

Social norms underlying collective intelligence in hunter-gatherers (Seminar)

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Accurate collective decision-making in the context of foraging, social life, and warfare was likely crucial to the demographic success of Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers. Theoretical and empirical work in organizational science and psychology has shown that in small-to-medium sized groups decision accuracy is a function of: i) independence, ii) diversity, iii) decentralization, and iv) the extent to which individuals share a common goal. Vivek Venkataraman presents a theoretical framework to analyze this issue, and ethnographic data from the Human Relations Area Files are used to test whether social norms promote adaptive outcomes at the group level in foragers. It is suggested that deliberative processes function as problem-solving devices to maximize group-level outcomes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtcphYid5QQ>

Camilla: Good evening, it's a great pleasure tonight to be welcoming Dr. Vivek Venkataraman, he is a biological Anthropologist from University of Calgary and he's assuming over from Calgary. Where is this morning? His research has focused on ecology and energetics of human foraging strategies and his main ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted with orang asley populations from Peninsula Malaysia. He's co-director of orang asley health and lifeways project and tonight. He's going to be looking at some cross-cultural and data on social norms underlying collective intelligence in hunter-gatherers and so our hand over to Yvette for that.

Vivek: All right. Thanks a lot. Hi everyone. It's great to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

So I wanted to start off with an observation that's rather topical these days and this is the idea of communication breakdown in modern society, according to a number of surveys and different countries. People are angry angrier than ever and political polarization is worse than it's ever been.

This is being driven by the viral Dynamics and Echo chambers of the internet. But now it's also leaking into real life with increased reports of road rage and unruly passengers on planes.

When we see this kind of news, it seems clear that we've lost the ability to communicate.

This is specially problematic now as we Face a host of collective problems.

They require large-scale cooperation climate change environmental destruction threats to democracy and so on.

As an evolutionary Anthropologist. I find these Trends particularly odd given that the defining feature of our species when compared with other primates is our ability to cooperate and solve Collective action problems. So these patterns raise a question.

Are humans actually good and making decisions in groups? Well, it's probably not a yes or no answer. So we might also ask what are the conditions under which the best group decisions get made.

As I've been exploring this issue in various disciplines Beyond anthropology such as political science and social psychology. I've been surprised to learn that many scholars entertain or rather dim view of human decision-making capabilities.

in groups one prominent line of thinking emerged in the early 1970s based on the work of sociologists Irving Janus.

He argued that human groups have some fatal flaws when it comes to making decisions.

He used the term groupthink. This is borrowed from Orwell's 1984 to refer to the tendency for people to conform.

As a reason for why group decision making can fail in particular. He argued that groups that are tightly knit.

That share common social norms and beliefs and so on maybe more likely to fall into group thing. This means that good Solutions get passed over people don't speak their minds in part because of social hierarchies and this can lead to a so called information Cascade and subsequent disaster.

Two prominent examples of this are that they have pays invasion of Cuba in 1962 under Kennedy and the Challenger explosion in 1986. And both of these cases leadership did not take into account important information that was held by people lower in the hierarchy and this led to bad outcomes from the Perspective of the Kennedy administration that is so Genesis work has since come under scrutiny, but it's still accepted in many quarters of the social sciences.

More recently prominent Scholars, like the legal thinker has sunstein have arrived at the same general conclusion as Genesis groupthink, but instead emphasizing the role of polarization in groups.

Some scene proposes that deliberation and discussion are likely to radicalize groups shifting them toward a more extreme Point than indicated by pre-delibration judgments and these matters are great importance as their relevant say to the conduct of government institutions juries legislatures courts, and so on and if this view is correct, then it would suggest that limiting discussion limiting deliberation during problem solving would actually be beneficial.

Overall, there's a general mistrust and of democracy and deliberation in some quarters of the social sciences as one political scientist wrote too much and too frequent democracy threatens to Rob many of us of our autonomy and rationality.

According to these views seeking consensus is considered as a fatal weakness to making good decisions.

This is the idea that people work toward a common solution together. It's not merely taking a vote and moving on but it's talking through possibilities ensuring that everyone is more or less. Okay with the course of action that they are then bound to.

Recall that Janice thought that Titanic groups those who shared moral standards and norms and beliefs were particularly prone to groupthink.

Therefore consensus seeking sets us on the path toward error.

In these accounts, there's also an implication that this is an intrinsic quality of human nature that's based on our evolutionary history as highlighted in this quote. We evolved as social primates who dependent on tight in group Cooperative Behavior. Unfortunately, this leaves us with a deep bent or tribalism and conformity.

We often see statements like this, but unfortunately the details are rarely drawn out with any rigor.

From an evolutionary perspective this view of human decision making is downright puzzling.

After all as I noted human uniqueness is often attributed to our Cooperative abilities and so for hyper Cooperators like humans, why would Evolution shape us to be so deficient in the abilities that Define us including the use of language? If humans are so poor making decisions and how do we come to exert ecological dominance over the planet? And if consensus seeking is such a bad thing, then why is it one of the most common themes of political life and ethnographic work? So I'm calling this a puzzle of Paleolithic politics politics is of course the debt by definition the process of group decisions.

So here I'll be asking how do groups of hunter-gatherers get together and make important decision decisions in the past.

Now there's at least two possibilities here one is that humans have survived despite being poor decision makers and groups group decisions are perhaps then merely a good enough result of competing individual interests in a group.

But a second possibility that I think is more likely is that in particular context like those that characterize our paths humans are actually very good decision makers in groups and the pessimistic view that from political science that I've been reviewing is actually more result of the weird populations that are studied that are being studied that is Western educated industrialized Rich democratic.

So in this talk, I'm considering the question of how groups make decisions and as Chris Christopher bone has notably documented group decisions in the past. We're likely matters of life and death for people whether it's about subsistence conflict within and between groups or coping with ecological challenges and this decision-making capability probably very between groups, which would make it a target of of selection.

So in particular, I'd like to link this with collective intelligence, which is basically just the ability to solve problems.

as a group Now as we consider the nature of this Paleolithic political life, it's interesting to note that hunter-gatherers are often invoked as a form of so-called primitive democracy as one prominent scholar of democracy Robert Dahl wrote for many thousands of years then some form of primitive democracy May well have been the most natural political system.

What is meant by democracy here? Well, it literally means rule of the many and here the author is appealing to egalitarian Norms in his words the logic of equality as a way for most members of these groups to have a say in the decision-making process and yet in this classic 220 page book on Democracy. This is the only sentence devoted to the period of human history before Athenian democracy, which is of course very recent in the scheme of things. Although generally taken to be the the birth of democracy.

In recent years, it's fortunately been more and more widely recognized that democracy did not emerge with Athens. But as in fact been a regular part of Human Society for a very long time.

There are many ethnographic and archaeological examples that show the widespread presence of councils and assemblies among a variety of small-scale societies umacross a range of systems types. I won't go into to more more detail on this but just to say that these examples as well tend to be relatively recent and some of these Societies or what we consider to be more politically complex.

I suggest that if we hope to understand the origin of democratic Tendencies of group decision making more broadly then we need to look at the egalitarian foraging way of life that likely characterized most of human history.

So how did the political processes? forgers Aid in their survival So I like to out briefly outline the argument that I'll be making here today. So first, I want to consider the political process as a problem solving device, whether it's facing problems with subsistence or or conflict as I noted foragers tend to solve this as a group and the question is what kind of politics lead to decisions that are good at the group level.

Recently in political science Scholars have spoken of this as epistemic or cognitive democracy.

In particular I will argue that social norms around the political process.

Are what lead to high collective intelligence? I think that when it comes to immediate return foragers egalitarian social organization is the ultimate umbrella phenomenon that leads to political system being an efficient information processing system.

