

War, authoritarianism and behavioral plasticity

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Abstract: People show a preference for strong leadership in times of war or collective danger, but a preference for an egalitarian system in times of peace and safety. This psychological plasticity may have evolved as a mechanism for overcoming the free rider problem in collective fighting, while also avoiding exploitation by despots when no collective fighting is needed. This plasticity at the individual level is reflected at the group level in the political structure, religious strictness, sexual behavior, parental investment and art preferences according to the cultural r/k theory, which is explained.

The predictions of the theory are tested on data from the standard cross-cultural sample and on data extracted from the ethnographic literature for non-industrial societies. Ecological and technological factors are used for predicting the level of intergroup conflict. The results support this theory better than alternative theories. The theory offers a new explanation for the phenomenon that social psychologists call authoritarianism. The theory has important applications for the study of political, social psychological and cultural phenomena.

Keywords: intergroup conflict, free rider problem, authoritarian personality, phenotypic plasticity, cultural r/k selection.

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