



LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

Annukka Sailo

Hierarchies, population control, war: Debating territorial aggression in behavioral sciences (1965–75)

The 1960s has often been depicted as an era characterized by the breakdown of consensus in scholarly disciplines, flourishing of revolutionary theories in and outside academia, and the polarization of the American intelligentsia. Society at large was in change. The civil rights movement, student movements, and feminist movements among others tried to influence opinions and address legal and policy issues, with some success. Awareness of environmental problems, especially the population explosion, grew as well. The decade was also characterized by soaring crime rates, inner city violence and rioting, and political assassinations. Besides the nuclear threat of the Cold War, U.S. military escalation in Vietnam made the issues of war and peace highly topical.

Aggression and violence became pressing scientific, and political but also popular concerns. The topics were researched and debated widely, not only in fields such as psychiatry, psychology, and criminology, but also in biology, anthropology, and other social sciences. “The rediscovery of our violence will undoubtedly be one of the important intellectual legacies of the 1960s”, stated the historian Richard Hofstadter in 1970.

70



Picture 1. Doctoral candidate Annukka Sailo (left), and the opponent, Professor Erika Milam. Picture: Annukka Sailo.

In my dissertation, I explore the curious fashion of using the ethology-derived concept of territoriality to explain human aggression and other social phenomena in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Besides analysing the idea of territorial aggression itself, I examine the concept’s dissemination to various scientific disciplines, and the cross-disciplinary controversies it caused. The topic gained special attention

in social and physical anthropology, and environmental psychology, but was also discussed in political science, psychiatry and sociology for example. In addition to the distinct disciplinary goals and sub-debates, the engagement with territorial aggression was also genuinely cross-disciplinary and thus a phenomenon worth studying as such.

Considering that the idea of the territorial basis of human aggression is now a discarded scientific idea, and that there were many different competing theories on human aggression in the era, the topic may sound trivial. Yet, ethological and other evolutionary explanations of human aggression became the most vividly debated aggression theories and raised especially wide interest amongst the lay audiences, leaving a lasting impression.

The huge interest in ethological theories of aggression is partly attributable to the popular ethological writers and their best-selling books, the most important of which were the eminent Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz's *On aggression*, and *The territorial imperative* by the American playwright and science popularizer Robert Ardrey, both published in 1966. The idea of territorial aggression included the view that human aggression had evolved in connection to territorial needs that humans shared with non-human animals; that humankind was characterized by extremely high aggressiveness; that territoriality was an especially fundamental human quality; and that this evolved legacy determined a large part of human social behavior both good and bad. Territorial aggression was associated with domestic, international, and environmental issues and problems.

The debate on territorial aggression had numerous political implications. In the public debate, lines were drawn between the conservative, racist, militarist, and social-Darwinian proponents of the biological basis of human aggression, often referred as “innate aggressionists” on the one hand, and the liberal “environmentalists” on the other hand. Historians, contemporary commentators and participants alike have depicted the schism as a classic nature–nurture controversy. In most aggression debates, both the nature and nurture sides end up asking whether socially important differences between persons are inherent in individuals or created in them by their society or upbringing. In many contexts in the 1960s, and the 1970s as well, the focus was on the causes that produced problem individuals. Aggression and violence were studied in connection to “abnormality”, to mental illness, and criminality. The debate on territorial aggression in turn was about evolutionary adaptation, about “normality” and the elementary human nature. It concentrated on the aggressive propensities that we all were claimed to share and the essence of humanity.

Previous research on the ethological debates of the era has noted the importance of the divergent views on the nature of human nature. What this research has not fully discussed is the variety of the uses of territoriality, or the importance of the notion ‘human condition’. My research highlights the ways that separate ideas in different disciplines were tied together in research and discussions of territorial aggression, and that, despite the sometimes furious controversy, there was in fact more agreement between the opposing parties than what the participants of these controversies were willing to admit. Even though the topics of the territorial aggression debate ranged from themes as diverse as urban design and criminality to mental health, I view the following three themes as the major issues in these controversies: social hierarchies, overcrowding and the population problem, and warfare.

Critics claimed that viewing aggression as an adaptive, positive quality, which brought benefits to the aggressive individual (like status and resources) led to the rationalization and legitimation of existing hierarchies and economic inequality. That notwithstanding, the interrelations between hierarchies, territoriality and aggression were not exclusively about selective breeding and dominance relations, but also about structuring the group, controlling aggression, and supporting the lower status individuals. The

innate aggressionists argued that aggression and territoriality were universal qualities that secured everyone's freedom and rights. In spite of the political accusations connecting ethological theories of hierarchies with conservative views, there was in fact no real debate on the necessity of hierarchical structures in society. On both sides of the debate, the majority of scientists viewed hierarchical social structures as necessary, even if they criticized their particular nature in modern societies. Strict hierarchies and the overly competitive nature of modern urban society were criticized on both sides of the controversy. On the other hand, the conservative androcentric views of the "innate aggressionists" seemed to fit in well with the worldview of most of their critics. Concern over militarism and racism did not bring along concerns over sexism, and male bias. Feminist critique of the popular ethological notion of aggression was separate from other parts of the controversy.