With egalitarian Norms people don't tell each other what to do or boss each other around this kind of independence, of course is fiercely maintained minimal hierarchies and so on.

Egalitarianism is of course widely discussed but it seems to me that it's group functional benefits have still been inadequately analyzed from an evolutionary perspective and finally we've seen that Scholars have been intensive to the potential costs of consensus seeking in a sense that it can Leach a group thing. But I would argue that under certain conditions consensus seeking is actually very beneficial to making good decisions.

This would suggest that the view of Jameson sunstein are actually derived from the fact that they're analyzing social dynamics and a very unusual situation from an evolutionary perspective that is weird societies and particularly those that are now under this way of digital platforms that are substantially altering our social dynamics.

Now before going further, I want to make an important caveat this argument isn't assuming or claiming that foragers are always making rational or optimal decisions. As any human knows we don't always necessarily even often behave like that. There are many reasons. This doesn't happen. Whether it's due to inadequate or false information problems being very difficult or some other important aspects of a cultural system that are involved.

But what this argument does suppose is that well, it's based on the principles of Behavioral ecology. It's opposes that political processes will vary and the results. The outcomes of those political processes will also vary Following bones work on emergency group decisions. We can suppose that there may be a correspondence between the effectiveness or the functionality of a political process and the group level outcome. Just as we might expect in our own Society for example polarization making political life difficult and ineffective and when we're talking about the mechanics of group decision making we can talk about several stages that occur in these groups. There's first a kind of information exchange stage before the decision when people are talking having informal discussions chatting and so on.

Sometimes there's also a more formal discussion where people gather together in a group maybe in a circle to talk about some issue and then third importantly there's some kind of aggregation. So how do we go from various opinions that people have to a binding collective decision that everyone has to kind of go with And it's worth noting. Of course that sometimes maybe even often these processes are invisible or very subtle to ethnographers and that makes this a rather difficult area of study.

But that being said we can test this argument by combining evidence from different disciplines. So first we need to look at the ethnographic record itself. So how do people actually make decisions what norms and procedures are in place during group decisions that could impact the ability of the group to make a good decision.

With these accounts we can actually observe what people are actually doing in ethnographic settings. And today I'll be talking about reports from the href the human relations area files database what I was searching for instances of social norms or events that indicate how these processes work. Now my colleagues and I are in the process of conducting a quantitative analysis of over 6,000 paragraphs from href covering a wide range of societies.

But today I want to focus on ethnographies from immediate return societies and I'll speak in general kind of broad terms pointing out the common themes that I've seen in ethnographic reports.

I'll be drawing particularly from reports from the GUI and The Cone based on the work of George silverbauer and Megan Bissell respectively their work is probably the most detailed that's been published in this area. So I just want to acknowledge the importance of that work and I'll be basically elaborating an argument that that Megan I think was making in this article you see on the right from 1978. It's a fantastic article.

There's also a second strand of evidence that we can use to evaluate the idea that social norms promote collective intelligence. And that's the extremely large literature from social psychology and organizational science on this topic.

In these studies which typically occurred with college students or other convenient samples people are put into teams or groups and ask to perform some problem-solving task as a team.

Then the performance of the team is examined as a function of for example, a leadership style or the or the demographic group of the composition and so on.

So this is a really large literature but it's important to it to acknowledge the pros and cons of it on the pro side. It is very large. There's literally hundreds of papers on any given variable that may be of interest.

Second these are typically done as experiments which can help lead to Stronger inferences. So that's a good thing and third the the measures of performance. They use like the, how fast a group solves the puzzle or something like that are quite concrete and they are plausibly linked with the kinds of things that may be important in a real world situation.

But in the con side the groups often consists of strangers that are in groups that are not demographically similar to what we see among foragers. So we need to kind of keep these caveats in mind and then lastly this area is quite vacuous in terms of a theory that can help to clear up conceptual and empirical disagreements.

However, we do have evolutionary theory at our disposal and this is a very powerful theoretical basis for understanding how groups can make decisions. So this is our third domain specifically using behavioral ecology helping to model the costs and benefits of given strategies.

It also allows us to link the ways that foragers make decisions with those of our closest living relatives the great apes and feels like foraging Theory can give us some kind of adjective objective criteria of judgment to say whether a decision is good or not more on that in just a moment.

Okay, so to review here we'll be using the theoretical and empirical insights from social psychology evolutionary biology to derive predictions about what makes an Adaptive group. And so today I'll be choosing a few key aspects of the political process and there's definitely more than I'm leaving out, but I'll be choosing these and asking whether they align with expectations about how groups should be performing.

if they are doing so optimally Now it's important to dig in a little bit on on what we mean by by accuracy and how we can use evolutionary theory to test hypotheses in the ethnographic record. Now admittedly saying that a group that a group decision is accurate is extremely difficult human life is is complex. And as I noted before we shouldn't expect the decisions to always be good or to be rational but there should be variation and we can use cases with relatively objective criteria at least as a starting point. And this is what forging Theory does. So for example several years ago me and my colleagues published a paper about how bot Tech hunter-gatherers and Malaysia decide to move their residential camps.

Based on historical data from Kirk Endicott. You see on the right as well as Karen Endicott who followed a band of 25 to 44 years and the mid 70s. They were recording virtually every calorie that was coming into Camp very exhaustive data set we were able to test whether basic movements accorded with a well-known model from origin Theory called the marginal value theorem. And this is basically an idea that makes a specific prediction about when you should move to New campsite based on the rate of depletion of resources that you get at a current site and this model is assuming it foragers are trying to maximize their what we call the long term return rate. They're just trying to get a lot of calories, basically.

A bit of background on the Baltic many of you will be familiar with over the past 10 years. I've actually worked in Peninsular Malaysia following up with The Descendant communities of the people that Kirk and Karen worked with many years ago.

Even today living in this rainforest environment. They have a very economy. They focus on items like tubers meet like monkeys and Gibbons as well as getting honey.

They're also very good and focus a lot of time on Gathering Forest Products that they can trade including Rattan which can be used in furniture and so on that's what you see on the the bottom panel there and as with immediate return egalitarian groups, these foods are shared widely when brought into camps. There's a lot of interdependence and sharing and cooperation here.

Now what we found is that the marginal value model predicts to within a half days Precision. How long people stay to Camp location before moving to the next one and the way we did this just briefly is to look at the cumulative calories coming into a camp Through Time.

We see these different colors correspond to different kinds of resources and through time. You can see there's evidence of depletion as they kind of taper off and then we can use this model to predict kind of what day they they should be leaving. I won't really go into all the nitty-gritty beyond that but the the fact that this model predicts Camp residence time is really well suggests that people are closely monitoring the food that comes into camp and That they're aware of even very subtle levels of depletion.

So the power of this model is in showing that the botok are using the environment in a way that from one standpoint is optimal. It's just they're making an accurate decision and this is actually what led me to the topic that I'm I'm here to talk about today because I was initially puzzled by this result. I was asking myself, here five or six years ago. How does an egalitarian group with no leader arrive at such a decision, but I'm realizing now that this initial hunch was was off as we now see it's precisely because this group is egalitarian because of the way that they process information that they are able to do this and that's what all that's what I'll continue to outline in today's talk.

A bit more on this now just to see how humans are special in their decision-making capabilities. Let's consider this idea of Group movement from an evolutionary perspective.

This is a problem that many animals face when they live in groups where and when do they move somewhere else? How do you make a good decision that's acceptable to as many group members as possible.

Now evolutionary theorists have modeled this as follows. So imagine you're in a patch and there are several candidate times to leave that patch indicated here by a t_1 through T_n and there are going to be different individuals in this group and for each of them the optimal time for them.

