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Keywords

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Conflict, Violence, and Conflict Resolution in Hunting and Gathering Societies

William Lomas

The study of hunter-gatherers is fundamental to the discipline of anthropology. All major and powerful anthropological models and theories that purport to explain human variability were developed largely through data and observations of hunter-gatherers (Ellis 2008). In fact, one could argue that the field of anthropology could not exist without the study of these groups (Ellis 2008). For this reason, critically examining the ranging stereotypes about conflict, violence, and conflict resolution in hunter-gatherer societies is necessary. This assessment is important because historical characterizations of hunter-gatherers have run the gamut between peaceful “noble savages” to brutish and solitary “beasts”, and many of these thoughts have persisted into modern studies (Ellis 2008). Evaluation of these stereotypes is needed to establish an accurate portrayal of hunter-gatherers. This analysis will reveal that conflict and violence does exist, that hunter-gatherers utilize effective conflict management and resolution mechanisms, and that modern hunter-gatherers cannot be used as representatives of the past.

Until recently, these stereotypes have been based solely on ethnocentric personal beliefs and biases; however, anthropologists of the 1960s revolutionized the manner in which evidence was collected. They chose to perform field work to directly examine, observe, and measure the methods in which modern hunter-gatherers lived. With this new empirical evidence and data, new models were formulated, new hypotheses were tested, and new theories were proposed. This has led to a radical change

of our perceptions of hunter-gatherers: these new models suggested that hunter-gatherers are industrious, intelligent, and peaceful. Moreover, it was found that they spend most of their time not engaging in subsistence practices, but in socializing and relaxing (Sahlins 1972). Some anthropologists, such as Marshall Sahlins (1972), even went as far as to characterize hunter-gatherers as “the original affluent society”. These new concepts completely erased any former thoughts about hunter-gatherers being fierce, unintelligent, and spending all of their time engaged in subsistence activities.

The new picture offered by anthropologists of a peaceful people was quickly adopted; however, increasing archaeological and ethnographic evidence suggests this is not always the case of hunter-gatherers of both the present and the past. More recent evidence suggests that these characterizations may be too general and do not account for the vast observed variations within these societies. Undeniably, while anthropologists were attempting to discount previous myths they have created new fallacies, such as all hunter-gatherers are peaceful and non-aggressive.

Studies of Modern Hunters and Gatherers

Studies of modern hunter-gatherers are primarily performed so that we may gain an insight as to how humans existed before hunter-gatherers invented agriculture. Through the archaeological record and ethnographic data, it has been discovered that the term “hunter-gatherer” does not define a homogenous group, but a vast continuum of differing societies. However,

two main categories of hunter-gatherers are generally accepted: “simple” and “complex” (Woodburn 1982). Woodburn (1982) defines simple egalitarian hunter-gatherers as being mobile and flexible in residence, having aversions to accumulation of personal goods, and creating a focus on sharing resources. For the purposes of this paper, simple hunter-gatherers, where egalitarianism is paramount, will be emphasized. This defining feature will allow a more focused approach to this analysis. It should be noted that these dichotomous categories are not absolute and no hunter-gatherer society fits perfectly within them.

Causes of Conflict

It is widely debated what the ultimate causes of conflict are within hunter-gatherer societies, but it has been well established that conflict and violence escalate as the shift from foraging practices toward pastoralism and agriculture subsistence increases (Ellis 2008). Moreover, a correlation exists between the level of stratification of a society and the latter two subsistence practices. This stratification is a precursor to competition and status hierarchy. In addition, according to evolutionary ecologists “conflict and fighting in the human state of nature, as in the state of nature in general, was fundamentally caused by competition” (Gat 2000:84).

Besides competition, Susan Kent (1990) argues that conflict and violence escalate with sedentism and aggregation of populations. Kent (1989) notes that newly sedentary societies engage in more intra-group conflict than when they were nomadic. It has been widely documented that conflict rates within hunter-gatherer groups increase when smaller groups join to form larger aggregates at various times of the year.

On the other hand, Bruce Knauft (1990) argues that conflict and violence are precipitated by status levelling and adult male status differentiation. Status levelling is the attempt to maintain egalitarianism within a band, whereas, adult male status differentiation is the attempt, by males, to develop leadership roles within the group. Knauft (1990) also suggests that status levelling was the primary form of conflict management within nomadic foragers. In addition, he states that status levelling results in fewer social aggressions and behaviours but a higher frequency of lethal violence in the few aggressive incidents that occur (Knauft 1990:1013). Regardless of their differing views, both Knauft (1990) and Kent (1989, 1990) believe escalations of conflict and violence occur within the context of sedentism and aggregation.

