

PEOPLE must have a tribe. It gives them a name, adding to their own and social meaning in a chaotic world. It makes the environment less disorienting and dangerous. The social world of each modern human is not a single tribe but rather a system of interlocking tribes.

Participants always ranked the out-group below the in-group. They judged their "opponents" to be less likeable, less fair, less trustworthy.

People savour the company of like-minded friends and they yearn to be in one of the best – perhaps an elite college or the executive committee of a company, a religious sect, a fraternity, a garden club.

The goal is to belong to any collectivity that can be compared favourably with other competing groups of the same category.

People around the world today have grown ever more cautious of war and are fearful of its consequences.

They have turned increasingly to its moral equivalent in team sports. Their thirst for group membership and superiority of their group can be satisfied with victory by their warriors in clashes on ritualised battle-fields.

Like the cheerful and well-dressed citizens of Washington, DC, who came out to witness the First Battle of Bull Run during the Civil War, people now anticipate the experience of a battle of the Washington Redskins on the football field with relish. The same applies to Arsenal of London, Real Madrid or Bayern Munich.

Experiments conducted over many years by social psychologists have revealed how swiftly and decisively people divide into groups and then discriminate in favour of the one to which they belong.

Even when the experimenters created the groups arbitrarily, then labelled them so the members could identify themselves, and even when the interactions prescribed were trivial, prejudice quickly established itself.

Whether groups played for pennies or identified themselves in a group-based manner, say, preferring some abstract painter to another, the participants always ranked the out-group below the

in-group.

The prejudices asserted themselves even when the subjects were told the in-groups and out-groups had been chosen arbitrarily. In one such series of trials, subjects were asked to divide piles of chips among anonymous members of the two groups and the same response followed.

Strong favouritism was consistently shown to those labelled simply as an in-group, even with no

other incentive and no previous contact.

In its power and universality, the tendency to form groups and then favour in-group members has the earmarks of instinct. It could be argued that in-group bias is conditioned by early training to affiliate with family members

and by encouragement to play with neighbouring children.

But even if such experience does play a role, it would be an example of what psychologists call prepared learning, the inborn propensity to learn something swiftly and decisively.

If the propensity towards

in-group bias has all these criteria, it is likely to be inherited and, if so, can be reasonably supposed to have arisen through evolution by natural selection. Other cogent examples of prepared learning in the human repertoire include language, incest avoidance and the acquisition of phobias.

Groupism – the elementary drive to form and take deep pleasure from in-group membership – easily translates at a higher level

into tribalism.

People are prone to ethnocentrism. It is an uncomfortable fact that even when given a guilt-free choice, individuals prefer the company of others of the same race, nation, clan and religion.

They trust them more, relax with them better in business and social events, and prefer them more often than not as marriage partners. They are quicker to anger at evidence that an out-group is behaving unfairly or receiving undeserved rewards.

And they grow hostile to any out-group encroaching upon the territory or resources of their in-group.

When, in experiments, black and white Americans were flashed pictures of the other race, their amygdala – the brain's centre of fear and anger – were activated so quickly and subtly that the conscious centres of the brain were unaware of the response. The subject, in effect, could not help himself.

When, on the other hand, appropriate contexts were added – say, the approaching black person was a doctor and the white person, his patient – two other sites of the brain integrated with the higher learning centres, the cingulate cortex and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, lit up, silencing input through the amygdala.

Thus, different parts of the brain have evolved by group selection to create "groupishness". They mediate the hard-wired propensity to downgrade other-group members, or else in opposition to subdue its immediate, autonomic effects.

There is little or no guilt in the pleasure experienced from watching violent sporting events and war films, providing the amygdala rules the action and the story unwinds to a satisfying destruction of the enemy.

We would be well advised not to belittle this inclination. It may seem trivial but shifting tribal instincts – from the very real battlefield of war and mutual human destruction, to sports arenas and video games actually represents civilizational progress.

THE GLOBALIST

This article is based on Edward O. Wilson's 2012 book *The Social Conquest Of Earth* (W.W. Norton & Company).

Globalism

Groupism

Tribalism

For all the talk about a world without borders and ever more interconnectedness, one fundamental human trait has not lost any of its power: the penchant of humankind to organise itself in tribes. **E.O. Wilson**, one of the world's most renowned biologists and author of *The Social Conquest Of Earth*, examines the roots of ethnocentrism.

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