To leave is going to be different based on say their their physiological state or their ecological conditions or or whatever. So their choices aren't always going to be lining up. That means that whatever time is chosen. Someone is going to be paying a fitness cost because they have to go to group even though it's not good for them. And this is what we call a consensus cost.

So what is the group do? To take a simple comparison between a what we call a dictatorial decision and a democratic decision. You can basically just tally up.

The costs that each individual face with such a decision and ask what kind of decision makes the most people happy and with this relatively simple arithmetic just adding up these consensus costs. Um theorists have shown that shared or Democratic decisions are more effective at reducing consensus costs and dictatorial ones.

So even though this is quite theoretical it's showing you how individuals can be happy or sad with a resulting decision that they're bound to follow. It shows us how Democratic decisions can evolve.

Now to date consensus costs haven't really been measured in any human society. It's a bit of an abstract concept it would be difficult to do but when we look at human life history, we can think about consensus costs and the way that they might be modulated or sort of altered by the fact that humans are such a Cooperative species and literally our Cooperative Tendencies are interdependence is written into our physiology.

So according to current thinking about the evolved human life history pattern. We have these long developmental periods. We have long lifespans. We focus on high risk foraging behaviors such as large Aunt hunting.

But also Gathering which can demand significant skill development this can lead to a sexual division of labor. It also means that people are not productive for their early lives, right? They're developing these skills. It takes some time and they end up being subsidized as our old people by prime age individuals through food sharing.

Now this pattern basically shows how humans are such a interdependent species. We have high levels of Fitness interdependence and I would suggest that because of this consensus costs are low in humans compared to other primates meaning that the barriers to Collective action are lower and we should also then expect that foragers should be particularly focused on decisions that actually benefit the group and not just individuals because of this shared interdependence and indeed this is what we see in the ethnographic record given the interdependence we see in forager groups.

It's no surprise that they can see of and cope with problems as a group. We might call this what what Tomasello would call Collective and intentionality and as seen

in this quote by boom foragers believe in reaching unanimity for good reason for as Nomads, they must either agree on a single foraging strategy or else split into groups the way they manage to stay together as a band is very interesting.

So let's take a moment to kind of remind ourselves about the benefits of living in groups from the perspective of collective intelligence. There's two basic mechanisms that have been recognized for at least a century. This goes by the phrase the wisdom of crowds. So in 1906 Francis Galton collected data at the 1906 West of England fat stock and poultry exhibition.

He asked 787 people at this exhibition to guess the weight of a steer their average guess was 1,197 pounds and the actual weight turned out to be 1,100 98.

So this is kind of the canonical example of collective intelligence in groups and that's sort of not including any interaction or consensus building between individuals and then condorcet with his famous. Jury theorem showed that individuals. They actually don't even need to be fully informed or even have a lot of information to produce it wisdom of crowds. In fact, they basically just have to be above about 50% basically.

Now what research has consistently shown is that there are some key factors that can allow a group to be wise or at least wiser than its component members and these are things like diversity. So with diversity it's more likely that a good solution to a problem will be found right you get more perspectives decentralization is also key.

This means that particular individuals are dominating a decision process instead. It's more distributed and tapping into the knowledge and multiple individuals.

Ideally people also come to their judgments independently, they're not just blindly copying others like the like the group think idea would suggest having Norms that promote Independence ensure that everyone has heard and encouraged to form their own judgment.

We also need to keep in mind. Of course that forager groups are not aggregations of individuals. They're not like a flock of birds. These are highly individuated networks of people with long-term relationships. So they have to negotiate and manage. So basically I'm gonna now look at the ethnographic record and talk about the ways in which the political process serves to maintain or promote these factors in forager groups.

I think it's useful to First Look at the way that forager camps actually look the way that they're organized and how this might impact information exchange and processing. So these are pictures of a batech camp from the 1970s as well as a diagram that you see on the right in a group like this. Of course, the camp sizes are a relatively small each person and household isn't that far from anyone else this results in what evolutionary theory is called Global Communication.

This means an information can flow freely and fully within the group. It's not limited to say one one region of a camp or something like that.

The houses are oriented in a circular orientation around a central open area. This is a pretty common organization. We see in forage or camps. It ensures that no single

individual or household is privileged above anyone else and interestingly it's been shown in social psychology work that circular structures such as tables are more conducive to egalitarian discussion and say rectangular tables where it boss can sit at the end kind of occupying a privileged position.

The lean two Huts of the botek made of thatch as you see here are also very open people know what's going on elsewhere. They can shout at each other from a Hut all the way across the camp when it comes to foraging and subsistence. It seems to me that this is a way in which each household can be monitoring what other households have this provides Rich information about depletion rates of the local environments and in our paper from 2017 that I talked about earlier. We speculated that this kind of thing may have played a role in helping the batech to achieve a high foraging efficiency.

Now this information Rich environment is further enhanced by the political process itself. So Megan Bissell wrote In 1978 the large amount of information and the high rate of information exchange required for calculating Moves In This logistic chess or maintained by the participation of all adults in the decision-making process, one of the Striking regularities in ethnographies. I've read and this isn't necessarily surprising but is that there's constant discussion and deliberation about big group decisions ideas or widely discussed and importantly everyone is courage is encouraged to give their point of view.

This process is generally confined.

to adults but in groups like The botek the opinions of both men and women are highly valued and the context of the sexual division of labor people of different kinds of knowledge and this is brought to bear on the decision.

So with these conversations we can see that there are high levels of information flow feedback between individuals using of course language, which is a very efficient way to communicate these Norms Health to reduce self-censorship. They can lead to more creativity interestingly Megan also mentions how these conversations and I've seen this too how they can seem quite Meandering without any particular point. So the tolerance of temporary ambiguity allows time for more information flow people aren't quick to or eager to get the meaning over with as we might be in our committees and so on as this could inhibits information flow.

Okay, so turning to social psychology we can see how the social norms around discussion and deliberation helped to maintain diversity Independence and decentralization. This idea of freely exchanging information is key one problem. Of course in today's environment or digital environment is that group polarization is compounded by people having access to limited information or at least different information than other people.

Moreover giving nearly everyone an equal Voice results in what has been termed functional diversity that is different ways of conceiving of and solving a problem.

The group collaboration process is key here research has shown that the way in which your problem is solved is often more important than individual ability. So it's no surprise that such emphasis is placed on dialogue and discussion discussion helps to

increase Viewpoint diversity deliberation can actually increase willingness to support causes that are for a greater common good which would further encourage cooperation.

The sale says of the comb democracy and science are closely Allied in people's minds while tagging along with Coon trackers to sell her constant feedback as they busily corrected each other about where animal tracks were leading. They responded to Scientific evidence and reason and they were corrected by each other without taking it personally.

Among the cone people do not cling to their ideas or adopt stances based on principles. It may be satisfying to try to prove each other wrong like Point scoring, but this is antagonizing and degrades conversation.

Detaching our ideas from our egos can promote the quality of group discussion.

Now this isn't to say that people won't ever disagree or get emotional about things in fact arguments can be quite common.

But importantly Norms against the expression of anger help to keep this in check.

As we probably all know anger changes how we think it can make people more punitive more optimism more optimistic about their own abilities more careless and Hasty to take action. It also makes people view leaders less favorably when the leader is angry. Clearly these things are not very good when trying to make a rational decision. So it seems to be a very important Norm not only for getting along and as broader part of being in egalitarian group, but it can also lead to better group decision making overall.

We also need to talk about the idea of leadership and egalitarian society's leadership is not fixed, but it's shifting.

It depends on status and Charisma rather than domination in terms of group decisions shifting leadership depends on a particular sorry on a person's particular expertise or specialization with respect to the problem at hand.

