PREPRINT

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Historical myths as commitment devices

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Abstract

Sijilmassi and colleagues claim that historical myths are technologies of recruitment that mimic cues of fitness interdependence. Paradoxically, they also claim that people are vigilant and that these myths might not and do not have to convince others which raises questions about how these myths become culturally successful. Thinking about historical myths as commitment devices helps overcome this paradox.

Main text

Sijilmassi and colleagues (2024) provide a novel account for the structure and function of historical myths. They argue that historical myths suggest a long cooperative history and thereby tap into cognitive mechanisms that track cues of fitness interdependence. By mimicking such cues historical myths function as technologies for coalitional recruitment, i.e., to convince others to opt for the coalition the myth supports. Historical myths thus owe their shape and cultural success to typical features of our mental architecture.

The explanation for the structure of historical myths is quite convincing and thus constitutes a prime example of cultural attraction, in which micro-scale cognitive and communicative processes help explain large-scale cultural phenomena (Scott-Phillips, Blancke, & Heintz, 2018; Sperber, 1996). The proposed function, however, raises several questions. First, the authors claim that historical myths are unlikely to trigger kinship detecting mechanisms into falsely assuming that coalition members are genetically related.

However, they also suggest that historical myths play into our detecting mechanisms for fitness relatedness. But if people are not gullible, as the authors acknowledge (see also Mercier, 2020), then why would the audience alter their coalitional preferences if the coalition does not serve their interests? Second, the authors claim – quite paradoxically – that myths do not have to be successful as recruitment tools, but the producers of the myths only have to believe that they are. But if myths are ineffective then why would producers transmit them in the first place? Furthermore, if the audience's coalitional preferences remain unaffected by historical myths, then why would they adopt and transmit them in their own turn? In other words, how could historical myths travel along and survive social causal cognitive chains and become cultural (Sperber, 2001)?

I suggest we can answer these questions by reconsidering and finetuning the function of historical myths. Instead of regarding them specifically as recruitment tools, we can think of them more generally as commitment devices. Linguistic expressions in general create commitments and thus raises expectations about how one will behave. For instance, if I claim that climate change is a problem, I commit myself to behaving in ways that help to mitigate it (Geurts, 2019). When relating a historical myth, one expresses one's coalitional preferences thereby making an implicit promise that one will act in ways that support the coalition (for the role of commitment in cooperation, see Khan, 2024).

This function of expressing and creating commitment allows for several other functions (Blancke, 2023). First, when historical myths function as commitment devices, people can use them as signals to indicate and track alliances and distinguish those who are similarly committed from those who are not (cf. Funkhouser, 2022). The latter may be outgroup members but also defectors within one's own community. Second, historical myths also function as coordination devices because they allow coalition members to collaborate with people who make similar commitments and to conspire against outsiders and inside defectors who pose a threat to the coalition (cf. Pietraszewski, Curry, Petersen, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2015). Third, historical myths do not convince people in the sense that they alter coalitional preferences. Instead, people adopt historical myths as *post hoc* rationalizations or justifications for pre-existing coalitional preferences. They select these myths in the marketplace of rationalizations (Williams, 2022) because the long-time cooperative bond suggested by the myth accounts for their preferences. Historical myths then justify any further actions *pro* their preferred coalition and *contra* outgroup members and ingroup defectors. This does not mean that historical myths have no impact on others. When adopting a myth, one commits to living up to the expectations raised by the myth, which will lead one to invest in the coalition. As such, historical myths do affect one's audience, not by directly altering other people's preferences, but indirectly through the commitments they create.

This is then how thinking about historical myths as commitment devices answers the questions raised by the authors' proposal that historical myths function as recruitment tools. First, people produce these myths not to convince others but to forge alliances with like-minded others. This explains why myths do not tend to change people's minds. Only those who share coalitional preferences will adopt the myth and become thus similarly committed to it. People are not gullible, but they adopt the myths that fit with their socially strategic priors. It is in this sense that historical myths recruit. Second, people who adopt a historical myth have an interest in further spreading the myth for the reasons explained above: to demonstrate their allegiance, to advertise their commitment to the group, to find people with similar interests, to coordinate and collaborate, and to justify their actions. As such, they create and sustain the social cognitive causal chains along which historical myths become cultural.

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