Clearly, Knauft (1990), and Kent (1989, 1990) both make valuable contributions to the studies of conflict aetiology. Additionally, it appears that they have common ground among their disagreements. Sedentism and aggregation are prime factors that precipitate conflict; however, the effects of resource competition tend to be overlooked. It should be noted that sedentism increases pressure on resources and hence, competition. Sedentism also allows an individual to collect more personal possessions, adding to social stratification. Certainly, if resources are plentiful, conflict will be mitigated, but as nearby resources become depleted or stressed, conflict will inevitably rise.

Preventing Social Stratification – Putting Down the Aggressor

Egalitarian societies appear to have less intra-group conflict compared to socially stratified societies. According to Bohem (1999:68), hunter-gatherers are not focused on complete equality, but instead attempt to gain mutual respect that maintains

individual autonomy. He adds hunter-gatherers are driven by the desire to maintain personal freedoms. This primary drive allows them to make egalitarianism take place despite competition, dominance, and submission that often leads to social stratification (Bohem 1999:65). Self-proclaimed leaders are not tolerated and are often ostracized by the group. In addition, humility is highly regarded and deemed necessary within these groups. The !Kung are a widely studied hunter-gatherer group from the Kalahari desert, and their tradition of *insulting the meat* is a prime example of modesty. In this practice, the hunter of the prized game is often the subject of ridicule by the group, and the hunter himself ridicules his successful hunt (Lee 1984).

Non-Violent Conflict Resolution and Management

Simple hunter-gatherer societies are typically acephalous, meaning that they are without a leader or central authority to preside over the group. As such, conflict resolution and management is collectively dealt with within the band. Historically, intra-group conflict was managed by fission and fusion (Ellis 2008). This favoured concept is simple: if you have a conflict with a member of your group, you split (fission) from that group and join another (fusion). For this to be an effective mode of conflict resolution two things are essential. First, land and resource territoriality must be absent or minimal. Secondly, and likely of prime importance, ease of mobility is necessary (Ellis 2008). Both of the above conditions are related to the straightforwardness of leaving one group and joining another without incident. However, current hunter-gatherer settlement patterns, such as reduced mobility, are rapidly undergoing a change that can complicate fission and fusion. This reduction of mobility can be caused by various factors

including sedentism and reduced subsistence territory due to encroaching neighbours (Ellis 2008). For these groups, different mechanisms are used to resolve intra-group issues. For example, the !Kung have utilized a headsman of the neighbouring Tswana tribe to mediate conflicts that cannot be resolved within the group (Lee 1984). This deviation from traditional methods of managing intra-group tensions may be the beginnings of the implementation of a stratified system to preside over conflicts.

In addition to the use of fission and fusion to manage hunter-gatherers' conflict, social and cultural pressures are of a paramount significance. Draper (1978:31) states that hunter-gatherers rely on informal methods of social control such as gossip, shunning, ridicule, ostracism, and public debating which lead to group consensus. These methods of conflict management are extremely effective at ensuring that quarrels and violence are avoided, or, if they should arise, they are dealt with swiftly within the group to return the group back to the status quo.

Ostracism and Shunning

Because the livelihood of each person within the band is dependent on sharing and cooperation, collective band ostracism and shunning is of prime importance when discussing hunter-gatherer conflict management. For example Bonta (1996:409) states,

when a member of a G/wi band does not heed the consensus judgment of the group about a conflict, and he ignores the barbed comment from others and does not mend his ways, the people may have to ease the offender out. This is done not by overt antagonism, but rather by subtly frustrating the offender, by misunderstanding his wishes on

purpose, by not hearing him: by, in effect, rejecting him without causing him to feel rejected or offended. The process prompts the offender to feel disgusted with his life in the band, so that he'll leave of his own accord without feeling a need for revenge.

This behaviour highlights the need for individual conformity. Collectively, the band has a tremendous influence on individual behaviour, and if a member is shunned from the collective group his livelihood may be endangered (Bohem 1999:59). Clearly, conforming to the greater wishes of the band makes for an easier and more successful life.

Joking, Ridicule, and Gossip

In most hunter-gatherer societies, direct confrontation is typically avoided, and the goal of conflict management is to keep intra-group social relations running smoothly. For example, according to Briggs (2000), the Inuit take great steps to avoid conflict. Personal wishes are typically expressed through hints and joking, allowing an individual to ignore the allusions and jokes should they so choose (Briggs 2000:111).

In addition to joking, Lee (1984:30) mentions the importance of the design of the !Kung camp for socializing, and this includes gossiping about fellow band members. Lorna Marshall (1976:67) adds that it is discussed among the group if someone has not reciprocated gift giving, in a timely manner. Marshall (1967:71) continues, however, to state that gossip that may cause trouble is avoided. Gossip flows freely among band members, and this can be a strong deterrent for inappropriate conduct. In addition to the aforementioned points, Bohem (1999:75) adds that when a hunting leader becomes overassertive, criticism is a way of expressing annoyance. Self-restraint

is heavily practiced and emphasized, as a loss of self control will often lead to ridicule from the group (Bonta 1996:406).