In recent years the idea of shared leadership has been kind of reinvented in social psychology that to me. It seems like it maps onto this concept of leadership that we see in forgers.

This idea is simply acknowledging that no single individual knows everything and having a more flexible view of leadership can promote decision quality and indeed Studies have shown that sharing leadership leads to better team performance. This is superior to being led by a person with a high power motive who's bullying nature can inhibit information flow.

Now interestingly one common Norm. I've observed ethnographies. Is that facilitators or these temporary leaders? They tend to withhold their opinions about a topic until the end of a broader discussion. They let other people speak first and a lot of work has actually looked into this exact topic and Social Psychology showing that this is a great way to promote information flow get ideas out there have creative discussion. If a leader were to speak to soon and especially too strongly this would reduce information flow and maybe make people scared to speak leading to the group think effects at Janice was so concerned about So when it comes to aggregating opinions and

coming to a final decision, what's notable about foragers as I mentioned before is the emphasis placed on consensus? So a single leader isn't forcing a decision, but it needs to emerge from the group itself as they say the talk needs to become one.

Given the importance of maintaining good and balance social relations with others in the group. This consensual process is critical.

This involves a deep concern for minority views.

Which again is very prominent in the ethnographic work and research and Social Psychology shows that having my new minority viewpoints is critical for providing ideas for critically examining and potential course of action, and it seems that foragers are ensuring that that Minority viewpoints are heard and appreciated as they work toward consensus and this brings us to voting or rather the lack thereof among foragers.

Voting is glorified in our society. It's a way to give everyone a say.

But it also has dangers that have been recognized for a number of centuries in particular. It's a way of delegitimizing minority voices as one political scientist wrote Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.

Foragers are quite concerned about avoiding.

The situation as Megan Bissell points out based on her work with the Kung voting is seen as polarizing it divides people up into camps. It reduces mental flexibility the ability to change your view and potentially cuts off fruitful discussion and deliberation.

So on the whole these packages of norms that I've been discussing they invite us to consider the distinction between debate and dialogue our society lionizes debate as a way to find truth. We see Talking Heads on cable news shows you put forward arguments, but they're really just talking past each other.

In contrast dialogue is the kind of conversation aimed at solving some kind of problem. It's not about scoring points against each other. The goal is to see common ground and understanding to me it seems that dialogue is a more appropriate way to describe the forage or political process than debate and I think this view is supported by silver Bowers observations.

I really like this quote here. He notes that scoring punts can be fun. But it ends up being irrelevant to the eventual decision that's made people aren't swayed by a good put down or a Starkey comment, even though they may enjoy it or laugh at it. He says here that power is not gained and used in the manner of politicians.

Band decisions are not The Spoils of victory of the member who devises the craftiest stratagems to discounts.

Power lies and what the band judges to be competent assessment of the gains and costs of following a particular course of action and the entries in that bookkeeping include not only the material benefits, but also the social balance sheet.

So again, it's about consensus.

There's a fantastic book by the physicist David Bone. It's called on dialogue where he emphasizes that the idea of trying to win is antithetical to the goal in the process

that we're talking about here and even goes on to briefly consider the evolutionary history of dialogue.

Like we see in this quote here. I like this quote because it illustrates a number of the factors. We've discussed today the fact that people engage in discussion that people have more or less equal voices that sometimes the decision itself isn't even explicitly stated. He attributes this to the fact that dialogue it helps to literally align people's minds together.

Everyone is on the same page so they know what to do so you don't even need to announce what that decision is.

Recently a study came out that is very relevant to these ideas researchers ask people to deliberate on issues and they scanned their brains before and after looking for brain activity patterns, and they actually found that having so called meaty conversations can actually serve to align beliefs as well as brain patterns.

So long as the group is free of blow hearts.

So I think this is a perfect empirical demonstration of what bone is saying and perhaps this is what happens in four years as they go about their conversations.

Now as I'm starting to wrap up here, I want to broaden this argument Beyond forgers.

If the Norms that I've been talking about are indeed functional then we should observe them and other situations as well in his book blueprint Nicholas christiakias reviews cases of intentional and unintentional communities. For example of people who are stranded in shipwrecks or plane crashes.

How do they behave when they have to survive as a small group? under conditions of isolation and interdependence the importance of solving problems as a collective increases for example in 1864 the ship Grafton crashed on Auckland Island, stranding five Sailors, one of them later wrote the death of any one of us in our present circumstances with more injuriously affect the morality others and perhaps be attended with fatal consequences for all of us.

In his survey of shipwreck cases kristiakias highlights the qualities of the surviving groups compared to those that did not survive.

They were highly egalitarian. They worked together toward common goals they share equally and they relied on informal and democratically instituted leadership.

There's also a case of a Uruguayan jet carrying a rugby team that went down in the Andes stranding people for over two months and brutally cold conditions.

They adopted the same kind of norms going so far as to share a single chocolate bar and a bottle of wine among dozens of people.

Trading off sleeping spots that were more or less exposed to the elements.

Leaders were chosen based on their Charisma and integrity rather than dominance and in the end a significant number of the group ended up surviving.

survivors commented on the fact that their survival dependent on these bespoke social structures in another fascinating case Economist Peter Leeson investigated how Pirates get along in their ships.

He calls them pioneers of democracy despite a reputation for plunder and Mayhem on their own ships Pirates Institute Democratic politics, including a system of checks and balances that prevent abuses by the captain all individuals have a vote in group decisions. And so on Leeson argues that these Norms help to increase the effectiveness of their plundering.

We can also look to religious communities. For example of how consensual decision making is used in institutionalized when I looked up Quaker decision-making processes that are famously consensual. I was struck to see that they have close parallels to what we see among the quote the cognin and the GUI.

Which you can observe and read for yourself here.

So in short all of these examples show that in small groups when people have high levels of interdependence social norms can serve to keep the group functioning and socially cohesive without compromising decision quality.

We can now return to where we started with Janice and sunstein and the question about whether humans are good decision makers and groups.

As I've argued it seems to be that forgers.

That while forgers are as tight knit as a community can be they aren't legislated by groupthink as Janice would hypothesize due to their egalitarian structures the key attributes of diversity Independence and decentralization are promoted which can lead to good or accurate decisions.

Importantly consensus doesn't have to lead to groupthink. It certainly can without the right checks and balances. But as we assume the forgers as possibility can be avoided with the right kind of social norms.

I would argue that sun scenes law of group polarization is in fact an artifact of Modern Life of living life in large bureaucratic nation states with significant hierarchy and now with the significant digital component that striving viral Dynamics This means that we aren't getting the crucial face-to-face cues that are used in a true dialogue and they can bring people toward a common understanding.

We're also less interdependent. Although this isn't actually true as we all have to breathe the same air and drink the same water. And as the pandemic made clear to us modern economic systems lead us to believe that it is true.

Considering the political lives of forgers has led me to conclude that the way we glorified debate.

As a way of finding truth might be counterproductive. There's a whole cottage industry of books about how to win debates.

But their approach is exemplified by a book cover that has a hammer and a nut on it as you see their left.

As we've discussed debate without some kind of ground rules without a sense of interdependence can easily lead us astray debate is useful for presenting alternative viewpoints and hashing out logical inconsistencies, but often results in a little more than hardened views that hurt feelings. It's a tool design to convince not to solve Collective problems and I think that forgers show us a different way.

What Megan Bissell wrote In 1978 remains true today? Augmented by 40 plus years of research on social psychology. It seems clear that these more recent artificial problem-solving groups have somehow stumbled upon some of the oldest and most effective of human group processes.

If there's a better way to conduct our conversations today and maybe wise to consider a strategy home by hundreds of thousands of years of trial and error.

