

How religious beliefs affect attitudes toward others: a study in Yasawa, Fiji



RESEARCH

'Supernatural punishment, in-group biases and material insecurity: experiments and ethnography from Yasawa, Fiji'

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Published in *Religion Brain and Behavior*, 6(1), 34-55.

Background

Research suggests belief in divine punishment reinforces pro-social behaviour. Beliefs in a universal God or brotherhood may reduce bias favouring one's own group and local deities might be seen as protecting local wellbeing.

Dr Rita McNamara, a Fellow of the Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research at Victoria University of Wellington, has explored how beliefs affect favouritism in Yasawa, Fiji. She wanted to find out if Christian or indigenous beliefs discouraged local favouritism and what role material security might play.

In Yasawa Island, locals believe in both a 'bible God' and ancestor deities. Food sources are traditional with some scarcity.

The researchers surveyed belief in punishment by a bible God, ancestor gods, or secular police. A game measured in-group favouritism, allocating coins to cups for locals or anonymous strangers in another village. Survey forms then measured participants' perceived material security. The coins were later given as allocated.

Main research findings

For participants who were most confident in their material security, the outcomes were similar. They tended to allocate the coins with little bias; belief in supernatural punishment reduced local favouritism for bible God believers and ancestor spirit believers.

For participants who were more worried about having food or money in the future, there was a difference. When local deity believers expected hardship, they appeared to show more favouritism to locals. There was no clear pattern for bible God believers with high material insecurity.

Yasawan cultural norms require cooperation to fish and grow food, and needs-based gifting to those in the community who are known to be experiencing hardship. People with relative wealth are obliged to contribute, and a Yasawan in poverty can expect a degree of support. These norms are seen as vital for leading a good life free from sickness and misfortunes.

Both traditional and Christian beliefs encouraged participants to allocate resources to strangers when their survival needs were assured, but when times are tight Fijian norms favour the family. This did not imply that Fijians are selfish (for example, a mother puts on her oxygen mask before her child's.)

While traditional ancestral deities were seen as more in-group focused, belief in them still promoted generosity toward strangers when basic material security was met. This was in line with traditional obligations to care for others and give them their dues or needs.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

The complex relationship between beliefs, material insecurity and behaviour toward strangers could be of relevance for future research in New Zealand.

Traditional Māori culture has similarities with Yasawans.' Yasawan obligatory needs-based gifting is associated with health. This includes generosity to strangers, especially those in need. In Western society, resource flow is more competitive and status-based. Mapping deity characteristics, traditional resource allocation, and generosity (manaaki) may have implications for Māori health and understanding the Treaty of Waitangi.

In-group bias could be used to study attitudes to accepting more refugees and whether those opposed have greater or less material security.