It is evident that these verbal methods of social control are exceedingly effective and are also relied upon heavily in hunter-gatherer groups. However, it should be noted that the ultimate purpose of these controls is to prevent violent conflict from arising. In a sense, their function is twofold: to allow grievances to be aired, and to elicit a response from the offender that will usually persuade them to conform.

Public Airing and Debate

According to Draper (1978), the nature of hunter-gatherer settlement patterns suggests a lack of privacy. Typically, residences are all located within close proximity. Therefore, any loss of control or display of anger is immediately noticed by fellow residents. This type of arrangement allows for all of the members of the group to witness, and participate in, conflicts that may arise within the camps. For example, Draper (1978) states the huts of approximately forty or so people are ordered in a circular arrangement, and this allows the subtlest acts of antisocial behaviour to be witnessed promptly. When an individual of the group feels slighted, he or she will talk about it so that others will hear the complaint. This behaviour allows the grievance to be publicized which reduces the burden of frustration on the individual (Draper 1978:47-48). Clearly, this lack of privacy acts to moderate conflicts by defusing them before they become too serious.

According to Marshall (1976), the !Kung use songs for discipline measures. They feel that the sharing of a late night song is an effective manner of repositioning social deviates back in line (Marshall 1976:67). Similarly, the Inuit developed a ritual known as the *song duel* to publicly

address interpersonal grievances (Briggs 2000). According to Briggs (2000:111) the *song duel* was resorted to in exceptional circumstances when conflict was difficult to resolve, and the two affronted individuals exchanged contemptuous songs while an amused audience watched. Briggs (2000) also states that these musical confrontations are hidden among festive gatherings where the songs of antagonists are easily confused with good-humoured and playful songs that friendly parties share. Furthermore, the details of the conflict are avoided, or are alluded to in an ambiguous manner. This mode of conflict management allows the antagonists to confront each other while pretending to be non-adversarial. The *song duel* is not judged by the validity of the hidden arguments but by the artistic qualities of the song, so the conflict is deemed to be complete when the festivities end (Briggs 2000:110).

Clearly, ostracism, shunning, joking, ridicule, gossip, and public debating are very common in hunter-gatherer societies. When examining these methods of non-violent conflict resolution and management, it becomes very clear how the band collectively manages individual deviants within the group. Moreover, these methods highlight the interdependency among individuals and how social compliance is vital for individual survival. For this reason, collective social pressures are incredibly strong at ensuring social norms are adhered to, and respected. Even though these non-violent conflict resolution methods are extremely effective at regulating behaviours, violent conflict and aggression does, nonetheless, arise.

Violent Conflict and Aggression

To blindly accept previous assertions that hunter-gatherers are resistant to engaging in violence and aggressive behaviours would be a mistake. Lee (1984)

found that the !Kung can be scrappy and violent, and the violence sometimes leads to fatal results. Between 1922 and 1955 there were 22 incidents of homicide (Lee 1984: 91). When analyzing these numbers, first impressions may lead one to believe that this is a low figure for homicides. At such a low population density of the !Kung, however, this number could be interpreted as high.

The !Kung characterize three levels of conflict: talking, fighting, and deadly fighting. Lee found that the majority of fights were between men and women (1984:91). This observation presents a pattern that contradicts Knauff's (1990) above assertion that conflict arises due to status levelling and active male status differentiation. This is evident because more conflicts appear to occur between males and females, rather than between males. In addition, Lee (1984) reported that most violent conflict between males was due to disputes over the rights to marry females. Violent encounters especially escalated when females were scarce, and females as young as eight years old have been betrothed to males to prevent such violent conflicts (Lee 1984). In this sense, females are considered a resource for reproductive means for males, and the effects of competition become evident when this resource is strained.

In addition to intra-group !Kung violence, Woodburn (1982) asserts that the Hadza, a group in Tanzania, recognize the threat of public violence, the hazard of being killed in their sleep by retaliation, and the threat of being ambushed while hunting alone in the bush. Woodburn also reports that the weapons of violence are the same tools that men use for hunting (1982:92). Presently, weapons are not typically fashioned for violent purposes in modern hunter-gatherer groups (Woodburn 1982).

Display of strong emotion is often an indicator of imminent aggression. According

to Briggs (2000), the Inuit have a tradition of controlling their emotions, including unhappiness and irritation, because they feel that people who experience these emotions are dangerous, and that such people may resort to aggression to change their negative feelings. Stories are told of individuals who have killed, or threatened to kill, in grief over the death of a loved one (Briggs 2000:111).

