A HUNGER FOR JUSTICE?

FOOD-STRESS AND MORAL COGNITION IN A RURAL ETHIOPIAN POPULATION

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SUMMARY

This poster describes a study of the influence of hunger on moral cognition.

Participants were rural Ethiopians, repeat-tested during the “hungry season” and again following harvest. Dependent variables included:

- Moral “sphere of interest”: moral concern about ingroups versus outgroups
- Preferences for resource distribution from rich to poor
- Attritions of responsibility to those who are poor.

Results demonstrate a reduced “sphere of moral concern” during the hungry season, with reduced moral interest in the welfare of strangers. There was little evidence of altered redistribution preferences, although the poor were more likely to be seen as responsible for their situation during the hungry season, and this effect was lead by wealthier participants.

This study is a pilot for a larger project (n=600), for which funding has been secured. Comments and advice welcomed, especially from interested potential collaborators.

BACKGROUND

Key question:

Why do moral and political attitudes vary?

Moral attitudes vary substantially, between societies, between individuals, and over time (1,2). People vary in their ideals about distributive justice, and in their sphere of moral concern – ranging from self and family only to friends, acquaintances, fellow humans and other species (2, 3). In Western countries during the last century, preferences for redistribution declined, but expressed concern for the welfare of outgroups increased (4). Food security increased during this period (5), but whether these facts are causally-related is unclear.

Theory:

Hunger as a heuristic for estimating scarcity

Most of the literature on distributive justice is framed in terms of money, but moral norms likely emerged in human societies prior to the use of exchange currencies (6). Ancestrally, an individual’s experience of hunger would have been a reliable and relevant indicator of resource scarcity, and mechanisms that calibrate moral attitudes to hunger could therefore have been selected for. In modern humans, food-stress predicts variation in dimensions of affect and hormonal profile that have been shown to influence moral cognition (7-16). There are hence a number of plausible mechanisms via which hunger and distributive morality could be linked.

Morality as a strategic response to scarcity

Consistent with the above, it has been hypothesized that aspects of moral ideology which influence access to resources should be altered by hunger (17). One might expect, for example, that moral attitudes towards outgroups would be altered during times of hunger, as coalitional behavior may be important for resource defense (3, 18, 19). Prior research has documented an effect of food scarcity on intergroup conflict (18,19), although the psychologi cal processes that mediate the relationship remain unclear (3).

Similarly, one might expect that attitudes toward equality and resource distribution would be altered by hunger; for example, that hunger would strengthen preferences for wealth redistribution and/or the alignment between one’s own wealth and one’s distribution preferences (17). Research to date, while limited, is consistent with this proposal; political preferences are more strongly aligned with wealth in poorer, less food-secure environments (20), while preferences for economic redistribution – but also selfishness – are increased by experimental manipulation of acute hunger (17).

The current project:

This project builds on existing research by extending tests to individuals who are undergoing chronic, biologically significant, levels of hunger. This level of hunger is of greater selective importance than that studied previously, and of greater potential relevance to historical, society-wide shifts in moral and political attitudes.

Predictions

Food-stress will be associated with:

- A shrinking of the moral “sphere”, with greater emphasis on one’s ingroup
- An increase in preference for redistribution of wealth
- A stronger relationship between one’s moral attitudes and one’s wealth status

REFERENCES


RESULTS

1. Moral “sphere of interest”: proportion of recalled moral transgressions pertaining to known individuals (versus strangers), during the hungry season and the harvest season.

During the transition from hungry season to harvest season, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of recalled events that related to known individuals (McNemar’s test: n=36, p<0.000).

However, amount of land owned was marginally correlated with changes in preferences across seasons, such that the rich redistributed less, and the poor more, during the hungry season (r=0.268, p<.057, one-tail).

2a. Preferences for redistribution: number of bags of coffee (out of ten) distributed from the “rich” farmer to the “poor” farmer, during each season. A transfer of 5 bags indicates a preference for absolute equality.

The proportion of people who viewed the poor farmer as “foolish” was significantly higher in the hungry season than in the harvest season (McNemar’s test: n=36, p<.02). Judgments of foolishness were limited almost exclusively to the hungry season.

2b. Attributions of responsibility: proportion who viewed the poor farmer as “foolish” (versus “just unlucky”), during each season.

Thus, negative appraisals of the poor seemed to be driven by the reactions of the rich during times of scarcity.