Norm Enforcement among the Ju/'hoansi Bushmen

A Case of Strong Reciprocity?

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The concept of cooperative communities that enforce norm conformity through reward, as well as shaming, ridicule, and ostracism, has been central to anthropology since the work of Durkheim. Prevailing approaches from evolutionary theory explain the willingness to exert sanctions to enforce norms as self-interested behavior, while recent experimental studies suggest that altruistic rewarding and punishing—"strong reciprocity"—play an important role in promoting cooperation. This paper will use data from 308 conversations among the Ju/'hoansi (!Kung) Bushmen (a) to examine the dynamics of norm enforcement, (b) to evaluate the costs of punishment in a forager society and understand how they are reduced, and (c) to determine whether hypotheses that center on individual self-interest provide sufficient explanations for bearing the costs of norm enforcement, or whether there is evidence for strong reciprocity.

KEY WORDS: Altruism; Ju/'hoansi Bushmen (San); Norm regulation; Punishment; Strong reciprocity

The high level of altruistic cooperation that is found in many human societies despite relatively low levels of genetic relatedness has invited numerous explanatory models. Of these, perhaps the most widely accepted has been reciprocal altruism in which one partner in a dyad rewards or punishing a partner on a tit-for-tat basis (Axelrod and Hamilton 1981; Trivers 1971). While indeed daily life in human societies is punctuated by tit-for-tat calculations, complaints, and cutoffs, there is a good deal of altruistic cooperation that is not so maintained.
Recently, alternate models to account for certain forms of cooperation have been proposed; important among them is strong reciprocity (Bowles and Gintis 2004; Fehr and Fischbacher 2003a, 2003b; Fehr and Gachter 2000; Gintis 2000). Strong reciprocity occurs when individuals are willing “to sacrifice resources for rewarding fair and punishing unfair behavior, even if this is costly and provides neither present nor future rewards for the reciprocator” (Fehr, Fischbacher, and Gachter 2002:3). Strong reciprocity requires high levels of monitoring within the group and subsequent action to bring individual behavior in line through reward and punishment. Numerous economic experiments in western and non-western societies have indicated that people behave altruistically by forfeiting personal economic gain in order to punish (Fehr and Gachter 2000; Fehr et al. 2002; Gintis et al. 2003; Henrich et al. 2003; Turillo et al. 2002).

The concept of communities with a “collective conscience” that control members through such mechanisms as shaming, ridicule, and ostracism has been central to anthropology since the work of Durkheim (1933). As ethnographers have noted, leveling transgressors provides the spice of life in foraging societies that have no formalized leadership (Boehm 1999; Briggs 1970; Lee 1979; Silberbauer 1981a, 1981b; Turnbull 1965; Wiessner 1996; Woodburn 1982). However, few systematic studies have been carried out to investigate the dynamics of norm enforcement. Here I will use data from 308 conversations among the Ju/'hoansi (!Kung) Bushmen of northwest Botswana (Howell 2000; Lee 1979; Lee and Devore 1968, 1976; Marshall 1976; Shostak 1981; Wilmsen 1989a) to examine norm enforcement through reward and punishment.

My objectives are threefold: The first is to look at the dynamics of punishment among the Ju/'hoansi:

a. What are the respective roles of reward and punishment in norm enforcement?
b. Which behaviors elicit punishment by individuals and by groups?
c. Who punishes whom?
d. What different forms of punishment are applied, and what are their outcomes?

My second objective is to evaluate the costs of punishment in a forager society and look at how they are reduced. A number of authors have argued convincingly that reward and punishment are low-cost behaviors that play important roles in the creation and maintenance of diverse primary behaviors in a cultural system, such as resource acquisition, sharing, or defense (Boyd and Richerson 1992; Boyd and Henrich 2001; Sober and Wilson 1998). Are reward and punishment indeed low-cost among the Ju/'hoansi? If so, how are these costs reduced? If not, my third objective is to see if the Ju/'hoansi data provide evidence for strong reciprocity in punishment, or whether other hypotheses that center on individual self-interest provide sufficient explanations.