Picture 2. Source material, which consisted of published academic research from various disciplines as well as popular scientific texts. Picture: Annukka Sailo.

The second theme as well, overcrowding and population control, evidences not only differences but also similarities between the opposing parties. The basic claim of the popular "territorial aggression thesis" was that much of human aggression and especially overt, uncontrollable violence was a territorial response to crowded conditions. The "innate aggressionists" claimed that humans had originally had mechanisms for controlling population growth, such as territorial dispersion, but those mechanisms had clearly failed. As a consequence, aggression had become dysfunctional in the modern world.

While the opponents of popular ethologists rejected the idea of the territorial and instinctive nature of human aggression, they very much shared their concern over the population explosion and overcrowding. Their fears concerning the population problem were not limited to ecological issues such

as starvation, pollution, and excessive use of resources, but also included the detrimental effects of population growth and overcrowding on human behavior and societies. Extensive interest in the topic of crowding gradually led to a questioning and rejection of the automatic connection between overcrowding, aggression and the “urban apocalypse”, especially among environmental psychologists and urban sociologists. However, the main protagonists on the opposing sides of the debate, such as the anthropologist Ashley Montagu and Konrad Lorenz, shared views on the ‘human condition’: they voiced similar criticisms of modern society, and its overcrowded, overly complex, and overcompetitive nature.

The third major theme of the controversy was war and the role of cruelty and violence in human evolution. This was probably the sorest spot of the whole debate. Besides including claims about the extremely high aggression in the human species, and even innate human cruelty and proneness to violence, theories of territorial aggression also included arguments that war was “natural” for humans. In addition, some of the popular ethological theories highlighted the importance of killing for the emergence and evolution of the human species. Territoriality had a strong role in these ideas mainly because of the way that group territoriality was linked with in-group solidarity and cooperation on the one hand, and out-group violence on the other hand. In spite of the grim views on human nature and the human past, morality, friendship, love and many other positive qualities were inherently linked to the darker side of the human beast.

For the opponents of the innate aggressionists the most problematic issue with the ethological theories was not necessarily the claimed biological underpinnings of human aggression or even the partially adaptive nature of aggression. Rather, the problem was the superior importance that the popular ethologists gave to this quality over all other human qualities. The critics accused popular ethologists of supporting militaristic ideas and the pessimistic – even fatalistic – notion of human capacities to live up to any humane or civilized standards. The political accusations, however, were not fully justified even in matters of war and peace. In spite of the divergent views on the role of war in human evolution, everyone shared the view that modern warfare was maladaptive and dangerous to the human species. On the surface, the debate over territorial aggression was about the biological limitations of human behavior in connection to the pessimistic and deterministic picture of the future of humankind. However, both the scholars that supported the territorial aggression thesis and those who strongly rejected it wanted to prevent such a dystopic future.

Despite their acknowledging strong biological constraints for human behavior, some aggressionist scholars in fact offered quite idealistic solutions to the aggression problem. For example, although Lorenz believed in the evolved genetic basis of xenophobia, he argued for the possibility of enlarging the perception of one’s in-group by making friends and acquaintances with people from different nationalities and ideologies, and by uniting under common values. Ultimately, it was possible to extend one’s sympathy to reach the whole humankind, he claimed. John B. Calhoun, in turn, famous for his rodent studies, suggested a unique human possibility of solving overcrowding problem: the creation of conceptual space.

The topic of territorial aggression as a contested meta-explanation for the problems of the 1960s and the 1970s highlights the impact of popular ideas and the wider social and cultural context on scientific research. Besides questioning the simple nature–nurture polarization of the aggression debate, and the simple political division lines, this dissertation raises the wider question of the problematic role that popularizations and the popular press may play in disseminating scientific knowledge, and especially in defining relevant research problems in cross-disciplinary research and debates. A notable feature of the research on territorial aggression was that interdisciplinary influences often travelled in popular form.

This caused both intentional and unintentional misunderstandings and further polarized the discussion. Yet, even the critical comments kept the criticized theory on display and provided unintended legitimation to the idea. Regardless of the critical attitudes and questioning of popular ideas, those ideas had an effect on the choice of topics and hypotheses in scientific research, at the very least.

On the other hand, this debate can also be viewed as an example of the capacity of science to correct false hypotheses and popular folk psychological ideas. The idea of human territorial aggression was ultimately rejected in different disciplines. Another question is whether scientists managed to communicate their findings to the lay audiences as efficiently as the popular ethological best-sellers had promoted their own ideas. Although territorial aggression is no longer a widely held or even commonly known concept, many of the claims connected with this idea seem to resonate with deeply rooted folk psychological views that have not vanished.

FM Annukka Sailon tieteiden ja aatteiden historian alaan kuuluva väitöskirja "Hierarchies, population control, war: Debating territorial aggression in behavioral sciences (1965–75)" tarkastettiin Oulun yliopistossa 30.10.2020. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori Erika Milam (Princeton University) ja kustoksena professori Petteri Pietikäinen (Oulun yliopisto).