of intergroup discrimination. For example, BGR stresses the importance of indirect reciprocity and the importance of reputation in cooperation where the theory predicts that in-group favoritism should occur in the absence of an out-group. However, SIT relies on the presence of an out-group to make the in-group categorization meaningful. Balliet et al. (2014) assesses competing and shared hypotheses between these two theories. The study also weighs in on the question of whether intergroup discrimination is the result of in-group favoritism or out-group derogation.

While the meta-analysis found support for both theories in explaining intergroup discrimination, it did support more predictions that were in line with BGR. For instance, in contrast to this prediction of SIT, people do cooperate more with in-group members compared to unclassified strangers, suggesting that the presence of an out-group is unnecessary for in-group favoritism to emerge. This finding also supports BGR in that mere cues of in-group membership elicited

enhanced cooperation toward in-group members. Balliet et al. (2014) also found that the possibility of direct reciprocity weakened in-group favoritism. In-group favoritism in cooperative decision-making rests on expectations of indirect reciprocity within one's in-group and is weakened by expectations of direct reciprocity. They show that there was a significant difference between social dilemmas and trust games, with weakened in-group favoritism in the latter, supporting the BGR perspective.

Tribalism in the Modern Day

Much of tribalism in the modern day is in the form of political conflict, which has arguably increased in the wake of the 2016 American Presidential election with the rise of both left- and right-wing extremist groups, if not in actual numbers, at least in popularity in the media. A recent meta-analysis examined the question of whether liberals or conservatives tend to be more politically biased in the following way: selectively evaluating information more favorably when it supports one's political beliefs than when it challenges them (Ditto et al. 2018). The meta-analysis examined over 51 experimental studies on partisan bias involving over 18,000 participants. Ditto et al. (2018) found evidence for roughly equal levels of partisan bias among liberal and conservative participants across the studies, and across various methodologies.

Engaging in such biased information processing is just one of the many forms of cognitive biases that take on a tribal function. Evaluating information more favorably when it aligns with one's group affiliation is a way to display loyalty to the groups to which one belongs and as well as denounce a rival group. It also likely leads one astray from an accurate understanding of reality since information is being selectively processed and evaluated on the basis of group loyalty rather than truth.

Kahan et al. (2017) found that subjects highest in numeracy – the ability to understand and make use of quantitative data – were better able to solve a difficult apolitical problem compared to people lower in numeracy. However, individuals high in numeracy were also poorer performers when the same data was politicized – that is, presented as the results from a study on gun control. These tribal differences in the political realm map onto differences in moral values between Democrats and Republicans that have been examined by moral psychologists (Graham et al. 2009; Haidt and Graham 2007).

Tribalism and the Coronavirus Pandemic

At the time of this writing, the world has been experiencing the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, to which the response in the United States has been tribal. In other words, an inherently apolitical and amoral infectious disease has come to be perceived politically and morally. This is because the objective existence of the pandemic has been refracted through the lens of subjective, biased, ignorant, tribal human perception.

On the face of it, one ought to doubt that a virus, which infects, spreads, and kills individuals regardless of their socioeconomic status or political affiliation would come to be perceived and treated differently by certain individuals. On the contrary, the doubtful would be proven wrong. In this case, the relevant tribes to which these individuals with differing information about the coronavirus pandemic belong are political tribes, which can be loosely categorized as conservative on one side and liberal on the other. Indeed, since the outbreak began in the United States, these two tribes, as represented in the government and in the media, have been espousing divergent information about the threat that COVID-19 poses to the American people. The cloud of misinformation has grown to include the severity of the virus, recommendations for how to slow the spread, and the relative importance of preventing deaths at the expense of harming the economy.

A recent NYTimes Op-ed displayed the extent of this political bifurcation in American political life (Plott 2020). The article shows how at least some of President Donald Trump's supporters perceived Trump's response to the coronavirus threat in a very different way than others. While many others took Trump's response to be an

unambiguous dismissal of the coronavirus threat to the United States, they instead saw it as Trump's attempt to "stay positive and not incite panic" (Plott 2020).

Recent research shows that, indeed, political tribalism plays a significant role in explaining the reaction of the American public to the coronavirus threat. Specifically, political partisanship better accounts for the differentiation between Americans' health behaviors and policy preferences in regards to COVID-19 than any other factor tested, such as race, marital status, age, income, education, and region of residence (Gadarian et al. 2020). In particular, Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinksy (2020) show that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to report having adopted a set of health behaviors, such as frequent hand washing, that collectively reflect social distancing. Democrats also reported showing more worrying attitudes towards COVID-19, such as there not being enough testing and that they, along with their friends, will get sick. In contrast to Democrats, Republicans are more likely to support policies restricting trade and movement across borders, whereas Democrats are more likely to report conforming to CDC-recommended behavior, changing their personal health behaviors, and supporting more socializing policies in response to COVID-19 (Gadarian et al. 2020).

Zooming out from the tribal response to the coronavirus pandemic within the United States, we can also view how differences between cultures in the degree of within-group cooperation and norm-enforcements encourage different responses to the pandemic. Research shows that in addition to government efficiency, the adoption of cooperative norms is essential for the effective response to a collective threat, such as the coronavirus pandemic (Gelfand et al. 2020). In other words, societies that are better able to deal with collective threats not only have governments that can efficiently coordinate institutions to allocate resources to solving collective problems, but also possess cultural and social norms that encourage cooperative norms and punish deviation from those norms (Gelfand et al. 2020). These are often known as "tight" cultures, which overlap with collectivist cultures such as China, as opposed to loose or individualist cultures, such as the United States.

This operationalization of cooperation within cultures is highly related to tribalism, since tight or collectivist cultures do possess more behaviors and tendencies that relate to valuing, favoring, and supporting their in-groups, which often comprise of familial, ethnic, and ethnolinguistic ties (Gelfand et al. 2020). These cultural and social differences between countries in dealing with the coronavirus have very real effects on the rates of infection and mortality for individuals (Gelfand et al. 2020). Indeed, Gelfand et al. (2020) found that nations with higher levels of government efficiency and cultural tightness have lower infection and mortality rates compared to looser cultures with less government efficiency.

Conclusion

In many ways, tribal behavior taps into what Pinker (2011) refers to as our inner demons, which form the main portion of this work. However, there is a bright side to the fact that humans are tribal creatures. Because we can create tribal identities and categorizations so readily and quickly around a variety of different concepts, we can also leave them quickly and reform and expand them to include more in-group members. Perhaps this process of greater inclusivity is behind what moral philosopher Peter Singer referred to as the expanding circle of empathy (Singer 1981) and one of the reasons behind what some scholars have attributed the decline of violence to (Pinker 2011). As we face new challenges and become a more interconnected species, understanding our tribal nature becomes increasingly important. Only then can we hope to counteract its negative features.

Cross-References

▶ Conflict
▶ Cooperation

- Moral Tribes
- Motivated Reasoning
- War

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