

Behavioral Data, Cultural Group Selection, and Genetics

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Kasser et al. pose an important and often unad-
dressed question: how do different institutional forms,
or economic systems, shape the ideas, values, beliefs,
motivations, and practices of their members or partic-
ipants (also see Bowles, 1998). While I applaud their
efforts in opening up this line, I offer two concerns.
First, Kasser et al. neglected two large-scale compara-
tive projects that directly test their principle hypoth-
eses and arrive at quite different conclusions. Second,
much of their evidence involves relationships among
variables drawn from samples within one ACC pop-
ulations, yet their hypotheses seem to demand compar-
isons among populations with differing exposure to
ACC institutions. This may have resulted in faulty
causal inferences.

The authors hypothesize that ACC institutions, col-
lectively forming the capitalist economic system, favor
the transmission of cultural representations that pro-
motes self-interest, competition, and materialism,
while suppressing the acquisition of representations
related to altruism, fairness, cooperation and numer-
ous aspects of psychological well-being. In my view,
the proper test of such hypotheses would involve a sys-
tematic comparative study, preferably using behavioral
measures of self-interest, fairness, etc., from popula-
tions with differing degrees of exposure to ACC in-
stitutions. It happens that my colleagues and I, over
the last decade, have run two such projects, deploy-
ing behavioral experiments among 15 diverse popu-
lations drawn from some of the remotest corners of
the globe (Henrich, 2000; Henrich et al., 2004; Hen-
rich et al., 2005; Henrich et al., 2001; Henrich et
al., 2006). Our results contradict the authors' central
claims. In dictator, ultimatum, third party punishment
and public goods games, we used actual allocation
decisions among anonymous members of these com-
munities to measure altruism, fairness, willingness to
punish unfairness, and cooperation. These decisions
had real financial consequences and involved non-
trivial sums of real money—we typically put one-day's
wage on the line (although wage labor was rare or
non-existent in several of our societies). With regard
to the question at hand, the findings are unambigu-
ous: Our American samples are among the most equi-
tably minded, cooperative, and altruistic people across

our 15 populations. This finding was replicated in
our second project, even after several methodological
adjustments.

I suspect that the difference between our results
and Kasser et al.'s arises from the fact that we mea-
sured behavior, with real costs and benefits, while much
of their data arises from people's rhetoric—their talk
about "values" or justifications, etc. (below I will also
outline some concerns about their use of behavioral
data). Cultural transmission often operates on two (at
least) separate channels: (1) what people do (with in-
ferences about underlying motivations from observa-
tions), and (2) what they say (or how they explain
what they do). Evidence for this comes from work
done predominately in the 1960's and 1970's on al-
truism and social learning in psychology. Kids learn
what *to do*—as in how altruistic to be in charitable
donations—by observing the altruistic or selfish ac-
tions of models. However, they learn what to say, or
how to answer a question about motivations, values,
or goals, by listening to how other people answer such
questions (Bryan, Redfield, and Mader, 1971; James H.
Bryan and Nancy H. Walbek, 1970; James H. Bryan
and Nancy Hodges Walbek, 1970). Much of the ACC
evidence may be about the rhetoric of the ACC, not the
behavior or the actual underlying motivational prefer-
ences. Having lived two years of my life as an ethnog-
rapher in small-scale subsistence-oriented societies in
South America and Oceania, it is clear to me that even
when Americans are being altruists, they like to justify
themselves with appeals to self-interest. The "norm
of self-interest" is actually a norm of self-interested
rhetoric.

Our experimental results are consistent with much
theory in cultural evolutionary anthropology (Richer-
son and Boyd 2000). In considering ACC institutions,
and capitalistic societies, I think Kasser et al. may have
missed a crucial dynamic. Competition among institu-
tions, societies, and organizations favors those forms
that are best able to promote cooperation, stability (fair-
ness), and trust among their members. Over the long
run, and on average, these institutions, etc. will out-
compete those who foster selfishness, disloyalty, and
distrust among their members. What seems to occur
most often is that successful cooperative institutions,

115 organizations, and societies are preferentially imitated
 by less successful ones, and those aspects that favor *a*
certain kind of cooperation, fairness, and trust spread
 (Henrich 2004). Such processes can help explain our
 behavioral data and differences in economic produc-
 120 tion. Of course, this is no Panglossian prescription,
 as competition among groups may also favor greater
 commitments to work, money, consumption, etc. for
 the same reasons. And, this *certain kind of prosocial-*
ity is not the same as the trust, loyalty, and devotion to
 clan, tribe, village, and extended kinship organiza-
 tions that has characterized much of human history, and re-
 mains central to social life in many places. Whether
 these effects are judged “costs” and end up reducing
 125 total happiness is certainly possible (likely even), and
 worthy of exploration.

Several pieces of evidence cited by Kasser et al.
 involve correlations between things like “materialis-
 tic values” and “generosity”, based on samples taken
 130 within the U.S. Such evidence, which is scattered
 throughout the paper, ignore the fact that often substan-
 tial amounts of the variance in such measures are ac-
 counted for by genetic variation among subjects within
 populations (Plomin, Defries, and McLearn 2000). The
 correlation between materialistic values and lack of
 135 generosity, for example, might occur because the same
 genes that influence the acquisition of materialistic val-
 ues also influence generosity. This seems especially
 likely since most Americans, and in particular most
 140 university students, experience similar degrees of the
 ACC. Even if one were to show that individuals who
 had more contact with ACC institutions had more ma-
 terialistic values and showed less generosity, the cor-
 relations could still be caused by the fact that the same
 145 underlying genetic variation influences all three. Thus,
 the authors are using within-group correlations to sup-
 port arguments of causality for differences between
 groups. Between-group differences, however, are of-
 ten caused by quite difference factors than with-group
 150 differences. Empirically, evidence supporting the au-
 thors’ hypotheses will either need to control for genetic
 variation among individuals within groups, or compare
 populations with differing exposure to the ACC.

Note

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