

# Zero Sum Games

## Contents:

- 1) Preamble
- 2) Duplicity, Outwardly Kind and Inwardly Ruthless
- 3) Power and Status
- 4) Dating Market, Male Reproductive Success
- 5) Business
  - 5A) Sales/Marketing
  - 5B) Office Politics
  - 5C) Job Interviews
- 6) Looks, Halo Effect
- 7) Education, University Admissions
- 8) Envy and Schadenfreude, Evolutionary Purposes
- 9) Pareto Distribution
  - 9A) Worldly Wealth
  - 9B) Male Reproductive Success
  - 9C) Consequences of the Pareto Distribution
- 10) Positive Sum Games
  - 10A) Wealth
  - 10B) Wisdom

## 1) Preamble:

### "War rages everywhere." –Illimitable Man

In modern America it is something of a dogma that zero sum competition doesn't exist and that everyone can be a winner.

The truth is this; *war rages everywhere*, 'war' being any situation where you face zero sum conflict or competition.

It is both sad and true to say that zero sum games are common while positive sum games are rare. The aim of this essay is to examine the key areas of life that are zero sum in nature.

## 2) Duplicity, Outwardly Kind and Inwardly Ruthless:

While you should inwardly be aware of the zero sum nature of the situations you face and be willing to destroy others for your own gain, outwardly you must appear to be a polite, compassionate, and virtuous person. Such an appearance causes other people to like you (or at least not outright hate you), which makes them more willing to help you and more hesitant to harm you.

### 3) Power and Status:

Power and Status are not precisely the same thing, but they are so closely correlated that differentiating between them is almost pointless.

They are both zero sum in nature.

A man can only be considered 'high status' if he is *higher* status than other men; being a billionaire grants a man high status only because most men are not billionaires.

Power is zero sum in nature, in the sense that one party can only wield power over another insofar as the other party is powerless.

There are practical reasons to care about your relative level of status and power, beyond just the vanity of having your ego stroked.

When people perceive you are high status it makes them eager to do you favors, since they perceive you are likely to have the power to repay them in a meaningful way. It also makes people hesitant to harm you, because they perceive that you likely have the power to retaliate in a meaningful way.

### 4) Dating Market, Male Reproductive Success:

In order for you to get commitment from that special someone, everyone else has to not get commitment from them.

The dating market is a zero sum game, particularly for heterosexual men.

Males are in zero sum competition with one another for reproductive opportunities, females are not. One man having a child with a woman prevents any other man from having a child by her (at least for the next 9 months). However, one woman having a child with a man *does not* prevent other women from having a child by him.

It seems to be the case that men are more prone to thinking in zero sum terms than women are, and this could be an extension of the fact that in our evolutionary past men *were* engaged in zero sum competition for reproductive opportunities, while women were not.

Intrasexual competition among men is far more intense than intrasexual competition among women.

There is female ingroup preference (women automatically side with other women), but there is no male ingroup preference (men do NOT automatically

side with other men). Why? Because men are by default in zero sum competition with one another, at least for reproductive opportunities, while women are not.

Quite sinisterly, another man dying indirectly benefits all the other men left alive; it means they have one less competitor in the race for reproductive opportunities. This may explain why males kill each other far more often than females do.

For insight on why men kill each other, see Martin Daly's book [\*Killing the Competition\*](#)

## **5) Business:**

The business world involves endless zero sum competition.

### **5A) Sales/Marketing:**

Sales/Marketing is zero sum in nature; you and your competitors are engaged in a zero sum game of winning market share.

Every piece of market share one of your competitors takes is a piece of market share you *can't* have, and vice versa.

### **5B) Office Politics:**

Office Politics is a zero sum game.

Your goal is to maximize the probability of being promoted and to minimize the probability of being fired, and *you are in zero sum competition with coworkers of the same rank as you for the same promotion opportunities*. You are also in zero sum competition with them for keeping your position when layoff season comes.

It is objectively in your best interest for your coworkers to fail, so that your own probability of being handed a promotion is maximized.

There may be cases where the number of promotions available is greater than the number of employees competing for them, in which case the game is no longer zero sum. Such cases are exceptionally rare; odds are you will go your entire career without encountering one of them.