With that, I will conclude thank you for taking the time to listen and given the experience in the interests of this of this crowd. I would be delighted to hear any feedback or recommendations for sources to look into to help to test the argument inside presented today. So, thanks a lot.

I see right and share screen be back. Yeah, I'll start right? Sure. Yeah.

Okay. That was wonderful. That was really really yeah. I'm exciting stuff and we've got a question from Kate said Good. Hi, that was a great presentation. I learned so much so much more than the pessimistic political science discussions. So really appreciate it. I guess my question is a bit of like, kind of teasing out the causation here if there is one but, you talk about a lot of the consensus forming.

Well Democratic processes rather in egalitarian societies, but it's is there something about the fact that the societies are egalitarian that makes these techniques work because, like just from personal experience if I come in with more of a, like we consideration based approach in a discussion amongst my peers.

Sometimes I'm seen as like soft.

Or like like somehow not as like somehow like taking the easy way out or not being courageous enough to face the adversary. So yeah. I was just curious about your thoughts on that. Thank you.

Yeah, I think it's a good point and I think that you're experience probably aligns with the experience that a lot of us have going back to that penultimate slide.

I had about winning arguments and debating where I think in our society that really emphasizes debate and point scoring being more conciliatory and deliberative can actually be viewed as a weakness. This is unfortunate from the perspective of problem solving of course for all the reasons. I outlined but of course our social norms, our society is is very different and that's what we have to deal with. I guess however, we do. Yeah.

Let's go to Ivan, I guess.

I've been back. Yeah, thanks so much. That was really really great. Talk really enjoyed it. Um, I just had one question. Okay, um about flexibility and kind of group of groups fishing.

So, amongst the batech and many of the other immediate return hunter-gatherer groups.

I completely agree with you about consensus building for example, but what about should you also need to take into account the fact that when Some people might not want to go along with a particular decision because of that extremely high levels of in individual autonomy that these groups have too. Let's imagine. We're in a group

everyone in this room meeting. We're in a particular passion the rainforest and then in and Camilla after talking about whether we should hear or there we say actually You know, that's great, but we're gonna go off and we're going to join.

Dave's band over there. For example in that other part of the forest So to avoid a conflictual situation, we we fish in, we split into other groups.

I just wondered if that if you could perhaps say something about that your your thoughts on that.

Yeah, that's a really good point. It's something I've thought a lot about especially looking at a cruise bombs work kind of treating groups as sort of these circumscribed groups that don't have a huge amount of of exchange.

I think the answer is somewhere in the middle. I think you're right. I mean empirically we know that this is true that people vote with their feet. They can they can just leave in some cases but we all know that we sort of have to deal with the social situations that were dealt with a lot of the time as well. We can't walk away from from every collective decision if we don't like it, right so I would say it falls somewhere in the middle, right? There's a cost to also going to a new place like you have to maybe walk a couple miles to go somewhere else your foregoing other opportunities to do things we can talk about predation, right if you want to go off as your own family and live in the jungle alone. This might not be a great idea. We know from from the batech. They always told Kirk that They're afraid of tigers. So they don't ever want to live in a group of less than three or four families and in fact with the data that I was showing from the marginal value study that group was rather cohesive across those hundred days, so it wasn't always the exact same people.

But there was a kind of core set of of the libir river group that was more or less always staying together. So I would acknowledge your point but also say that sometimes we have to deal with this with the situations. We're in.

Yeah.

If you're muted Ivan, thanks, very back. I was just gonna just say one thing. I was just thinking that perhaps some my intemia groups who who don't really fish so so much but who have very kind of egalitarian decision making processes. They could be very very interesting case studies from Malaysia for example as well.

Anyway, yeah, I think Malaysia's a great place for these kinds of comparisons for a variety of reasons. So nothing working on that. Yeah good stuff.

Thanks, Ivan. I see Chris. You have a question or comment? Um, yes, I agree with everyone that said it was an absolutely great talks. I mean a wonderful concept anyway and beautifully presented in and delivered but Society because the issues are so important today in in Politics As again you stressed.

I I would like to just reinforce the question that came from Kate a bit earlier about causality about causation.

So in other words is it that can is it the consensus seeking which sort of produces the egalitarianism the healthy Society or don't do we need some other independent cause of the of the of the degree of a gallatinism which in turn then it gives rise to

that form of discussion and debate. Could you say a little bit more about which way around you think things are because obviously if you want to change things really to know which things are which aspects which dimensions are most important to start with and changing the way we do things.

Yeah, absolutely. I think that is that is a really good point in my logic here as you're kind of hinting at I've been kind of taking this these egalitarian norms and these groups is kind of forgiven. And then how does that lead to these good decisions based on what we know from social psychology and so on but I feel like acknowledge that that there's kind of synergies that are going on here and feedbacks, right that can complicate the the causality.

So unfortunately, I don't think I have a good answer to that but it is something I'm thinking about and if anyone has any any good thoughts on that, I think it is something I'd like to clarify before getting my publication together on it.

Just some of the research I've been doing on them on great apes so looking at chimpanzees and bonobos. It does seem as if it's what females get up to.

as a result of subsistence really so I mean it seems to be that we're resources are scarce and females have to sort of for its separately from each other you get very intense male dominance and we're resources are much more Lush and females can form coalitions.

Which is based on their on their foraging strategies operating together, then it's precisely because the females have some solidarity and can beat up males who try to put them around you get something closer to a bonobo like situation. Of course, as you said depending on those Dynamics, the informational Dynamics will will change I gather that's the way around you you see it but took but I suppose just I mean that one big problem with Christopher burum is he seems to be utterly gender lines. There's nothing but ever about gender and his discussions of dominance and can't reverse dominance. And again, I just wondering if you could So, I mean it just seems to be so critical instead of simply saying well, it is a gallitarianism and women I listen to kind of again, isn't it? Isn't it the degree of female solidarity and assertiveness, which actually influences the whole dynamic that Yeah, I think that's super important. I mean the way that I've approached it in this talk so far is about the fact that we have a kind of gender division of labor, right which which contributes to different different Realms of knowledge. And this means that if you want to make it a decision, that's good for everyone, right? Because everyone needs to eat carbohydrates, then then men are gonna have to listen to what women are saying and actually if you look at the area of Camp movement literature it is often I would say usually what women say about where to move that drives decisions because hunting is like high risk anyway, right like you can you can find game or not find game even if you're in a rich environment, but if you don't have a good carbohydrate a good resource base, then it's probably not a good spot and so in a lot of societies it tends to be the case that the women they give the information the key information needed to make that decision.

Interestingly in the case of the botek we found that that was both true and not true. It was true in the sense that That retain was actually the the main driver of of their Collective decisions. This was the thing that that drove.

To the day basically what what they were doing and just a bit of background they get Rattan and they trade it for Rice kind of like immediately. So we basically converted Rattan proceeds like cash money to Rice calories and this ended up being really powerful now even as far back as the 70s the batech were replacing tubers in their diet with with rice basically. So if we look at all our camps, we find a kind of negative correlation between the amount of tubers and the amount of rice in a camp and so It's men who actually gather the Rattan because it involves a lot of climbing and so on but in a way it's kind of the exception that proves the rule that it's the carbohydrates that the drive this and I think probably if we got back and done that study saying the 1910s or something like that then maybe the tubers would have been the really driving Factor there. So anyway, that was kind of a tangent, but I agree with what you're saying. Yeah. Thanks, Chris.

I'm not sure about the order of the other people who had hands. It's okay Dave I think Dave, okay.

Yeah, thanks very much. Great talk Vivek. I'm just fascinates me listening to you. But, I don't know if this is relevant.

