

# **MU anthropologist develops new approach to explain religious behavior**

September 9 2008

---

Without a way to measure religious beliefs, anthropologists have had difficulty studying religion. Now, two anthropologists from the University of Missouri and Arizona State University have developed a new approach to study religion by focusing on verbal communication, an identifiable behavior, instead of speculating about alleged beliefs in the supernatural that cannot actually be identified.

"Instead of studying religion by trying to measure unidentifiable beliefs in the supernatural, we looked at identifiable and observable behavior - the behavior of people communicating acceptance of supernatural claims," said Craig T. Palmer, associate professor of anthropology in the MU College of Arts and Science.

"We noticed that communicating acceptance of a supernatural claim tends to promote cooperative social relationships. This communication demonstrates a willingness to accept, without skepticism, the influence of the speaker in a way similar to a child's acceptance of the influence of a parent."

Palmer and Lyle B. Steadman, emeritus professor of human evolution and social change at Arizona State University, explored the supernatural claims in different forms of religion, including ancestor worship; totemism, the claim of kinship between people and a species or other object that serves as the emblem of a common ancestor; and shamanism, the claim that traditional religious leaders in kinship-based societies could communicate with their dead ancestors. They found that the

clearest identifiable effect of religious behavior is the promotion of cooperative family-like social relationships, which include parent/child-like relationships between the individuals making and accepting the supernatural claims and sibling-like relationships among co-acceptors of those claims.

"Almost every religion in the world, including all tribal religions, use family kinship terms such as father, mother, brother, sister and child for fellow members," Steadman said. "They do this to encourage the kind of behavior found normally in families - where the most intense social relationships occur. Once people realize that observing the behavior of people communicating acceptance of supernatural claims is how we actually identify religious behavior and religion, we can then propose explanations and hypotheses to account for why people have engaged in religious behavior in all known cultures."

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: MU anthropologist develops new approach to explain religious behavior (2008, September 9) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-09-mu-anthropologist-approach-religious-behavior.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--