### **5C) Job Interviews:**

Job Interviews are usually a zero sum game, because in most cases the number of people applying for the open position is far greater than the number of open positions available; in order for you to be given a job offer, others must *not* be given a job offer.

## 6) Looks, Halo Effect:

It is the case that being good looking gives a person a 'halo effect'; it causes others to perceive them as more likeable, more trustworthy, and more competent.

Good looking men are more likely to be hired for jobs than ugly men, and more likely to be promoted up the corporate hierarchy.

Of course, this is insanity since in reality the true correlation between physical attractiveness and competence or trustworthiness is *zero*. Sadly, it is a form of insanity that most humans are plagued by.

Physical attractiveness is a zero sum game in the following sense; the halo effect you get from being good looking only exists insofar as you are *better looking* than other members of your gender who are roughly your own age.

If every 30 year old man was as handsome as the 30 year old Brad Pitt, none of them would benefit from the halo effect.

It is objectively in your best interest for yourself to be good looking, while every other man or woman your own age is ugly.

For details on the 'Halo Effect', see Robert Cialdini's book [\*Influence\*](#)

## 7) Education, University Admissions:

University admissions is a zero sum game, particularly when dealing with elite universities; in order for you to be admitted to Harvard, at least one other applicant has to *not* be admitted to Harvard.

## 8) Envy and Schadenfreude, Evolutionary Purposes:

Envy is feelings of unhappiness when others succeed. Schadenfreude is feelings of happiness when others fail.

The reason we evolved to feel envy and schadenfreude is rather straightforward; in our evolutionary past, zero sum games were common and positive sum games were rare, so it was rational to be happy about others failing and unhappy about others succeeding; the failure of others marginally improved one's own odds of success, while the success of others marginally decreased one's own odds of success.

In our modern world, zero sum games take the form of college admissions, job interviews, and office politics. In caveman world (our evolutionary environment), zero sum games took the form of competition over finite resources (animals that could be hunted or farmland), and men engaging in competition for reproductive opportunities (sexual access to women).

Humans are hardwired for zero sum thinking (envy and schadenfreude), because for all of the evolutionary timeline and even today zero sum games have been ubiquitous.

## **9) Pareto Distribution:**

In statistics classes university students are taught that everything of consequence is normally distributed; everything that matters in life can be represented by a bell curve.

Tragically this is false; many of the most important things in life are pareto distributed.

'Pareto distributed' is a euphemism for *a tiny minority of people get everything, and most people get little or nothing.*

### **9A) Worldly Wealth:**

Worldly Wealth (Power, Status, Wealth) is pareto distributed.

A minority of people are powerful, high status, and rich. Most people are powerless, low status, and poor.

Historically the existence of a middle class has been exceptional; in most societies there is no middle class, only a minority who are rich and the majority who are poor.

### **9B) Male Reproductive Success:**

Male reproductive success is pareto distributed.

This is a euphemism for *women consider a minority of men (top tier men) to be very attractive, and most men to be unattractive.* Consequently, a minority of men have many offspring while most men have few or no offspring.

Male reproductive success correlates closely with Worldly Wealth; women consider high status men (who are a minority) to be attractive, and low status men (who are a majority) to be unattractive.

## **9C) Consequences of the Pareto Distribution:**

The fact that Worldly Wealth is pareto distributed has some practical consequences:

- Losers are the majority. Winners are a minority.
- To be average is to be a loser.
- Shoot for the stars or drown; there is no middle-ground.

## **10) Positive Sum Games:**

Fortunately, there are positive sum games in life; games where you can work together with others for mutual benefit.

### **10A) Wealth:**

While power and status are zero sum games, wealth is a positive sum game.

Free market capitalism can make everyone richer on an absolute basis.

Relative wealth (being richer than other people) is a zero sum game, but absolute wealth (how much material wealth you have) is a positive sum game.

### **10B) Wisdom:**

Wisdom is a positive sum game; open discourse can make everyone wiser.

**Secrets should go with you to the grave, but wisdom should not.**

If there is valuable wisdom inside your head, you have a sacred obligation to write it down and publish it before you die.