So if you can't comment, that's fine too. But what strikes me in listening to what you're saying is that it describing what is very much a much more egalitarian approach to decision-making and a moving forward in one Society than perhaps we're used to in our post-industrial world here where everything is taught down in the political process is very power dominated.

So given that where I know you're coming from in Calgary and I'm living on the traditional territories of the Salish and slay what tooth and muscular people's on the west coast of the coast here. I wonder if you see any relevance or any opportunities to influence and assist the processes of decolonization and not only here but in other post-colonial and transitional societies where we're moving from a settler society and a colonial world to one that acknowledges and recognizes and integrates indigenous cultures more fully into the political process.

Yeah, it's a great question. And I think that these processes that occur in these groups, in a way that's quite different from from what we see in our society at large. I think we need to to be promoting them as as ways of making better decisions that that are more inclusive that bring in that bring in more more people as far as I can tell this literature on dialogue versus debate.

It's still occupies a relatively kind of minority position. I think for the reasons that the first person asks about that it's seeing as kind of like a soft way of of doing things. It's seen as kind of weak, but I think as some of these considerations that I've talked about show it's actually a very powerful way and it harnesses the collective mind much more effectively. So I think when it comes to to leadership these these sorts of styles

of decentralized leadership, so to speak I think need to be promoted more more often. I think that's one way that we can Aid in that decolonization.

Process is by making people more aware that this idea of like talking head bashing skulls against each other style of debate is not how it worked for most of human history and that we can learn from from people who are actually still engaging in these kinds of dialogues today because they are this isn't gone. This is still real and contemporary.

Yeah.

Lucinda I mean I had two things. I was writing them down. So I don't forget them both right away. One thing. It was just a referring back to that. Is that actually US democracy and some of the western ideals of democracy are actually based on First Nations confederations.

So our ideas of Confederacy are not actually Western divide derived their derived from indigenous people's in North America. And I think that's relevant when we start thinking about these things not to always see the West as dominant as we tend to or being the first there with democracy or any of these things. So I think that's an important consideration and the other thing is Justin as an aside women in often in often in groups. Use this kind of decision-making anyway consensus decision-making is often used in women's groups. It's just naturally what we fall into so it's and very much and I think a lot of men will fall into this too if they're not specifically trying to debate each other or assert a hierarchy, right if they're open to being a more lateral group and more egalitarian. So I don't think this is something that's lost in our society. I just think it's something that's devalued and yeah, I would agree with both of those points and that's totally right. And that's really interesting about the women's groups.

I hadn't read or heard about that specifically, but I'll look into that. Thanks for that note. Yeah.

Yeah, I mean I just brought that up because I think it's one of those things that is maybe obscured to a lot of men because these are groups that are often men are not included in especially straight men Gabe and getting helped in gay culture. There's a lot more of this decision-making process as well specifically and mixed queer in queer culture specifically queer culture is obviously much more political anyway and much more based around Anarchist principles and egalitarian principles. So some of these things are come from ideological places, but a lot of it's just not how people organize themselves naturally as well.

Basically that the three informative. Thank you.

Yeah, should I go and thanks fantastic talk. Can't wait to see the kind of quantitative results about this and but I wanted to chip in support on this kind of women's fundamental.

fundamental decision-making for hunter-gatherer Camp movements from my experience with the huder and I had very little time in the field with the Hudson but was involved with a couple of of Camp moves and I remember trying to get information from the men about when would the camp move when did they think the camp would move and they told me this and they told me that but On the day. It's like the women

pick it up and they go and yeah, it's almost surely gonna be to do with carbohydrate that these were camps which were doing a lot of tubers and dry season. Yeah, exactly. Yeah difficult to get hold of.

The other thing I want to mention is some of my is just mention a few contexts of experience where I got I really cat. I really got the idea of consensus decision making different social contexts from, coming from a background weird middle-class experience which were revelatory and just open my eyes and the first one was during campaigns for the miners pit closures in Britain in the early 90s and whereas also involved with women against pit closures work, but it was the experience of being inside a union and anyone National Union of Mine Workers open meeting.

With the dialogue and discussion and the extraordinary extraordinary impact of how that worked. Even though they did use voting to make the but it's an open but it's a public vote where everybody sees what everybody's right. And so it was kind of on one sense consensus development Dialogue on the other with as much diversity and input as possible. But also on the other sort of some level of Conformity and the second such experience. Well, we're had to hunt gatherers. Definitely. I mean any form of decision-making that and what was interesting these were decisions being made in interface with kind of Swahili political processes to some extent.

So this was trying to move from ads are kind of natural normal egalitarian processes, too.

Integrate with Swahili forms and nevertheless the the absolute the presence of everybody's input men women older generation younger generation and everybody's, they're that was again. I mean it was like so revelatory in terms of the dialogue that was happening also that the uses of humor To control anyone with power and Dominic. I mean they were quite dramatic and mechanisms of use of humor to control anybody who was trying to who might have been getting out of hand.

because they were perhaps more LinkedIn to Swahili meaning the broader Tanzanian forms of of government and the last one and to to mention because and you showed the Quaker and consensus decision making so I got some experience in relation to that not from Quakers directly. But because you may you probably do know that Quaker horizontal forms of consensus decision making have very much informed and Anarchist horizontal Organization for protest movement against all kinds of social justice climate Justice. Yeah, really, so I got involved in summer in quite a lot of that early in yeah, 20 25 years ago reclaim the streets and so forth and learning learning those processes of consensus decision making and seeing them in operation.

It was absolutely fascinating as Apologies, I think David Graber one of his ethnographies on direct action, right actually is worth looking at in that his it's not and ethnography that's often, but he he did really look into that decision-making process. It was in respect of one of the free trade Americas Quebec meetings where they so they're they're making all kinds of decisions about to be soft to be hardcore black block or do what are we what are all the different strategies? Everybody's got any and

what's important about this is that everybody's got their kind of different political ideologies.

Exactly what you said about don't people aren't standing on positions. They work together to well, we've all got this different ideologies. But what can we do practically together? What can we achieve together is what takes the the Forefront? Just that's great. Yeah. Thanks for all those those examples. That's fantastic. Um, just just a brief comment on one thing. You said that was really interesting was about how I guess we can call it Colonial decision-making structures being imposed or introduced to certain groups. Like you mentioned the hadza we see with this with the batech as well and this was going on as early as the 70s where there was an appointed headman by Jack which is sort of like the Aboriginal government arm, but this guy wasn't really paid attention to, he was just sort of appointed but he wasn't really the informal leader that the basic would have chosen and so as I'm sure, the title of the end of God's ethnography is the head man was a woman because they found that the most influential person in their group was was middle-aged woman.

So that's very interesting and I think we have this kind of kind of invoking James Scott of sort of this like two face of these groups. Sometimes where you engage in political making structures that are imposed from the outside kind of when you have to But when people aren't looking you kind of do something else maybe the way you did it in the past. And so I think that's a really interesting Dynamic of maintaining the sort of two-facedness. Yeah.

See another hand Joshua. Yes.

Turn what turn myself up. Hello. Yes the back. I'm on thank you very much. That was very informative. Pretty much. I'm a psychologist.

So maybe it would be helpful to hear a little bit about the Neuroscience behind someone you're finding.

turns out that the two modes of Consciousness that we generally have the left hemisphere drives one and that's the left hemisphere is wired only to itself. So it only knows its own little representation or World essentially and it's the ego.

Ego Consciousness that the hunter-gatherers are trying to always minimize right but it's also where anger is people often have the idea that all the emotions are on the right hemisphere. But the latest very nuanced work shows that anger is left to lateralized and so it's another indicator that that left brain.

Self-important kind of Representative mode of Consciousness is coming to the four.

