

TABOOS AND THEIR ROLE IN FOSTERING COOPERATION

Taboos are extremely strong social norms that define forbidden behaviours. Over millennia, cultures around the world have developed their own specific taboos. They have supported them with beliefs that those who violate them attract misfortune, play with black magic, and bring upon themselves the wrath of gods or spirits. Although when we hear of taboos, we tend to imagine distant and foreign cultures, our social life is permeated with them. Some of the taboos are sometimes relatively sensitive, such as those related to tattooing one's own body. Although younger generations are now familiar with the practice, just mentioning a new tattoo at grandma's dinner party is enough to feel that this taboo still has power. Some are so strong and widespread that it is hard to imagine that they will one day disappear - the taboo of eating human flesh, for example. For decades, scientists have tried to explain the role that taboos play in human societies. It was suspected that they were not just irrational beliefs and had a function. They were seen as ways to cope with stress, ways to control natural resources or methods to avoid harmful substances. Taboos, however, are so intertwined with social dynamics that it is impossible to overlook one potential function that has not yet been explored. Individuals who break taboos may cause the contempt of their group members. They may expose themselves to ostracism and even physical violence. Why do people react to taboo violations in this way?

We suspect the answer is related to cooperation. Societies maintain taboos because they help them identify people who might be valuable partners in joint ventures. "If you are violating our sacred prohibitions, it may mean that you lack self-control and respect for your community. It is also possible that you have stopped identifying with us and want to harm us somehow. However, if you respect our taboos, I feel that we share similar values, and I can trust you."

The aim of the project is to verify whether people actually treat taboos as a proxy for who can be a valuable ally and who cannot. We will conduct three studies looking at how people react to people who violate taboos. The first study will be a rigorous laboratory study. We will conduct an experiment in which we will verify what reactions people have towards a person who breaks a taboo. It will allow us to look in detail at different aspects of taboos and the social contexts in which taboo violators are particularly condemned. In the second study, we will launch an international research network to study thousands of people from dozens of countries around the world. Through this project, we will learn the detailed cultural determinants that make some societies more attached to their taboos and more likely to rely on them to select allies. This will be the largest study of taboos in history, through which we will create a powerful team of experts and lay the groundwork for the next large-scale cultural research. In the third study, we will undertake two research expeditions to hard-to-reach populations living in New Guinea and Kashmir. These populations are non-industrialised, and this makes data from such populations extremely valuable from a research perspective. On the one hand, we will be able to verify our hypotheses in populations for whom the adherence to taboos is a fundamental part of everyday lifestyle, and on the other hand, we will have the opportunity to develop the research methods of experimental anthropology, which is still a very young field of science.

We expect our research programme to provide the first such comprehensive data on the hitherto unexplored function of taboos. We have taken up this topic because our previous research experience allows us to conduct several high-quality studies that can provide many explanations in the never-ending scientific debate on the functions of taboos. In addition, we believe that this topic is of great social relevance today. Our world is becoming increasingly complex, and more and more cultures are beginning to intersect. This raises the threat of tensions and the possibility of conflicts. A better understanding of such fundamental cultural norms as taboos can push us in a different direction - towards cooperation and mutual understanding.