Violence and aggression are readily recognized within these groups, and this evidence contradicts the myth of the peaceful and non-aggressive hunter-gatherer. With this evidence a clearer picture is formed of the methods employed by hunter-gatherers to manage intra-group conflict and violence. However, care must be taken to not make the common assumption that these modern groups are representative of past hunter-gatherers. Further analysis is needed to establish the extent of conflict and violence, and the methods of conflict resolution of past hunter-gatherers.

The Present is Not the Past

The ultimate purpose of studying modern hunter-gatherer groups is to gain an insight and understanding of past human existence before the development of agriculture. When attempting to develop these thoughts, one must be careful not to treat these modern hunter-gatherer groups as remnants of the past or as if they have not evolved. Modern groups have changed with the rest of the world. Nonetheless, the environments in which modern hunter-gatherers currently subsist are likely dissimilar to the previous residential environments and according to the "environmental determinism" model, the environment is a primary determinant in shaping the behaviours of hunter-gatherers (Ellis 2008). The examples below illustrate this point.

Environment

Presently, most hunter-gatherers live in what many would consider harsh environments (LeBlanc 2003). It is of considerable debate as to whether this is a chosen residential locale or whether hunter-gatherers have been pushed to these extreme environments because, as in the case of desert groups, of agriculturists and Europeans encroaching on their area of subsistence (Ellis 2008). It can be assumed that hunter-gatherers of the past would have also resided in resource rich areas and not only in harsh environments. This variation of past residential environments creates vastly different population pressures upon the respective groups. LeBlanc (2003) mentions that modern hunter-gatherers maintain low reproductive rates to maintain a stable population. This low reproductive rate has a survival advantage in that it enables women to forage long distances from camp while still carrying a child. However, if resources were more plentiful and closer to the camp the need to space the births of children farther apart would be less important and population growth rates would increase (LeBlanc 2003:113). LeBlanc's (2003) argument clarifies that previous hunter-gatherers experienced population pressures in a manner that does not occur in modern groups. Past environments and resources were conducive to a relatively rapid population growth rate, as historic hunter-gatherers managed to explode in numbers and populate the world. LeBlanc (2003) argues that when population growth is positive, resources become depleted quickly, and competition, conflict, and aggression ensue. Therefore, because of past, rapid population growth rates of historical hunter-gatherers, modern hunter-gatherers seldom experience the same population pressures, and, consequent resource competition.

Weapons and Warfare

This historical versus modern referential conundrum presents difficulties when attempting to reconstruct the past. However, the archaeological record is available to lend insight into the past and bolster our understanding of these historical societies. In fact, LeBlanc (2003:115) states that “archaeology reveals burials with evidence of violent deaths and even massacres, and specialized weapons useful only for warfare have been found”. LeBlanc (2003) also mentions that warfare between neighbouring groups was not uncommon. For example, the Herero (a group that neighbours the !Kung) invaded !Kung territory in the 1800s, and they were defeated with raids and warfare (LeBlanc 2003:116). LeBlanc (2003) also provides evidence that the early Arctic anthropologists observed occurrences of warfare and were told stories about warfare among the Inuit. Researchers know that the Eskimo had tools used exclusively for warfare (LeBlanc 2003:117). This evidence suggests that historical warfare was much more prevalent in previous groups as compared to modern counterparts. In addition, this emphasizes that caution should be taken when deriving impressions of the past.

Conclusion

Conflict appears to occur at a lower incident rate amongst hunter-gatherers of a “simple” form. However, through this analysis it has become evident that archaeologists have unduly created a myth of the “peaceful hunter-gatherer”. It has been made clear that conflict is prevalent and healthy within these groups. Furthermore, the method in which conflict is managed and resolved is much different than what Westerners are accustomed to. Simple hunter-gatherers are acephalous and conflict is dealt with by collective social

control. This method is effective because each individual is interdependent and conformity is necessary for the livelihood of each member.

In addition to utilizing social control for conflict resolution and management, modern hunter-gatherers live in vastly different environments than their counterparts did in the past (LeBlanc 2003). The present residential environments are primarily harsh and modern groups have low birth rates that maintain stable resources. This combination allows for adequate resources to be shared within the group, generally reducing resource competition. The differing residential areas of the past, however, provided great resources, and high population growth rates ensued. This combination eventually provides a strain on resources and competition naturally follows. Consequently, evidence of historical violence and warfare are common in the archaeological and ethnographical record. One must look at the data and evidence both objectively and critically to dispel these perpetuated myths of the “noble savage” or brutish solitary “beast”. This is vital for a clear, concise representation of what humans were like prior to the development of agriculture which transformed the current global human condition.

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