So the right hemisphere is the more relational less verbalizable, but the know-how that we have so these emergency situations where you have people have crashed.

They're left brain knowledge the semantic knowledge about how logic and the linear causality of the left brain doesn't work. They've got to go back in their bodies and back into the animal Consciousness the awareness of how to get along in your body in this place with these people, right? so it's really it pulls the rug out from kind of the educated mind the left brain motive Consciousness. That's interesting. I think yeah and the talking Circle, so I study indigenous I have.

For some time study the indigenous worldview and ways of being and I think the talking circle is actually a third way. It's not a dialogue so much as the, you pass the something around the circle and each person expresses their whatever their thoughts feelings are at the moment and the whatever the Talking Stick that's going around Circle. You just keep going until there's nothing more to say and by then there's consensus so it's not so much a dialogue because dialogue can bring in that left brain Consciousness try make your point or whatever right? And I've tried this with students so I know they want to jump in when someone has an opinion they want to jump in with their own. Yeah, and that's a different way. It's a different one.

So, I guess that's all I wanted to say. Thanks.

That's great. That's very insightful. Those are things. I didn't know. So thanks for that. I'll look into those. That's wonderful.

All right. Have we got any more? cruise and that's yeah, I'm just thinking of work of Jerome Lewis as well and his student Dasha bombayakova.

Because she was looking at these mechanisms particularly.

Forms, like most sambo which is calling kind of group meeting. So these are bayaka and calling a group meeting. It might happen at any time of day perhaps and then somebody because they've got something they want to say and get across does a kind of speech kind of oratory and but what's it over puts out what something that they think is going wrong something that they think there's been a problem whatever and but they're going along with that are techniques like what the famous Mojo which is the They mimicry typed form of ridicul targeting any individual that's got above themselves or doing something out of order out of line so that very often travels from older women quite isolated older women to potentially men. And yeah, so these are these are what we've got to remember that. Of course James Woodburn talked about egalitarianism is is assertive. You can never take it for granted people are going to be hustling even if even if they're supposedly egalitarian and so there's always got to be like checks and balances. It's somebody might be the kind of bully strategies or getting too too much ahead of themselves in some way and so we really can expect this to be power Dynamic we can expect this to be very flexible and dynamic rather than just kind of these these Norms aren't going to just sit there. They're going to be And yeah, they're going to be sort of.

Yeah, absolutely. Those are good examples and, there's many other Norms I could have talked about or and behaviors like one of them is like the use of metaphor and stories right rather than stating a point directly to give a metaphor. And this is a way to get your point across without being kind of confrontational quite effective. Yeah.

Yes, sir, another handout.

Yeah, I'm sure we have Shakti first and then come back to Lucinda Shakti.

Hey, thanks weekly mainstalk. I was just wondering about whether you're also looking into things like I mean, there's obviously dialogue in speech but there are many other ways by which animal is any humans as well. Obviously.

Can bring themselves into synchrony so through, so even even things like dance.

Or sitting around the fire.

You know and so these sorts of and they there's there's a ticket and so social norms about even like the physical space and how we design our spaces and the ways that I mean you talked about the round table, of course, but for instance dance is such a wonderful we do synchronize your metabolism, even or even sitting by a fire it warms you it slows you and this is actually a physical metabolic process. I don't mean this in a figurative sense but in a very physical biological sense so I wonder whether whether you are or whether you can look into some of these things through the ethnographic literature in the human area files and other databases yes reports that's been done on this already. Sorry, I think not much with respect to the exact topic that we're talking about. I'm very interested in all those things including the use of like gesture as communication, right? It's not just language. But also how we use our bodies like in an aggressive or not aggressive way and so on I like your comments about the fire as well. Of course, one of the really fun papers from the past 10 years has been probably reasons paper on the Fire Light Embers or something like that and she makes the interesting point that I think during the day that talk is kind of more practical right and kind of like subsistence oriented logistically oriented, but at night it's kind of more metaphors stories things like that. I feel like there's something kind of important there, but I haven't thought through it fully so this will kind of encourage me to make more deeply about that but I think all that stuff matters for sure there's something like that chills you out about a fire maybe it makes people less aggressive. Yeah and again, these are things that I'm missing from my cousin social media spaces and things we don't have those rituals speak that had to sing Grenadines us exactly. Yeah. It's a good point.

Lucinda you I got I got two things.

I'll jump off from what was just said there because there is actually cognitive science research into singing and how that synchronizes brainwaves with between people. So I think that we've got good biological evidence that doing certain activities together actually brings to brings people's brains into a synchronized kind of Harmony and a unity and along with that.

There's the with in the west we tend to see Thing see ourselves very much as individuals and not especially in European Western culture.

This is less. So in Asian culture, we see ourselves very much as individuals and not as part of a connectome when in reality Humans, human nervous systems are too close into each other because we're social animals. So our nervous systems have to be either, have to be synchronized to some level or desynchronize which makes us feel uneasy, etc. Etc. So there is evidence around that perhaps on anthropology, but certainly in cognitive science, but the thing one of the things that this brings me back to is particular thing I'm interested in is how Society deals with sociopaths and so that was talking a little bit before because we talk about brains, but when we do that we forget that there are a lot of different kinds of brains that people's brains are very different and people function very differently in the world. We've evolved to

have different kinds of brains because different kinds of brains of different purposes. So different brains are not necessarily good or bad. They're just different and they serve different social purposes. So just have a social function obviously, especially in Warrior societies and you can be a pro-social sociopath as well and be perhaps Very difficult to be in a relationship with but still do good in the world and be Charming Etc. So I think what for me one of the things that's interesting is to think about how we currently have a society where sociopaths are very evidently in charge, which is not a particularly good thing for the rest of us who aren't sociopaths and because we don't see Unless you think a lot about different neurodiversity.

If you're not if your brain doesn't function differently than the norm, you might not think very often that other people are different than you you'll assume. There's this assumption that everybody is like us right, which is obviously not true. If you're neurodivergent you tend to be a little bit more aware of the different differences that are more than stylistic. They're very fundamental and biological right? So what interests me is how egalitarian societies sort of deal with people who are problematic maybe murderers and or Or are always keenly out for themselves and not empathetic to others which is a Hallmark of sociopathy obviously, right which would make you less effective in some ways in an egalitarian society because you'd be less aware but perhaps more effective in being able to dominate people because people wouldn't be expecting for it or are there do you have you noticed mechanisms in societies to sort of deal with in hunter-gatherers societies to deal with these kinds of outliers? to some degree Oh, yeah, it's an interesting question. I've deplete some of ignorance on that exact topic. I mean the most Salient thing that comes to mind is is work by by Chris poem and followed up more recently by Richard Wright and kind of looking at like when when people get to be too much of bullies too much of upstarts the the extreme responses for the group to to kill them basically, but on a more kind of Or rather a less extreme situation.

I think that what you're talking about of this like neurodiversity that people have it's another form of diversity that could be beneficial to a group. But but as far as how have different people are Are treated I'm not completely sure. I think someone else can probably speak to that better than I can. I see a handout. Maybe that's the Yeah, I have to understand that in the hunter gather societies. Typically children babies are raised much more with much more nurturance than in our society where we stress babies extensively children and their brains just don't develop properly self-regulation all sorts of things. Now, we know very trauma toxic early stress is I don't know the apathy is talking about I don't know I'm talking about fundamental brain differences, right? They're inborn. I'm not talking about there's nature there's nurture and there's both nurture and they're interactive. They don't, I understand that I come from a neuroscience family. But what I'm looking at what I'm asking about here is there is actual neurodivergence this exists. It's not just all nurture, right? So there are different brain types and different ways of people in we all have very individual experiences of the world, but we have this assumption that everybody else is having Same experience

of the world. So it once we move away from the assumption that everybody's having the same experience of the world and obviously narratives and things like that over the way we form our common shared view of the world, but I'm sort of thinking about I'm trying to I'm looking at hunter-gatherer societies and I'm trying to apply some of this to present day society and find solutions for present-day things perhaps in the way we're manager, but my point is that the range of diversity is huge now because of the undercare and early life that I know I don't say, yes can you listen please you bring your pictures? I feel I feel like I feel like the fundamental thing of saying that it's all nurture and I don't know I didn't say that I'm saying it the range is much narrower when you have a good nurturing you're really environment that we don't provide anymore. And so you have all humongous range of disregulations.

