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What are the causes and consequences of belief in karma?

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ABSTRACT

The scientific study of religion has thus far overlooked the study of beliefs and practices that are centered on the notion of karma: ethical causation across one or different lifetimes. Here, we outline a set of pertinent questions about karmic beliefs and practices ripe for research, namely (1) their cultural distribution around the world, (2) their structure and content, and (3) their psychological and cultural antecedents and consequences.

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Global religious traditions centered on karmic principles, like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, make up an important portion of the world's religious diversity, with more than 1.5 billion adherents (Pew Research Center, 2015). Intuitions reminiscent of karma appear even in Western cultures shaped by the Abrahamic faiths (Callan, Sutton, Harvey, & Dawtry, 2014). However, there is surprisingly little research focused on these karmic religions and beliefs, reflecting a disproportionate reliance on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples in the behavioral sciences, and a heavy focus on the Abrahamic faiths (Norenzayan, 2016). Research into karmic beliefs would push the scientific study of religion forward to a broader understanding of theodiversity, while also informing questions central to the field.

To begin with, there are basic unknowns about the prevalence and cultural distribution of karmic beliefs across the world. A significant percentage of humanity affiliates with karmic religious traditions, but we do not know the actual prevalence of karmic beliefs in these and other populations. We also have little information about whether these beliefs vary by subculture, socioeconomic status, and life history, and to what extent individual differences and situational contexts matter.

There are also fundamental questions about the structure and content of karmic beliefs, and their psychological antecedents and effects. Theologically speaking, karma is an impersonal force that tracks moral behavior, rewarding “good” and punishing “bad” actions (Bronkhorst, 2011). However, precisely how karmic believers actually reason about this process remains an open question. Research is currently lacking about whether or not believers expect karma to monitor and enforce social norms, and more importantly, how thinking about karmic consequences affects people's actions in everyday life. Also, karma-motivated norm-following behavior may be propagated through collective costly rituals (Legare & Watson-Jones, 2015; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003; Xygalatas et al., 2013) and credible displays similar to those occurring in other prosocial religions (Norenzayan et al., 2016). Evidence of an association between karmic beliefs and prosocial behavior (e.g., measured through individuals' behavior in economic games, or group-level measures of cooperation and interpersonal trust) would suggest that karma is a form of supernatural punishment for norm violations, similar to punishment doled out by moralizing gods. This would have important implications for understanding the cultural evolutionary history of the karmic religions (White, Souza, & Prochownik, 2016).

This raises the question of *how* karma might be able to facilitate prosocial behavior. If karmic beliefs do influence prosocial behavior, we would want to know whether it is through the same cognitive mechanisms evoked by commitment to punitive gods (e.g., social surveillance and reputational concerns), and with the same directionality (e.g., punishment is more potent than rewards in regulating behavior; Johnson, 2016; Purzycki et al., 2016). Existing ethnographic observations of karmic beliefs speak to the variability in how karma is conceptualized across cultures (Keyes & Daniel, 1983), what timescales karma is believed to operate on, corresponding reincarnation beliefs (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2009; Obeyesekere, 2002), and in one psychological study, the way that perceived divine justice works in Hindu and Christian contexts (Young, Morris, Burrus, Krishnan, & Regmi, 2011). Identifying core features of karmic beliefs – through interviews, field studies, surveys, as well as through experimental approaches – would help us identify its effects on sustaining cooperation, shaping moral judgment, and regulating one's own and others' behavior.

It would be interesting to compare the correlates, key features, and consequences of karmic beliefs to better-studied, non-karmic concepts with similar attributes, such as powerful, moralizing gods who, like karma, can enforce supernatural punishment; and immanent justice or just-world beliefs, which similarly lead individuals to expect moral congruity between actions and consequences (Callan et al., 2014; Lerner, 1980). Belief in karma, gods, and immanent justice may all be manifestations of a general motive for justice or fairness (Banerjee & Bloom, 2014; Baumard & Boyer, 2013), or a tendency to ascribe purpose to life events and natural phenomena (i.e., teleological thinking; Willard & Norenzayan, 2013). The intuition that the universe intentionally enforces justice and other norms, such as ingroup loyalty, may be apparent across different cultural traditions (e.g., East Asian religions, Western Spiritual-but-not-Religious movements), and may even appear in young children. Therefore, questionnaires measuring karmic belief could assess explicit belief in “karma,” as well as less explicit endorsement of justice-related statements (e.g., “When people are met with misfortune, they have brought it upon themselves by previous behavior in their life”). Karma-like intuitions could also be assessed experimentally by, for example, measuring surprise when a norm violator goes unpunished. Similar to just-world beliefs, karmic belief may also have a dark side and be implicated in victim blaming, justification of systemic social inequality, and possibly fatalism (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Omprakash, 1989).

It would also be interesting to investigate whether people think about karma as an impersonal force, as theological teachings dictate, or whether believers have “theologically incorrect” (McCauley, 2011; Slone, 2007) intuitions about karma having agentic features, similar to personified gods, who are seen to possess personality traits (e.g., “vengeful” or “forgiving”) and mental capabilities (e.g., sight, awareness, and memory). People understand the minds of gods, and regulate their behavior under supernatural monitoring, using some of the same cognitive mechanisms involved in understanding other human minds. For example, there is evidence that individuals who struggle to understand other minds (i.e., individuals diagnosed along the autism spectrum), or think more analytically, are more likely to be disbelievers, and if they do believe, hold more abstract views of God (Norenzayan, Gervais, & Trzesniewski, 2012; Pennycook, Cheyne, Seli, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2012). Therefore, it is an interesting question whether karmic beliefs also partly depend on an individual's mentalizing abilities, and whether the attribution of mental capabilities and agentic traits to karma has specific consequences for the behavior of believers (e.g., Purzycki et al., 2016). If karma is instead represented non-agentially, then cognitive mechanisms besides mentalizing abilities could underlie karmic beliefs. For example, karma might involve intuitions about contagion, a beneficial or dangerous substance that is seen to affect individuals (Feder, 2016), thereby evoking feelings of contamination and disgust (Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DeScioli, 2013), purity-related concerns rather than reputation-maintenance concerns. Alternatively, karma might involve resource accounting, such that people see their actions creating gains or losses to a running karmic balance of moral currency.

In conclusion, understanding how believers of karmic faiths mentally represent karma, how karmic beliefs differ from other related beliefs, and how karmic beliefs are distributed across individuals

and groups, would provide insight into how karmic beliefs are constrained by human minds and shaped by culture. Further, examining people's beliefs about karma would broaden our understanding of how religious cognition can affect a wide range of psychological and behavioral phenomena, including moral judgments, moral emotions (such as guilt, shame, and empathy), cooperation, social inequality, and self-regulation, to name a few core topics. Our understanding of theodiversity (Norenzayan, 2016) will deepen from a greater focus on the currently overlooked karmic religious traditions. Perhaps these questions will even bring good karma to those who investigate them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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