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Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Fu, Y. and Viera, G. (2023) Drinking and feasting are perceived as facilitating cooperation. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 46. e305. ISSN: 0140-525X

<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x23000407>

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Drinking and Feasting Are Perceived as Facilitating Cooperation

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Abstract

We argue that the occurrence of puritanical norms cannot simply be explained by appealing to the need for cooperation. Anthropological and archaeological studies suggest that across history and cultures self-indulgent behaviours, such as excessive drinking, eating, and feasting, have been used to enhance cooperation by enforcing social and group identities.

Main Text

According to Fitouchi, André, and Baumard, moral cognition is grounded in a need for cooperation. They argue that people believe that engaging in self-indulgent behaviours, such as drinking, dancing, and feasting, amplifies the motivational force of short-term cravings, leading to a lack of self-control, which hinders cooperation. As a result, puritanical norms, which prohibit such self-indulgent, yet apparently harmless, behaviours, arise out of a need to preserve self-control which is essential for cooperation.

We argue that the relationship between puritanical norms and cooperation is more complicated than the target article claims. Archaeological and anthropological studies provide evidence that collective self-indulgent behaviours, such as drinking, dancing, and feasting, have played a role in solidifying social and group identities, which have ultimately promoted cooperation in communities across human history and culture. As a result, the existence of puritanical norms cannot be explained simply by the need for cooperation, since behaviours that violate such norms can help, rather than hinder, cooperation.

To see this, consider studies of communal drinking in ancient China. During the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (ca. 8000-1200 B.C.), China underwent rapid population growth due to the emergence of settled communities which engaged in the domestication of plants and animals. In Neolithic Northern China, unpredictable fluctuations in climate and rainfall directly affected the agricultural and economic activities that resulted from attempts to farm arid land (Zhang et al., 2018). As a result, cooperation was vital to ensuring an adequate food supply against the background of rapid population growth and environmental pressures. If Fitouchi et al. were correct, then Ancient China would have been a culture in which puritanical norms would have likely emerged to preserve precious resources and facilitate cooperation. However, evidence shows that these communities spent time and effort to take part in drinking and feasting, treating such collective self-indulgent behaviours as a crucial way of building social connections to further communal goals (Feng et al., 2021; He et al., 2021; Liu, 2021; Liu et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019).

Consider first the development of community infrastructure during the mid-Yangshao period (c.a. 4000-3500 B.C.) (see Liu, 2021). During this period, with population growth there was a shift in the organisation of settlements. Public houses, located in village centres, increased in size and smaller family dwellings were built to surround these public centres. As part of these village centres, large communal hearths were constructed for communal cooking. Large, decorated, amphorae for the sharing of alcohol were also located in these centres. During this period, as populations grew there was a substantial investment of time and resources for creating the means for social interactions centred around drinking and feasting.

Why might these cultural practices have emerged? One explanation is that they helped to solidify relationships within the group, encourage the sharing of goods, and solidify group identity. Different

stories can be told for how this might work, yet we can see these activities helping to establish tribal boundaries or in-group member status, thereby directly facilitating cooperation between those that indulge as part of the ritual.

These behaviours aren't unique to Ancient China either. We see evidence for the role of feasting and drinking in the promotion of cooperation in a number of cultures, e.g., Andean Peru (Williams & Nash, 2021), Mesopotamia (Paulette, 2021), and Egypt (Wang et al., 2021) (for a review see Dietler, 2006). Similar practices can also be found in modern day rural Southwest China, where individuals drink alcohol from a communal *zajiu* vessel as part of the *guozhuang* ritual dance (Li, 2011; Liu, 2021). This activity has the explicit goal of promoting group solidarity.

Turning to Latin America, Spier (1995) found evidence speaking directly to the folk belief that Fitouchi et al. attempt to establish. In the Peruvian parish of Zurite, Andean women opposed the conversion of their husbands to Protestantism because the resulting abstinence, due to puritanical norms, would eliminate a means of developing connections across households, and ultimately would destroy mutual aid networks. Once again, there is a belief that anti-puritan behaviours promote cooperation, rather than hinder it.

To this day, drinking is often considered an important catalyst for social bonding which promotes cooperation. In Western cultures this is often part of workplace 'pub cultures' in which partaking in these activities is taken as evidence of being a 'team player' and abstaining is cause for a lack of trust. Similar phenomena can be found across the world, such as in modern day Korea, the United Kingdom, Japan, China, Australia, and numerous other countries (Schweitzer & Kerr, 2000). Partaking in these collective indulgent activities is taken to be an indicator of trustworthiness, and not as an indicator of a lack of self-control.

Fitouchi et al.'s account neglects a rich literature and oversimplifies the functions of puritanical norms and self-indulgent behaviours in complex social practice. Throughout human history, folk psychological beliefs about alcohol consumption are more complex than Fitouchi et al. claim. Self-indulgent behaviours such as drinking and feasting are not always perceived as hindering cooperation. Rather, studies have shown that people treat self-indulgent behaviours as a crucial way of facilitating cooperation. From this we see how their account fails to explain why puritanical norms on prohibiting self-indulgent behaviours only exist in some societies while other communities promote such behaviours. It also suggests that something other than the simple need for cooperation has brought about puritanical norms in certain regions.

12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS STATEMENT

None

13. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

14. FUNDING STATEMENT

None

15. ALPHABETICAL REFERENCE LIST (APA STANDARD)

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