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Marking 10 Years of LEVYNA: Shifting Topics and Tools of CESR

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In October 2021, the Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion (LEVYNA) celebrated ten years of its existence. Knowing the importance of marking the milestones along the way, LEVYNA took it as an opportunity to reflect on the past and discuss what the future holds by organizing a two-day workshop called *Marking 10 Years of LEVYNA: Shifting Topics and Tools of CESR* (the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion). Even though the workshop was held in a hybrid form due to the pandemic situation, on-site in the picturesque setting of The Open Gardens education center in Brno, and online, it succeeded in bringing together everyone involved in the process of creating and supporting LEVYNA over the years. While Friday evening (22nd of October) was dedicated to reminiscing and celebrating, Saturday morning (23rd of October) followed up with a hosted lecture and roundtable/panel discussions about shifts in the theoretical framework, methodological tools, and global challenges and trends in the CESR domain.

Celebratory evening

Friday's event started with the welcoming speech of Radek Kundt, the director of LEVYNA. First, he introduced the efforts of LEVYNA to combine expertise from the humanities and sciences to study religious beliefs and behaviors by experimental manipulation in cross-cultural research both in the lab and in the field and characterized four main research lines: 1) anxiety and ritualized behavior, 2) religion and intragroup cooperation, 3) religion and signaling theory, and 4) coevolution of religion and morality. Next, he reminded that LEVYNA is not formed only by theories, methods, and topics of interest but, first and foremost, by its members. Collective, collaboration, and mutual support are of the utmost importance for the team. Subsequently, he took us on a journey through the most significant events from the very beginning, when everything was just a bold idea of a handful of doctoral students, through receiving a grant and gradually overcoming various challenges and seizing opportunities, such as undertaking anthropological expeditions in Mauritius with Dimitris Xygalatas, and cooperation with the newly created Experimental Humanities Laboratory (HUME Lab). The opening speech was followed by congratulatory words delivered by Thomas Lawson, Robert McCauley, and our faculty vice-dean Petr Kylouřek. The rest of the evening was dedicated to the banquet and social mingling.

Panel discussion

The second day of the workshop was more conference-like, consisting of three sessions: (1) Dimitris Xygalatas' talk *If You Love Something, Set It Free: The Present and Future of CESR* and two panel discussions oriented towards (2) the theoretical framework of CESR and (3) its methods and tools.

(1) Dimitris Xygalatas first briefly characterized the development of the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which emerged from humanities departments to reform religious studies using cognitive science and evolutionary theory as interpretative frameworks. This promising trend has been further developing in interdisciplinary centers (including LEVYNA) and was institutionally supported by the International Association for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Sciences of Religion (IACESR). Next, he highlighted the methodological turn to experimentation and emphasized the importance of collaboration demonstrated on data from the Scopus database, revealing that multi-authored publications are the most cited. In the rest of his presentation, he tackled a lot of crucial points in connection to the future directions of CESR, which were further elaborated on in the ensuing discussion moderated by Jakub Cigán. These include, for example, the relationships between natural sciences and humanities, the efforts to avoid doing quick and easy research at the expense of its quality, the importance of building new tools, the applicability of research for a broader audience, and related topics of necessary funding and popularization of science.

(2) In the second session, which took place in the form of a panel discussion, Eva Kundtová Klocová took over the chairing and reminded panelists of the questions they were instructed to cover in their talks: *Where is CESR heading? What is CESR missing? What withstood the test of time in CESR theories? Are CESR scholars taking humanities expertise seriously?* Panelists with various research backgrounds and topics of interest provided diverse insights into these issues. First, Thomas Lawson pointed out that CESR is missing the subject matter of the new research program and emphasized the importance of collaboration as opposed to the tendency to do isolated research while focusing on a single topic. The next panelist, Armin Geertz, called attention to the developing features of CESR, such as turning to non-WEIRD¹ populations or digital and simulation approaches, and he encouraged the integration of new developments in the embodiment, neurophysiology, or predictive processing. Vojtěch Kaše appreciated the increasing interest in developing and polishing methods but pointed out that it should not be at the expense of quality of theoretical background. Stemming from the situation in Poland, Konrad Talmont-Kaminski spoke of the need for sensitivity when dealing with delicate topics such as religions because scientific studies can yield disruptive results for many people. Nevertheless, the research should be indifferent to state ideologies or the general opinions of the public. In the final talk, John Shaver stressed the paradox that although reproductive success is essential for studying the process of evolution, little attention is paid to it.

¹ WEIRD is an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. See more in Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan (2010).

The subsequent discussion touched upon the reproducibility crisis and how we tend to rely on consensus when there is no replication available or how problematic imprecise methodologies can be. Secondly, attention was brought to the difficulties with obtaining funding, which can be harder to secure for researchers collaborating across disciplines. Furthermore, the discussion focused on the educational systems that tend to favor theoretical knowledge rather than training students in methods. Finally, the discussion introduced the topic of the general need for reliable inferences about causality, which became a vital subject matter and of central importance in the subsequent panel.

(3) The last session, moderated by Martin Lang, focused on the CESR methods and tools. The panelists pondered: *Are we studying causality with our methods? Can we manipulate belief in the lab? Is neuroscience of religion heading somewhere? Are we putting the building blocks back together?* First, based on her experience, Anastasia Ejova pointed out the need for collaboration across teams of Bayesian phylogenetic modelers and scholars of religions and emphasized the importance of pre-registration, replications, and applied research in connection to the hardships of seeking funding. Next, Dimitris Xygalatas defined science as detecting patterns to test hypotheses based on cumulative empirical evidence, which should be obtained by triangulation. He stressed the importance of continuously conducting research in the field and the laboratory as complementary ways of looking at specific mechanisms, their interactions, and the broad picture. Joseph Bulbulia then elaborated on causality, especially in connection to economics and epidemiology, and highlighted the need for using causal inference methods in data analysis. As for difficulties with examining beliefs, he would be attentive to the neuroscience of religion. David Zbiral followed up with a talk about causality as a not directly observed phenomenon with various ways of making causal inferences like extrapolation or systematizing the set relations between predictors and outcomes. In contrast to previous talks, Justin Lane problematized the topic of causality by asking what is meant by it. He distinguished that causality in natural sciences is considered strictly mechanistic, whereas in social sciences is used more loosely. Nevertheless, he stressed that causation is a goal researchers should strive for, otherwise the applicability of the results in the real world would be difficult. The last of the panelists, Russell Gray, briefly addressed the WEIRD problem, mainly by criticizing the tokenism in the research and emphasizing the need for a culturally sensitive approach and methods while doing the research in the field.

Conclusion

The tenth anniversary of LEVYNA's existence was a unique opportunity to convene various generations of researchers from different departments worldwide who have been linked to LEVYNA during its establishment and development. Given that the whole CESR is a vital and constantly changing research field, there are many shifts LEVYNA needs to reflect on to stay flexible and up to date. All the fruitful talks and discussions contributed to summarizing essential shifts in the topics and tools and identified possible threats, challenges, and opportunities for future growth. This enrichment, resulting from connections and discussions among many outstanding scientists, was a birthday gift for LEVYNA entering

the next decade. This gift is not only an encouragement to continue making good science but also to nurture a friendly environment and non-formal conversations. We hope that LEVYNA will keep evolving, prosper and host another such event in the next ten years.

References:

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J. & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The Weirdest People in the World? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2-3), 61–83.