



CO-OPERATIVES UK

THINK PIECE 3

The psychology of co-operation

The benefits of co-operating for your psyche and society

Oliver James

“ There is strong evidence that co-operation is good for us emotionally, as well as advantageous for organisations and societies. ”

Co-operative roots

For the last 30 years it was widely forgotten that the impulse to co-operate is every bit as strong as that to compete.

There is strong evidence that co-operation is good for us emotionally, as well as advantageous for organisations and societies. By contrast, excessive competitiveness causes stress and mental illness.

The root of co-operation is our need to belong: to love and feel loved, to feel part of a group. Co-operation is essential for these. From infancy onwards the evidence is overwhelming that we have a powerful drive to form intimate relationships. Their absence puts us massively more at risk of the commonest problems, be that depression or more extreme ailments, like eating disorders or violence.

Happier people

Our social relations are expressed in brain and body electrochemistry.

Competitiveness is strongly associated with the neurotransmitter serotonin, high levels of which are linked to violence, low levels to depression. Similarly, the fight-flight hormone cortisol is secreted when we are threatened, including the fear of losing competitions. High cortisol levels for prolonged periods are linked not only to an early death, but to anxiety, depression and aggression.

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By contrast, co-operation is linked to the neuropeptide Oxytocin. It greatly increases feelings of love and affiliation. Loved-up on Oxytocin, natural opioids are released, creating a sense of relaxation, a reduction in the tendency to interpret others as threatening and a greater confidence that they will be nice to know.

People high in Oxytocin tend to have well-balanced Cortisol levels, although sometimes both chemicals may be high if they are competing – attack or relax? That Oxytocin is in favour of the latter is shown by the fact that levels of it are higher after a massage and after sex. Indeed, supplying it to men who are having trouble getting orgasms helps them to finish the job.

Courting couples have higher levels when in each other's company than single people. If singles are given a stressful task to do, they have higher levels when given the support of their best friend. For the unsupported, only Cortisol levels rise.

Happier society

Given that our brain chemistry is so heavily affected by both competition and co-operation, it would hardly be surprising if different societies had differing rates of mental health, since how they are organised strongly effects this.

The more unequal a society – and therefore, the less co-operative – the higher the prevalence of mental illness.

For example, my research showed that the more unequal a society – and therefore, the less co-operative – the higher the prevalence of mental illness.

My research also showed that citizens in developed nations with what I call Selfish Capitalist (Free Market, Thatcherite) political economies are twice as likely to suffer the commonest mental illnesses compared with relatively Unselfish Capitalist ones.

The average is 23% of the population in English-speaking nations (UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) compared with exactly half that proportion in relatively Unselfish Capitalist mainland Western European ones (Holland, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy and Spain). A major reason is that Selfish Capitalism fosters hyper-competitiveness rather than co-operation.

In theory, such differences could be caused by genes but the Human Genome Project is now demonstrating that they appear to play little part in most mental illness. A study of 29 nations recently showed that a gene variant which was supposed to be a cause of depression was actually commonest in the countries which have the lowest rates of depression. Rather, the study showed, it was whether a society was co-operative (collectivist rather than individualistic) which predicted its rate of depression: the greater the co-operation, the less the depression. Small surprise that the most atavistic nation (America) has the highest prevalence of mental illness (26%).

The intellectual hegemony of genes in the last 30 years shows just how much public beliefs about our psychology are governed by political economics, as well as science. It is an interesting fact that Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene* was first published in 1976. It only became an international bestseller when 'greed is good' Reaganomics and Thatcherism made it seem plausible in the 1980s.

Sane, fruitful lives

With the ever-increasing threat of ecological catastrophe and the growing risks to the world economy posed by deregulated globalisation, the need for co-operation has never been greater.

But quite apart from our desire to avoid destroying the planet or economic meltdown, I offer another reason to position co-operation at the heart of our political economy: it will mean we are more likely to live sane, fruitful lives.

THE AUTHOR

Oliver James is the author of *Affluenza* and *The Selfish Capitalist*. His latest book is *How Not To F*** Them Up*, for parents. More about Oliver James at www.selfishcapitalist.com

Co-operatives UK

Co-operatives UK works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. It has a unique role as a trade association for co-operatives and its campaigns for co-operation, such as Co-operatives Fortnight, bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.

Any organisation supportive of co-operation and mutuality can join and there are many opportunities online for individuals to connect to the latest co-operative news, innovations and campaigns. All members benefit from specialist services and the chance to network with other co-operatives.

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This *Think Piece* was launched during Co-operatives Fortnight.

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In **The psychology of co-operation**, clinical psychologist and author Oliver James explains that, because of our brain chemistry, we are happier and less stressed when working with rather than against people. The *Think Piece* shows the importance of more co-operation for society and ourselves.



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