

How Kinship Influences Cooperation in Yasawa, Fiji



RESEARCH

‘Kin and Kinship Psychology both influence cooperative coordination in Yasawa, Fiji’

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Background

Genes shared through common ancestry are among the oldest social bonds. Despite these ancient roots, humans often adopt the psychology of genetic relatedness and extend it to genetically unrelated others, for example through culturally-acquired kinship systems.

These kinship norms are not bound to genetic relatives: on one hand they can extend to include non-genetic relatives, and on the other hand they can be inhibited toward actual genetic relatives.

These relationships beyond genetic similarities are encompassed especially in smaller-scale societies throughout the Pacific.

Through an economic coordination game we investigate how genetic relatedness and kinship norms might support or oppose each other within the kin network in Yasawa, Fiji. Traditional Fijian village life centers around a highly-structured, clan-based kinship system, with a hereditary chief. Maintaining one’s place within this hierarchy through proper observance of kin obligations is central to the definition of being a good Fijian.

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 genealogical 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.