

GUEST EDITORIAL

THE NORDIC ISSUE: ECLECTIC, NON-WEIRD, AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE

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A few years ago, I invited some of my Swedish colleagues to join me for a visit at the Religion, Cognition and Culture research group (RCC) at Aarhus University in Denmark. While most CSR scholars in the Nordic countries are scattered across various universities with large distances between, the RCC provides a joint hub where researchers can collaborate and exchange ideas, which in turn supports these scholars in advancing their research.¹

As most of us lack opportunities for such collegial exchange, and many even find ourselves in contexts where the cognitive perspective on religion and religiosity is questioned, the inspiring visit at RCC Aarhus sparked the formation of the Nordic Network for the Cognitive Science of Religion (NNCSR). The initial idea of gathering CSR-researchers from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Iceland expanded as scholars from other northern European countries also wanted to join the network. Five years later, more than 150 members from 17 different countries are invited to the annual network meeting, which we envision as a generous, safe space where the members can try out new ideas and get valuable input from international colleagues.²

This special issue of *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* gathers work conducted by NNCSR members from Finland, Denmark, and Sweden. Rather than the usual, joint topic or research area, this special issue embraces eclecticism. The articles found here illustrate a broad variety of topics, methods,

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1. Similar groups can be found in Brno, Oxford, Coventry, Belfast, Amsterdam and Helsinki, but most CSR scholars in Europe appear to exist outside these environments.
 2. The NNCSR is run by Uffe Schjødt, who currently serves as head of the RCC at Aarhus University, and me. We arrange well-attended, annual network meetings, and are pleased to see that many members return year after year. More information about the NNCSR and our events can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/231505690523398>

and theoretical frameworks, brought forward by a mix of experienced scholars and doctoral students whose research is conducted among non-WEIRD populations³ as well as a secularized context. While drawing on established ideas in the CSR, such as agency detection (Barrett 2000), dual processing (Kahneman and Frederick 2005), contagion heuristics (Rozin *et al.* 1986), and the Big Gods hypothesis (Norenzayan 2013), these authors aim to expand these through new cases, fresh lenses, and a large amount of cultural sensitivity.

Another Nordic aspect of this special issue is the gender balance. There are four female and five male authors in this issue, which is good for two reasons. First, academia is built on meritocracy, and thus quality and ingenuity should count before identity. Female scholars however tend to get less funding opportunities (Brian *et al.* 2019), and thereby also get cited less often than male researchers (see Aksnes *et al.* 2011) since funding is vital to generate publications. As peer reviewed articles are a path towards obtaining grants and being cited, it is crucial that editors and peer reviewers become aware of their own biases to guarantee that men and women acquire equal, scientific opportunities (see Helmer *et al.* 2017).

Second, heterogeneity contributes to improved research. Campbell, Mehtani, Dozani, and Rinehart (2013) for instance found that gender-heterogeneous research teams produced articles of higher quality when compared to teams with researchers of the same gender. This is also why we need joint networks and research hubs where we can share ideas and collaborate. It is therefore a special pleasure to present a wide-ranging mix of authors and studies that in various ways contribute to expanding and deepening our outlook on the interrelation between religion, cognition, and culture.

The articles

The first three articles attend to religious cognition in non-WEIRD populations. In the first article, psychologist Theiss Bendixen and anthropologist Benjamin Grant Purzycki address the Big Gods hypothesis (Norenzayan 2013) through a study conducted in the Siberian Republic of Tyva. In short, the hypothesis suggests that as cities grew larger, people gradually came to understand that deities were monitoring their thoughts and actions. It has therefore been suggested that the idea of divine observation of human morality developed in order to create stability in larger societies. Bendixen and Purzycki, however, illustrate the significance of defining and widening the concept

3. WEIRD is an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Developed. The term was coined by Heinrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2010) to problematize the oversampling of homogenic participants in psychology studies, which threatens validity in a wider cultural context.

of “morality.” While the Abrahamic god seems concerned with certain moral aspects, inhabitants in non-urban communities may believe that their gods observe *other* types of virtues. This is not always apparent to the outsider who is unfamiliar with such cultural expressions, but the authors illustrate how Tyvan gods have come to care about things that are central to the Tyvan communities. Put differently, Bendixen and Purzycki aim to challenge the idea that divine moral concerns are less relevant in small-scale societies.

