

Battle trance and collective identity

We have already mentioned several times probably the most important survival tool of our human ancestors – the specific altered state of consciousness which I called in my 2011 book the “battle trance.” This is a mental state that allowed hominids and humans not to feel any fear or pain in a critical situation and to show absolute, selfless dedication towards the interests of kin, military unit, religion, or state. In this state of mind humans lose the feel of their individuality, and literally obtain a new, collective identity. In this new state they feel themselves as a small element of a much larger entity. In this state humans stop questioning orders or judging behaviours of their group members; instead they follow others in the most literal and rigid way. In this state humans act in total disregard of their “common” sense. This change of personality can be so intense that, after experiencing the battle trance, group members may experience partial or full amnesia and may not remember their actions. The state of battle trance was appearing in groups of hominids and humans in the most critical moments of survival, chiefly in combat situations against predators or enemy human groups.

The presence of the altered state of consciousness is quite well known, particularly within the military. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote: “The difference between an ordinary man or boy and a reliable killer, as any drill sergeant could attest, is profound. A transformation is required: The man or boy leaves his former self behind and becomes something entirely different, perhaps even taking a new name. In small-scale, traditional societies, the change was usually accomplished through ritual drumming, dancing, fasting, and sexual abstinence -- all of which serve to lift a man out of his mundane existence and into a new, warrior like mode of being, denoted by special body paint, masks, and headdresses” (Ehrenreich, 1997:10). “Recruits obtain the first taste of collective identity in the peace time, during the long drill sessions. It is the rhythmic unity of a large group of humans, stomping together, that gives the feel of enlarged ego, or more precisely, shrinking of ego and becoming a small part of a much bigger entity” (MacNeil, 1995). This feel of a new larger unity is the force behind the unquestioning following of military commands, sometimes even in cases where the orders are to shoot civilians. Many scenarios throughout history have also taught us that a small number of drilled soldiers can defeat a much bigger army of undrilled and unprepared opposition.

Let us now try to trace the hypothetical origins of this specific altered state of consciousness. The origins of this mental state in mammals most likely were developed from the female dedication toward her offspring. When parental (particularly motherly) care became crucial for the survival of a new generation,

natural selection wisely re-evaluated the grand scheme of the hierarchy of instincts, and put the instincts of survival for the newer generation higher than the instinct of self-survival. Of course this happened via the process of natural selection, in which the genes of dedicated mothers were propagated to the next generation better than those who would think of their own survival first and not of their young. This is why the dedication of mothers in many animal species is total and absolute – for the millions of years mother animals were risking their life for the life of their offspring. Even today, the most dangerous situation for a hunter is to deal with a nervous mother who is defending her cubs. In this case if a mother attacks, they usually do not waste time on giving or perceiving an aposematic display and go straight into lethal violence.

The simplest case of putting a human in a state of battle trance still arises when a child is violently and suddenly attacked in the presence of a parent. In this extremely emotional moment humans cannot think rationally. There is a momentary switch in the brain that turns a rational and thinking human into a furious bundle of nails and fists without any reservations or fear for his or her own health and survival.

Many scholars believe that this kind of self-sacrificial dedication can happen only with members of one's own kin. This is the "kin selection model" of altruistic behaviour, proposed by William Donald Hamilton, but the situation is not as simple as it may seem. The complexity is brought by the fact that such selfless actions may be directed to save someone totally unrelated to the fighting person. Humans are known to fight without fear for their pet dogs and cats, receiving horrendous bodily injuries in the process.

Sex and hunger are often considered as the strongest instincts, but escaping predators is stronger – and helping loved ones to escape danger is even stronger than the instinct of self-survival and escape from imminent death. In truly critical moments of life and death, humans often behave for the good of others, sometimes even without any rational explanation for their motives.

We humans often prize ourselves as thinking animals, but in the most critical moments of life when our life is in imminent danger, we cannot think rationally and we just follow instincts. This is why we can sacrifice our life not only for our children (biologically the most obvious reason), but for our loved ones, for our friends, for our country, or even for our religious ideals. Despite the bad publicity humans are generally getting, we are wired by the powerful forces of natural selection to be concerned primarily for the safety of our loved ones, not for that of our own. Humans often behave the most altruistically when in the most critical situations for survival. Altruism and compassion, although often laughed at and dismissed as unwanted and dangerous features for individual success, are at the very core our human hierarchy of instincts ([Keltner, 2004](#)). It is good news that there are scholars who take human altruism and compassion seriously into account – even such ostensibly unconnected spheres such as compassion and business are sometimes the topic of scholarly discussion (see for example, on the internet: The Compassion and Business Conference, organised by Stanford University's [Centre for Compassion and](#)

[Altruism Research and Education](#), scheduled to start in less than a week on April 30th, 2013).

Unfortunately, apart from the selfless dedication towards the health and life of others, the battle trance has a negative side as well. The negative part of the battle trance is that in this selfless and altruistic state, humans can perform the most horrendous violent acts as well, such as shooting civilians or participating in mass murders. This may sound unbelievable to some, but self-sacrifice and mass murder are two sides of the same coin, the coin that puts the interests of your group, your collective identity higher than anything else, including the interests of your own survival, common sense, and the basics of human morality.

