

Conflict breeds kindness

Does hostility by outsiders generate generosity and solidarity towards fellow group members? This question sheds light on a puzzle that has preoccupied social scientists since Darwin's time. How can pro-social behaviour – including a desire for sharing and helping others – be evolutionarily stable? Pro-social behaviour typically comes at a cost to the sharing individual, even though it benefits others in the group. So you would think that evolutionary pressures would 'weed out' such behaviour. The idea that inter-group violence acts as a catalyst for the evolution of sociability can help us understand the dynamics of this kind of behaviour.

Rigorously testing the idea that violence is linked to altruism is not so simple. Nevertheless, two studies published in 2010 provide compelling support for it. In *Warfare and Social Preferences in Children*, Michal Bauer from Charles University in Prague, the Czech Republic, and colleagues staged simple sharing experiments to explore the effect of exposure to bombardments (in this case during Georgia's war with Russia over South Ossetia) on the generosity of young children. The other study – *Does Conflict Affect Preferences?* by Maarten Voors from Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and colleagues – conducted sharing experiments with farmers in the countryside of Burundi.

The data on the patterns of bombing in Georgia and village attacks in Burundi suggest that violence was to a large extent inflicted randomly. This implies that the violence in these studies can be treated as a sort of 'natural experiment', and the affected individuals can be compared with those in a control group (communities that have not been bombed or attacked). The two studies have a different focus. The Georgia study examines children's behaviour right after the war, while the Burundi study targets adults almost a decade after the cessation of hostilities. And yet the studies produce strikingly similar results.

Most importantly, both studies conclude that exposure to violence fosters pro-social behaviour. The findings reveal that Georgian children and Burundian farmers hit by violence are much more generous towards others than children and farmers who came through the war unscathed. This is consistent with



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the paradoxical notion that conflict is altruism's midwife, to borrow a phrase from Samuel Bowles, director of the Behavioral Sciences Program at the Santa Fe Institute in the United States.

The study of Georgian children suggests that the desire to share and help evolves quickly, and the Burundi study suggests that the effects can be long-lasting. The insight that conflict may carry the seeds of altruism is consistent with a 2009 study by John Bellows and Edward Miguel, *War and Local Collective Action in Sierra Leone*. This study presents evidence suggesting that conflict exposure stimulates political participation, social capital and cooperation.

When designing interventions to promote reconstruction and economic development in post-conflict settings, NGOs and governments would do well to acknowledge this diversity of behaviours, and tailor their interventions accordingly. What works in one community may not spill over to another, and differences may systematically and predictably co-vary with the local history of violence.

A word of caution may be appropriate. The accumulation of *within-group altruism* can be potentially accompanied by *across-group hatred*. In such cases, conflict will promote the accumulation of 'binding social capital' at the expense of 'bridging social capital', and the net effect on the community's ability to cooperate and coordinate will be unclear.

Conflict may also affect a wider swath of human preferences, including a taste for risk-taking or impatience (fundamental drivers of investment and hence growth). The Burundi data suggest that this is indeed the case. Farmers who had been exposed to violence showed a higher willingness to take risks and were more impatient.

One of the challenges for scholars and practitioners in development studies is to make sense of the plethora of (conflicting) evidence from macro and micro sources. It is fascinating that simple experiments with children and farmers can be used to illuminate fundamental issues that strike at the heart of the current policy agenda with respect to the reconstruction of fragile states. ■

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