Religious concepts promote cooperation

Effect seems to work regardless of a person’s beliefs.

Matt Kaplan

A belief in God may have promoted the evolution of cooperative behavior, say researchers who have shown that playing people with religious concepts creates more generous—regardless of whether they define themselves to be believers.

Notions of civic responsibility also promote cooperation, suggesting that religion might encourage altruism by inculcating an impersonal judge of behavior. "One idea that we seriously considered was that God, to those who believe in him, might function as a punishment police agent," says psychologist Alice Shariff of the University of Chicago. "The standard punishment is whether you violate civic responsibilities, and religion operates all that differently within the religious frame of reference."

To investigate, new belief in supernatural agents might influence cooperation, Shariff and her colleagues. Are nonbelievers used a world game to determine how religious concepts to their subjects.

Participants had to choose words to create a four-word sentence, dropping an extraneous word from each to create a grammatical four-word sentence. For example, "felt the wurde spill" that "would become" "felt the spill," and "dust don’t do" could become "dust don’t do." A control group understood "dust don’t do" as an nonsensical.

Share and share alike

After the exercise, the participants played an economic (department game. Each player was given $10 to share with an anonymous recipient.

Participants paired with religious concepts gave their partner an average of $5.32, as compared with only $4.50 in the control group. But those who declared themselves religious before the study never showed kinship ties and were then less generous.

Common functions

"The research is really groundbreaking," says sociologist James Averett at Arizona State University. "The study shows people who feel spiritually connected tend to behave more cooperatively."

But why does religious affiliation make people more cooperative? "We think it's unclear," says Cooper. "The fact that religious institutions also produce cooperative behavior gives us some confidence."

Religious beliefs, such as the idea that religious institutions have a function or an effect in common, is generally accepted.

Whether religious and civic responsibilities are equally effective at the cooperation remains to be seen. "We can’t compare the relative strengths of religious and civic, or does that directly translate to real-world situations," says Cooper. "What can we say is that both concepts have substantial effects on prosocial behavior."

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