Any useful behaviour must be rewarded in order to stay in one's memory. Just being useful in the long term does not help the memory and does not really incite behaviour with altruistic elements. We need the feeling of pleasure, a notorious "instant gratification." If you have ever trained a dog or a cat you would know how long it takes to teach them to behave appropriately in certain situations. But who was training animals or our human ancestors many years ago to teach them the basics of social behaviour and instill an altruism that actually goes against their instinct of self-survival? And what could have been used as a reward in the process? The trainer was of course: natural selection. The reward (apart from staying alive) was a neurochemically induced incredible physiological pleasure, feelings of euphoria as their personal selves dissolved into collective identity. In this state of collective identity one suddenly felt larger, stronger and without any fear or pain. This coveted feeling can be experienced if you have been a member of a religious group, or a military unit, or a sporting team. This is the feeling that many humans experience when their state declares war, or when they listen to their national anthem after their national team wins. By its intensity this is not a battle trance yet, but the thrilling feel of belonging to a bigger social entity is based on similar mental mechanisms. The battle trance is just the ultimate, most dramatic expression of this mental state in the spectrum of collective identity. The battle trance is able to totally override our selfish interests up to the point of sacrificing our lives for the lives of others or even merely for some abstract ideas.

Now let us discuss the reward used while teaching altruistic behaviour to naturally selfish individuals. In the book "War is a force that gives us meaning" Chris Hedges persuasively wrote about the feeling of war and battle being akin to a "powerful drug," something that is well known to many veterans of combat operations: "The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug" (Hedges, 2003:3). This incredible feel of euphoria is achieved by the release of different neurochemicals into our brain. I am not going to discuss all the neurochemicals that possibly induce this feel, but the participation of neurochemicals is obvious. According to the available literature, oxytocin might be the most important neurochemical that was (and still is) activating the feel of belonging to a larger entity. Known as a "trust hormone," oxytocin is a perfect tool to feel the strength of social bonds, bonds that may lead to leaving your own self to obtain another, collective identity.

Oxytocin is released in our brain on number of activities, such as (1) giving birth, (2) breastfeeding, (3) grooming, (3) dancing together, (4) singing together, (5) praying, (6) sexual arousal and orgasm. Through the increase of trust and reducing of fear oxytocin seems to facilitate even the healing of wounds (Gouin at al., 2010)

It is not accidental that oxytocin is sometimes referred as the “trust hormone” and sometimes as a “love hormone.” If we have a look at these activities, we can notice that they all represent moments of life when we are closely connected to other members of our society.

(1) Release of oxytocin when giving birth establishes the positive bond between mother and her offspring (Lee et al., 2009). The presence of oxytocin at birth must have played a particularly important role in the animal species where the vigorous care given by the mother was crucial for the survival of the offspring (particularly within mammals and birds).

(2) Breastfeeding is another crucial activity that links mother and child in the most intimate and personal way, via body contact and receiving/giving food from one organism to another.

(3) Grooming each other establishes a strong social bond between the grooming individuals, and the time spent in grooming each other directly correlates to the strength of the social bond between the individuals. Studies of primates provide ample evidence of the strength of grooming as a social bond (for example, see de Waal, 1989, 2001)

(3) Dancing together in united rhythm, particularly in religious rituals and before combat situations, establishes a strong bond between the participants (McNeil, 1995). We should remember here that dancing together in united rhythm is a uniquely human behaviour, as the sense of rhythm and the ability to be entrained, according to our present knowledge, is not present in any other animal species. Even a human dancing to an internal or external rhythm alone can experience this feel of entrainment and belonging to a larger entity, as rhythm is one of the strongest agents of social bonding in humans;

(4) Singing together, as a rule, is also united rhythmically, and like dancing it also creates the feel of entrainment. Also similarly to dance, a lone singer can experience the feel of establishing a connection with a larger entity (for example, with God). Poetry and mantras, due to their **rhythmic** nature, are particularly powerful in creating a feel of belonging to a much larger entity.

(5) Sexual arousal is another important activity that is mostly connected to the interaction of more than one individual and the release of oxytocin is very natural for sexual arousal and orgasm.

Such human social sentiments, like patriotism and religious belonging, are primarily based on this ancient instinctual desire to experience the intoxicating feeling of collective identity. Situations stressful for survival are powerful incentives to induce the battle trance and collective identity, and to enhance fervour. This is the reason why feelings of group identity, religious fundamentalism and patriotism are

becoming particularly strong in the moments of big national or religious upheavals, including wars and natural disasters.

The very fundament of human religion is based on the feel of collective identity. This is why every human religion is offering to its followers an understanding of our humble role in the larger picture of life, where individual lives are only small particles of a Grand Scheme. The exhilarating religious feel of belonging to a larger-than-life cause has its roots in the ancient rituals and the altered states of consciousness of the battle trance. This is also why the ritualistic actions that lead to the induction of the battle trance are so universal and so similar to religious rituals.

Let us now sum up the characteristic features of the battle trance, based on seven elements:

- (1) Battle trance is a neurochemically induced altered state of consciousness where humans lose their individual identity and acquire a group identity;
- (2) Battle trance usually appears when we find that someone or something (a person, group, animal, country, idea) we love is in a mortal danger;
- (3) This state is characterized by total neglect of fear, pain, and humans can experience an increase in physical strength;
- (4) Instincts of self-survival and self-preservation, as well as notions of calculated "common sense" do not apply in this state of mind. In this state humans are unable to judge or question their group members' or their own behaviour;
- (5) People can have a full or partial loss of memory of the events conducted in the state of the battle trance;
- (6) This state can be achieved instinctively and instantly when sudden danger arises, or alternatively it can be induced by ritualistic actions, using rhythmic singing, chanting, dancing, body painting or use of masks.
- (7) People can go into the battle trance both individually and in groups, of both men and women.

Next we are going to discuss the emotions involved in attachment and love. As we will see, love is the central force that gives us courage and determination to fight for others, so to discuss the mechanisms of the state of the battle trance and collective identity without discussing love and sexuality is simply impossible.