

Levels of analysis and problems of evidential support in the study of asymmetric conflict

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Abstract: The contribution by De Dreu and Gross (2019) oversimplifies the complexity of the topic. I provide counterarguments that undermine the two sweeping contentions on which the paper's argument depends and I argue that asymmetric conflict is best understood at the finer grained level of studying the sequences of strikes and counter-strikes the rival actors have in store for one another.

De Dreu and Gross (2019) provide a welcome contribution to the theory of conflict by questioning the assumption of symmetry pervading much of the existing game theoretical literature. They bring to the foreground of current debates the significance of distinguishing between attack and defense and demonstrate this point through a wide-ranging review of neurobiological, psychological, and cultural mechanisms associated with this distinction. These merits notwithstanding, their contribution oversimplifies the complexity of the topic in several distinct ways that, taken together, cast in doubt the theoretical and practical insights of their proposal.

In this commentary I show that counterexamples can be adduced to undermine two key sweeping contentions on which the paper's argument depends. To begin with, the claim that "group-level defense creates a common fate for defenders that is absent in attackers" (De Dreu and Gross, 2019: IV.5, p. 41) is a generalization that ignores the obvious fact that "the defenders" are never a homogenous group in all respects. There are multiple axes of social difference including, but not limited to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, (dis)ability, and social class (Simandan, 2019a). These axes of social difference induce profound heterogeneities in the specific "fates" the various sub-groups constituting the higher-order grouping of the "defenders" will face. To give an illustration, given that Nazi ideology specifically targeted the elimination of Jews, Roma, disabled people, and LGBT minorities, the occupation by Nazi Germany of large swaths of Europe during the Second World War resulted in very different outcomes for these ideologically-targeted minorities compared to the less "problematic" ethnic majorities of the occupied territories (Childers, 2018). To give another illustration representative of the ethnic fragmentation associated with the political geography of the nation-state, Transylvania has belonged to Romania for the last hundred years, but before that it was a part of the Habsburg, and then Austrian-Hungarian empires (Treptow, 1997). Even though Romanians constitute the ethnic majority, the province has a substantial Hungarian minority. Given what we know about homophily and ethnocentrism (Bizumic, 2019; Currarini et al., 2009; Jones, 2018; Salter, 2008; Stavenhagen, 2016), it strains credulity to suggest that were Hungary to invade Transylvania, the fate of the occupied would be a "common fate", regardless of whether they are the Romanian majority or the Hungarian minority.

The second and equally problematic sweeping contention on which the paper's argument depends is the claim that "the negative consequences of failed defense are stronger and more extreme than the consequences of failed attack" (ibid, p. 45). On one hand, this second claim presupposes and therefore reproduces the questionable assumptions about the alleged common fate of "defenders" of the first claim. On the other hand, the historical and military record suggests that the relative severity of failed defense *versus* failed attack depends on the contextual specificities of the conflict under investigation. To illustrate, a viable competitive strategy is for a party to act weak and/or oblivious so as to bait its rival into a rushed, over-confident, attack (Freedman, 2015). Since the attack wasn't surprising at all, the defenders can mount a counter-attack that can often be devastating for the original attackers on two grounds: firstly, the intelligence and foresight of the defenders can give them time to orchestrate a well-thought-out counter-attack; secondly, because the initial attack was induced by the defenders' tactic of appearing weak and/or oblivious, the powerful counter-attack is especially likely to take them by surprise and to find them unprepared and vulnerable (see also Simandan, 2018a-b).

I also argue that the manner in which the authors model attack and defense as games of strategy is misleading to the extent that it does not take into account the optimal level of analysis at which such modelling should take place. More specifically, asymmetric conflict is best understood at the finer grained level of studying the sequences of strikes and counter-strikes the rival actors have in store for one another (Simandan, 2018c-d, 2019b). In other words, it is less productive for the study of conflict to think in terms of attackers *versus* defenders than to think in terms of the specific chains of moves and counter-moves that, taken together, constitute the higher-order

“conflict”. De Dreu and Gross mention only in passing this micro-level of analysis (2019, section III.4, p. 25), and this analytical oversight severely circumscribes the range of insight that their current framework can offer. This problem should be remedied in their future work by more carefully articulating the study of conflict at finer-grained levels of analysis. As a constructive suggestion of how this task could be carried out, I end this commentary by briefly delineating four complementary criteria for classifying move/counter-moves pairs (for details, see Simandan, 2018c-d, 2019b). The first criterion is *intentionality* and its application allows us to appreciate the fact that counterforce creation doesn't require conscious decision-making, and that, therefore, we can usefully distinguish intended countermoves from unintended counterforces. A second criterion that carries significant analytical traction in characterizing move-countermove dyads is the degree of *similarity* between the substantive, intrinsic features of the initial move and the properties of the subsequent response. Its application yields two broad categories: similar (or symmetrical) countermoves, which describe responses that are of the same kind as the triggering move, and dissimilar (or asymmetrical) countermoves, which refer to reactions that are substantively different from the initial trigger. The third criterion by which move-countermove pairs can be usefully classified is the degree of *concentration of human agency* involved. One can thereby distinguish between individual countermoves and collective or diffuse responses. This distinction is significant for theoretical and methodological reasons in both the social sciences and in historiography. Finally, the fourth criterion is *the time elapsed* between the initial move and the countermove. The distinction of immediate countermoves from delayed countermoves (a) brings out the complication that even immediate responses cannot happen instantaneously, (b) prompts the further classification of delays themselves into unavoidable and

deliberate delays, and (c) opens questions about the advantages of making use of deliberate delays when crafting one's reaction to a competitive challenge.

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