The second article is based on archival studies in Finland. Here, folklorist Siria Kohonen examines the early modern concept of “wraths of fire.” Finns believed that these severe and infectious skin burns were caused by a personified fire, which thus required magical healing methods. The study illustrates the role of magical thinking and draws on contagion heuristics (Rozin *et al.* 1986) in understanding how such embodied afflictions were understood. Kohonen argues that this early Finnish healing tradition is a result of a cross-cultural process in which intuitive notions of impurity are understood through local folklore. While conceptions of illness may share similar cognitive underpinnings, religious expressions thus depend on the favored cultural framework – what Bendixen and Purzycki refer to as *evoked culture*.

In the third article, Islamologist Jonas Svensson similarly addresses the magical transmission of “stuff” by paying attention to prophetic relics in Islam. While Kohonen centers the role of disgust, Svensson sheds light on positive contagion and prestige psychology. As the prophet Muhammad is an admired role model, many Muslims believe that physical objects associated with the prophet possess a spiritual force known as *baraka*, which is transmitted through physical contact. Svensson discusses how the notion of such positive contagion is part of intuitive, human cognition, and suggests that this specific tradition is underpinned by “info-copying” (Henrich and Gil-White 2001), a model for social learning that requires social proximity, such as touch and gaze. In line with Kohonen’s contribution, Svensson thus highlights the role of embodied experience in religious beliefs and behaviors.

The next two articles shift focus from religious contexts towards Swedish secularism. While “Nordic” may signify a geographical area, it also represents a specific point of view on religion. The Nordic countries are characterized by widespread secularization, in the sense that religion is considered to be a private matter which should be kept apart from societal areas such as politics, healthcare, and education (Thurfjell 2015). Both these articles are authored by teams of researchers in clinical psychology at Linköping University in Sweden, including one of the world’s most cited scholars.⁴

4. Gerhard Andersson is featured in the “Global Highly cited scholars list” (Clarivate Analytics 2018). It is based on publications in Web of Science and lists researchers

The first of these articles is authored by Nathalie Hallin, Daniel Västfjell, and Gerhard Andersson. It presents an experimental study on moral bias against atheists and religious persons, which is a conceptual replication of a study conducted by Gervais *et al.* (2017). This allowed them to compare results between two very different settings: while religiosity is normative in America, non-religiosity is normative in Sweden (see Visuri 2018). Using the conjunction fallacy test, the authors hypothesize that anti-religious bias amongst Swedes would lead to more conjunction errors in the religious target condition. While the results show no difference between groups, it is interesting to note that when compared to the original, American sample, the Swedish participants made less errors in relation to the atheist condition – but *more* errors when compared to a Finnish sample. Beyond cultural differences between the countries, Hallin *et al.* also note that sampling is relevant: while the Swedish and American studies draw on WEIRD populations (i.e., college students), the Finnish study contains a broader sample. Thus, both local and global cross-cultural elements are vital to reflect upon when considering why results differ between studies.

In the second article, Nathalie Hallin, Paola Törnaeus, Wadad Mahmud, and Gerhard Andersson explore autobiographical memories by adding religious categories of positive and negative words to the Autobiographical Memory Test (AMT). The authors note that the estimated proportion of atheists, non-believers, and agnostics is high in Sweden, but also remark that many of those who reject traditional religion harbour individual beliefs, which surveys might not capture. Contrary to the hypothesis, the number of memories produced by Christians was not significantly higher when compared to the uncommitted and atheist groups. Hallin, Törnaeus, Mahmud, and Andersson suggest that the historical legacy of Lutheran Christianity may impact also those contemporary Swedes who do *not* define themselves as Christians. The results however indicate that religious words generated fewer specific memories in the three groups, also in comparison to other studies, which suggests that religion is a less prominent, cultural theme amongst Swedes in general.

Beyond the relevance of the topics discussed, the publication of these two articles also relates to the ongoing discussion about the publication crisis in psychological sciences. Rosenthal (1979) conceptualizes the drawback of journals side-stepping studies where no statistically significant differences between groups were found as the “file drawer problem.” This bias leads to the misconception that there are only positive results, which is why it is important to also publish null results. Another crisis in psychology concerns

in the top 1% in their respective fields by citations.

the fact that a large proportion of studies fail to replicate previous results, and Andria Woodell (2020) describes how this has led to an awakening and call for increased transparency in research. The study on bias against atheists by Hallin and colleagues for instance illustrates how cultural variances – both between different countries and local populations – are likely to impact results.

We therefore encourage CSR scholars to continuously embrace the cross-cultural approach that is at the core of our field, and believe that the articles in this special issue on Nordic CSR provide a nice illustration of how such cultural sensitivity contributes to nuancing cognitive aspects of religious beliefs and behaviors.

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