

**Evolution of Fairness:
Cultural Variability**

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J. HENRICH *ET AL.* ("Markets, religion, community size, and the evolution of fairness and punishment," *Research Articles*, 19 March, p. 1480) have shown that market integration and participation in world religion covary with fairness. The authors suggest that their results support cultural evolution theories and contradict the hypothesis that successful social interactions in large-scale societies arise to a large extent from an evolved psychology. We believe that their conclusion is based on too simple a view of human morality. Much research in behavioral economics supports the idea that humans have a sense of fairness that aims to equilibrate exchanges among individuals. In economic games where money needs to be distributed, for instance, people carefully respect everyone's rights over the stake: If the common good is produced by a single person, she is granted more rights over the money (1, 2); similarly, the most productive partner during the joint production phase is favored (3, 4).

Economic games are notoriously underdetermined: Participants are given a lump of money to distribute with no information as to where it comes from, who owned it in the first place, who the receiver is, and so on. As the authors have noted in previous papers (5), participants have no choice but to fill this informational gap by drawing on their everyday life experience. Because participants in more market-integrated societies have more experience in sharing goods and investing with others, they spontaneously attribute more rights to the other participant and consequently allow her more money (6).

This explanation fits better with the economic literature on institutions and cooperation. Contrary to what the authors suggest, Nobel Prize-winning economists Douglas North (7) and Elinor Ostrom (8) have shown that cultural variability in cooperation is not explained by different norms but rather by different systems of incentives (reward and penalties) organized by local communities or States. Thus, an innate preference for fairness is fully compatible with Henrich *et al.*'s results. It is also theoretically more parsimonious and supported by more empirical evidence.

References

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