All kinds it looks like that's what normal human beings are like, no, it's not. It's just that's not what we find in the hunter-gatherer societies.

So you can't really apply the same criteria.

Have we done extensive extensive brain scans and studying of the brains of people in in hunter-gatherers societies because I suspect that their brains would actually be quite different than ours are because once we get back, we're getting back to the weird thing, right and I'm not trying to impose all of our differences here on hunter-gatherers, but I do think that there are people there are some fundamental ways of great people's brains are different and it's not all upbringing or nurture. You see this in ways families.

It descends in families in various things and genetic things happening across Generations. So you can inherit anxiety from your grandparents having gone through the whole I think things like that, right but my work is on the Evolve nest and how that provides a buffer for whatever kinds of genetics you have and we don't provide that at all. So then all the genetics seems so important because you're missing so much of the the nurturing that I was protect you and I'm not trying to DM I'm not trying to say nurturing isn't important or it doesn't provide those things. I'm trying to look at a deeper question, which is about how the my fundamental interest is in how Hunter mcgatherer societies deal with people who are dangerous within their society, right that still happens. There is still murderers in hunter-gatherers societies.

It's not I don't I think we shouldn't Well REM, there is ethnography concerning this which Vivek was mentioning. So one of the people to read is Richard Lee's work on he collected a whole kind of long Decades of data on violent incidents and actual murders for children classy or Kwong and compiled all that now Richard rangham has used some of that data to hmm some what I wouldn't agree with everything that Richard brangham says about that and I go back to Richard Lee's later on that and it's pretty revealing in terms of of the, group decision-making to deal with extremely violent or obnoxious individuals and but you can also scale back from the really extreme cases where you might somebody sociopathic to what I was just talking about women's weapons women's weapons for dealing with obnoxious and dominant often men are more about humor. They're more about taking doing things as Vivek was suggesting.

You're putting things in a non-confrontational way that gets everybody to Laugh Until eventually the person who's causing the laughter realizes sees themselves as others see them and this is the secret of what we've really been selected for which is into subjectivity our ability to see ourselves Through The Eyes of others and this is a fundamental aspect of human psychology as Sarah Hurdy argues from mothers and others that this is like the basis of human processivity that we can have this meshing of mental States. Just one other quick thing to keep in mind is that there was a 50% mortality rate before age 15.

Right in the hunter-gather societies. Typically it was same for us before 1850 or something. So the people who weren't as smart who weren't as Cooperative probably didn't make it past age 15 on average.

mmm I also ask it partly because I know in some First Nations cultures in North America that they you that they expel people from the tribe the way of the way of doing it is you've broken the social contract essentially and you're asked you're made to leave the tribe and survive on your own.

So I was just wondering whether there was a difference between obviously First Nations had.

Way being hunter-gatherers, but perhaps in a somewhat different way because of confederations in various other political forms than hunter-gatherers who were perhaps or that have perhaps less of that sort of confederated nature or extended political nature, right? So that's part of why I was asking that as well. Sorry could our interviewing say that Ian has had his hand up for a while and it's wanting to talk. Yeah.

yeah, well, it's just Jerome Lewis has data on well, I call it data. But like I've heard him talk about.

What you could call sort of neurodiversity and most and been jelly.

You know people who don't fit in by.

sort of consensual standards, but it's still recognized.

For particular qualities that will be rarely called upon but are very valued when when needed and It would be lovely. If he was to sort of write up some of these sort of Fairly individual case studies like, people who were no hunting too much and the women just refuse to cook their meat because they just thought it was self-aggrandizing and they he basically had to leave.

He's got several.

Sort of stories he can tell along those lines.

But just that is is that yes. I mean he was he was telling us about so the man he was completely impossible and I don't know verging on murderously Psychopathic but somehow they didn't kill him. But anyway in an elephant hunt he was absolutely valued he would get in such a frenzy of violence against this unfortunately elephant that actually was kind of useful useful as a hundred on occasion. So that that's that's the kind of thing that Jerome would talk about but I kind of I agree with both sides in his argument really, I mean, it's not John would definitely say that some people are just kind of just a bit crazy kind of thing, but it's the but it's the way it's dealt with

which is so different from the way we don't deal with things and I was just going to suggest committee. Would you just say a little bit more about this whole thing about random and executions. What is it that really Tends to drive Evolution at least among evolutionary past, against the whole idea of sort of getting away by staying awake around. I mean, it just seem to be you've got some important things to say there on rang and you did a review of his book. For example. Oh well.

Oh, and that's why to be talk about rang them over over Vivek stuff, but Okay, I mean, I mean, right the trouble is with ragamus.

That even more than Christopher Bohm. He completely removes female agency from his argument. I don't know whether Vivek agrees about or thinks much but about that and you in well my my understanding of assertive egalitarianism and how it works with hunter-gatherers. You can't remove females from the picture. You can't have a model which is just about the males doing it and females are just an add-on to that. It doesn't work because obviously not because males are going to be competitive for sexual relationships and so females and so you've got to resolve all the issues of conflict that might be going on in terms of sexual relationship before you can maintain Cooperative relationships. So and these are these are fundamental aspects of group conflict of conflict within groups that need to be addressed. You're not going to be able to you can't just come along with social norms and plunk them on top of that without resolving those conflicts.

some basic sense is my viewpoint on it anyway, and yeah, right random just so eliminates females from the The the picture that it he yeah, it doesn't work. But I was going to ask vivac before we wind up and are you doing this work this research now with a an idea of trying to bring the wisdom of hunter-gather a crowds to bear on the dire political situation that we're seeing.

Well in our country as well as in the Americas as well.

As everywhere. What's your motivation for this work? Yeah, I think it has a strong bearing on what's on what's going on. I was just gonna go back to the earlier question that I answered about how we can bring in these.

You know indigenous practices and all the knowledge. They have to improve our way of doing things. So I think that that dialogue is very much undervalued and I think what it comes down to is that our sense of interdependence and our society is Far lower or kind. I don't know what phrase to use. But but we underestimated we are actually very interdependent in so many ways, but but somehow we're kind of buffered from it, I guess and so that when we have arguments or disagreements we tend to to go for winning points for our side rather than for solving the problem together and I think that's what's most unfortunate about the political climate. Now, I wouldn't say I optimistic that, these these practices and methods are going to solve things because we're up against a lot, but I do think that we Like I don't think that Janice's ideas and Son scenes ideas are particularly helpful for giving us a optimistic view of ways that we can behave that will promote better decisions that they keep people happy. It's a very pessimistic View and I think it's pretty hierarchical and yeah, I just I don't

think that it's a generalized case of human nature the way they make it out to be right they're generalizing from these very narrow cultural samples.

But what we see is that for most of human history for the kid the conditions that we Face humans are actually excellent decision makers as you'd expect. So I think we need to be emphasizing that side of human nature a little more.

I think that's a wonderful note to close on and yes.

Thanks for having me. I really appreciate the feedback.

The Ted K Archive

Vivek Venkataraman
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28 February 2023

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