

Cognitive Anthropology, Religion, and Atheism



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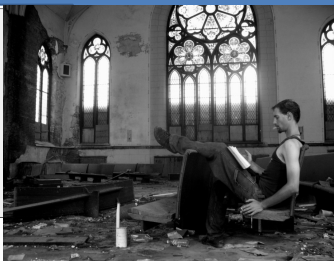
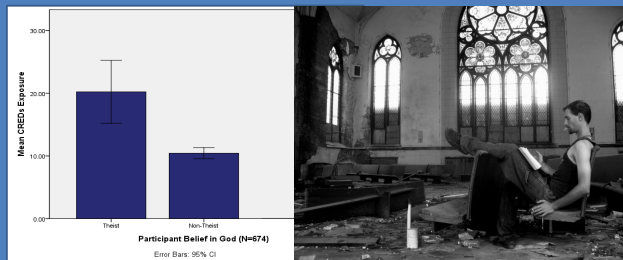
I am interested in both the social and cognitive anthropology of religion, atheism, and intergroup relations. My doctoral research yielded both a descriptive and explanatory account of atheism in the contemporary West, which I am writing up as a monograph. At present, I am collaborating with anthropologists and psychologists on a number of projects having to do with religion's impact on cohesion and identity and continuing my work on atheism. These projects are funded by the ESRC, SSSHRC, and the John Templeton Foundation. Below is a selection of projects I am working on with a number of collaborators.

Towards a Cognitive Anthropology of Atheism

'Atheism' has many meanings. I focus on two phenomena: non-theism (a lack of belief in the existence of non-physical agents) and anti-religion (an active moral opposition to religion) (Lanman in press).

I continue to investigate the hypothesis that one of the most important factors determining whether an individual comes to explicitly believe in the existence of non-physical agents is witnessing sufficient Credibility-Enhancing Displays (CREDs) concerning these agents (Henrich 2009; Lanman 2012). CREDs are actions that are consistent with expressed beliefs and costly for an individual to perform if they believe something different than what they express symbolically.

Initial survey research, pictured below, asked 674 theists and non-theists a series of questions regarding their exposure to CREDs and suggests that, on average, theists receive double the CREDs exposure as non-theists. I continue to collaboratively develop this line of research, improving the CREDs survey and seeking to develop religion-specific CREDs surveys. I am interested in collaborating with specialists in particular religious traditions in this effort.



Henrich, J. (2009) The evolution of costly displays, cooperation, and religion: Credibility enhancing displays and their implications for cultural evolution. *Evolution and Human Behaviour*, 30, 244-260

Lanman, J. (in press). Atheism and Cognitive Science. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lanman, J. (2012). "The Importance of Religious Displays for Belief Acquisition and Secularization." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27: 49-65.

The Effects of Religious Primes on Intergroup Relations in Northern Ireland

As a co-investigator on the Evolution of Religion and Morality project, I am collaborating with Joe Henrich, Ara Norenzayan, Ben Purzycki, and others to test hypotheses concerning the effects of different religious primes (Big Gods, local gods, and secular institutions) on cooperation.

Northern Ireland, with its history of conflict between the largely Catholic Nationalists and the largely Protestant Loyalists, provides an intriguing setting for such studies. While most Nationalists and Loyalists identify as Christian, it is unclear whether being primed with the idea of God would encourage prosociality only within the participant's own community (Nationalist or Loyalist) or prosociality across communities. Does religious belief in Northern Ireland, as it exists in the minds of most people, serve the interests of inter-communal reconciliation or inter-communal conflict?

An initial study this summer will investigate how playing an economic game in a religious vs. non-religious environment affects cooperation both within and across communities.

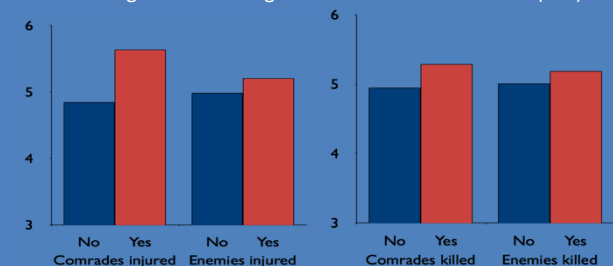


Ritual and Social Cohesion



As part of the Ritual, Community, and Conflict project (based in Oxford), I am collaborating with Harvey Whitehouse, Bill Swann, Ryan McKay, and others to test the hypothesis that sharing dysphoric experiences produces a powerful social bond. This bond has been called 'fusion' by Bill Swann and 'psychological kinship' by Lanman and Whitehouse (in prep). Fusion entails a visceral sense of oneness and reciprocal strength with other individuals or a social category (Swann et al. 2012).

Several studies are underway. Some initial supporting evidence, pictured below, comes from a survey of Vietnam Veterans in the US. Experiencing the highly dysphoric event of witnessing comrades being wounded or killed increases levels of fusion with other Vietnam Veterans ($p=.02-.04$), while witnessing enemies being wounded or killed does not (n.s.).



Lanman, J. and Whitehouse, H. (in prep). Rites of Terror and the Making of Kin. To be submitted to *Current Anthropology*.

Swann, W. B., Jr., Jetten, J., Gómez, Á., Whitehouse, H., & Bastian, B. (2012). When group membership gets personal: A theory of identity fusion. *Psychological Review*, 119, 441-456.