Prosociality declines after a collective ritual: Evidence from a patron saint festival in Oaxaca, Mexico

Cameron M. Curtin[a,b], Narcedalia Vasquez Martinez[c],

Yunitza Vásquez Vásquez[d], & Joseph Henrich[b]

[a] Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Toulouse School of Economics

[b] Department of Human Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University

[c] Division of Mechatronic and Industrial Engineering, Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Ecatepec

[d] Department of Anthropology, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cameron M. Curtin, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Toulouse School of Economics, 1 Esplanade de l'Université, 31000 Toulouse, France. Email: cameron.curtin@tse-fr.eu

Abstract

The cross-cultural ubiquity of costly collective rituals presents a puzzle. Researchers have proposed that collective rituals enhance group solidarity, facilitating these rituals' spread through intergroup competition. Accordingly, studies indicate that collective rituals can foster cohesion and cooperation in lab and real-world settings. We test this hypothesis in a novel, naturalistic setting: patron saint festivals (*fiestas*) in indigenous communities of Oaxaca, Mexico. In this preregistered natural experiment, we used mixed methods to study changes in cohesion, prosocial attitudes, and cooperation after a *fiesta* in one Zapotec village. Our within-subjects design included 36 survey participants, 25 of whom also completed a Public Goods Game. Contrary to prior research, we find evidence of declines in altruism and cooperation, and no change in cohesion. Nonetheless, the *fiesta* is a huge cooperative endeavor. While the sample is constrained by the community's size and this naturalistic event does not provide a fully controlled field experiment, these results offer important nuance to our understanding of collective ritual.

1. Introduction

Collective rituals, such as those involving communal singing, dancing, pain, or terror, are ubiquitous across human societies (Norton, 2024; Xygalatas, 2023). In the Kalahari, !Kung hunter-gatherers traditionally danced, clapped, and sang all night during elaborate healing ceremonies (Marshall, 2009[1973]). Starting in boyhood, men in Papua New Guinea underwent a series of group initiation rituals that involved genital mutilation, adhering to strict food taboos, and head-hunting victims from rival groups (Tuzin, 1976, 2001)– an example of *rites of terror* that recur across many small-scale societies (Whitehouse, 1996). In contemporary, large-scale societies, collective ritual is common in the form of group worship, hazing rituals, and patriotic parades.

Given that these rituals are often costly for participants (Henrich, 2009; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003), this ubiquity poses a puzzle. How did these costly cultural practices become so widespread?

Building on ethnographers' longstanding observations that collective rituals seem to bind groups more closely together (Durkheim, 2001[1912]), one leading hypothesis proposes that collective rituals promote group cohesion and cooperation (Hobson et al., 2018; Irons, 2001; Norenzayan et al., 2016; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003; Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016; Xygalatas, 2023). According to cultural evolutionary theory, cultural practices that enhance cooperation spread through intergroup competition, including intergroup conflict (war, raiding), selective copying (less successful groups copy more successful groups), selective migration (people in less successful groups migrate to more successful groups), and differential survival (more cooperative groups are more likely to survive a shock) (Richerson et al., 2016). Thus, psychologically potent collective rituals may have spread as groups with rituals that fostered greater cohesion and cooperation outcompeted less cooperative, cohesive groups (Norenzayan et al., 2016).

While prominent, this is not the only hypothesis about the origin of collective ritual. Complementary hypotheses suggest that collective rituals provide opportunities to signal commitment and loyalty to the group and facilitate the identification of in-group members (Hobson et al., 2018; Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). On the other hand, some scholars have argued that collective ritual does not serve any adaptive function. For example, Liénard & Boyer (2006) suggest instead that collective rituals were selectively transmitted over generations simply because they are cognitively sticky.

Supporting the cultural evolutionary hypothesis, lab-based experiments have found that key elements of collective ritual promote group cohesion and cooperation. Many collective rituals feature behavioral synchrony (matched rhythmic movement, such as dancing or drumming) and

shared physiological arousal. In experiments with adults, behavioral synchrony and shared physiological arousal increase trust, feelings of "being on the same team", affiliation, cohesion, and cooperation (Jackson et al., 2018; Mogan et al., 2017; Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009). Similar effects have been observed in children. For example, preschoolers were more likely to spontaneously help and cooperate with a partner after participating in a ritualized group activity that involved singing and walking in step (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010). Meanwhile, repeated participation in a ritualized group activity increases children's self-reported ingroup affiliation, affiliative ingroup displays, and outgroup monitoring (Wen et al., 2016, 2020). The early emergence of these tendencies suggests that humans may come into the world psychologically prepared to engage in ritual (Wen et al., 2016).

