How Kinship Influences Cooperation in Yasawa, Fiji

Main research findings

There are two main dimensions that describe how kinship directs interpersonal relations: in the first dimension, kin terms may promote more emotional closeness and respect. Relationships high on this respect/closeness dimension are one’s immediate family, people that Yasawans rely on most for help and support. For example, cross-cousins are often ideal marriage partners and are friends who are generally treated more informally.

The second dimension of joking/authority tracks relationships that are less respected. Respect in Yasawa generally centers on obedience, quietness, and humility. Within the Yasawan kinship hierarchy, higher rank entails more respect. For example, a high-ranking, highly respected relative is free to joke around with lower ranking relatives, but a lower ranking relative should not be as nonchalant with the respected relative (study 1).

Through an economic game played by Yasawans individually or in pairs, it was found that individual players tend to select more generous options for more closely related partners. Also, pairs of players coordinated their actions more productively, if they were part of the same kinship norm, as compared to being genetically related. Overall, while genetic relatedness may boost generosity, kinship norms facilitate more productive coordinated action even when communication is not possible (study 2).

If everyone knows their role within a social system, then people can spend less time talking and more time doing. In Yasawa, the expectations based on kin hierarchy provide just such a social structure.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Kin relations in Yasawa (and Fiji in general) overlap with the ego substantially, especially for kin terms high on the closeness/respect dimension. This overlapping self across family ties is both a fundamental part of being Fijian and a fundamental barrier to success in Western, economic market driven interactions.

Our data offers a view on how these aspects of relationships might tacitly shift decisions, providing a more valid model of behavior than if kinship was explicitly evoked. Because both kinship and genealogic relatedness are constantly present but may not be explicitly referenced, most cooperative tasks will require this kind of tacit kinship awareness.

The ways that kin psychology extend feelings of familial interconnectedness may itself be a building block to other norm systems like economic markets and resource trade; religious systems; and secular governments that support ever expanding, increasingly complex societies.