Taking this research "into the wild", empirical studies of real-life collective rituals have found associations between collective ritual, cohesion, and cooperation. For example, in Spain, people reported increased feelings of belonging and identity fusion– a visceral feeling of "oneness" with the group– after participating in folkloric drumming marches (Páez et al., 2015). Similarly, self-reported measures of cohesion increased during a Hindu religious festival (Singh et al., 2020), and participation in such festivals is associated with more cohesive networks of social support (Power, 2018). Providing evidence that collective rituals may enhance prosocial behavior, Israeli kibbutz members who participated in more collective prayer rituals were more cooperative in a behavioral economics game (Ruffle & Sosis, 2007). In Mauritius, observing an extreme ritual was associated with donation of a larger proportion of a cash endowment to the local temple (Xygalatas et al., 2013).

We build on this literature by testing the hypothesis that collective ritual fosters cohesion and cooperation in a novel, naturalistic setting. Every year, indigenous communities in Oaxaca,



Figure 1. Dancing during the *fiesta.* (A) Women dressed in traditional garments (*huipiles*) danced traditional dances (*jarabes*) with baskets of flowers and sparklers during the opening celebration of the *fiesta.* Soon, other community members joined the dancing. Over the course of about 6 hours, the community and bands processed around town, stopping frequently to dance. (B) Costumed dancers performed a traditional regional dance for about 1.5 hours. Source: Cameron M. Curtin, 2022.

Mexico host elaborate, multi-day festivals (*fiestas*) in honor of town patron saints. *Fiestas* involve various collective ritual activities, including dancing, music-making, and processions (Figure 1). These celebrations are costly for participants in terms of money, time, and energy (de la Fuente, 1949; Stephen, 2005). There are undoubtedly a variety of proximate reasons why people participate in *fiestas*, including religious devotion, local customs, and social norms. At a more ultimate level, however, *fiestas* may serve an adaptive function by binding communities closer together and promoting cooperation.

The cohesion-enhancing effects of *fiestas* could be particularly important in Oaxaca. In this highly indigenous state, the community serves as the primary locus of identity (Martínez, 2013). Most communities are semi-autonomous from the Mexican government, self-governing to provide local public goods (e.g. paved local roads, piped water systems) and manage communally-owned lands (Curtin et al., 2024). A preference for village endogamy is common (Chance, 1989; Dennis,

1987; Nader, 1964; Selby, 1974), as are restrictions on outsiders' ability to gain community citizenship and rights (Bustillo Marín, 2016; Martínez, 2013). Moreover, many Oaxacan communities have long histories of intergroup conflict, stretching back to the colonial era (Cook, 2014; de la Fuente, 1989; Dennis, 1987; Yannakakis, 2008). Territorial disputes have been particularly common; for example, there were 656 ongoing agrarian conflicts in Oaxaca in 2001 (López-Bárcenas, 2004). According to our ethnographic work in the region of this study, other points of contention include unauthorized use of community resources by outsiders (e.g. extraction of firewood or gravel) and the distribution of state funding in municipalities that contain multiple communities. Conflicts are dealt with using a variety of methods, ranging from mild (e.g. exchange of formal letters) to moderate (e.g. legal battles, road blockades), to violent (e.g. raids, burning crops, destroying property, and killings). For Oaxacan communities to effectively provide public goods, manage and defend collective resources, and negotiate intergroup relationships, group cohesion and cooperation are paramount. Oaxacan *fiestas* thus serve as a compelling natural setting for testing the hypothesis that collective rituals are culturally-evolved technologies that promote ingroup-oriented prosociality.

To test the hypothesis that *fiestas* enhance group cohesion and cooperation, we compared the prosocial attitudes and behavior of community members before and after the largest annual *fiesta* in one Zapotec village. Building on prior literature, we pre-registered (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CW693) the hypotheses that after the *fiesta*, participants would (1) feel a greater sense of cohesion with the community, (2) report more prosocial attitudes towards community members, and (3) behave more cooperatively with community members.

This study extends current scholarship in several ways. First, we expand sampling to a novel real-world setting, contributing to ongoing efforts to assess the generalizability of

established findings and to sample from populations underrepresented in the psychology literature. Second, we leverage mixed methods– including psychological surveys, interviews, and a behavioral economics game– in a preregistered within-subjects design. Previous studies of real-world collective rituals have combined only some of these elements, such as within-subjects surveys (e.g. Páez et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2020) or between-subjects surveys and/or behavioral games (e.g. Ruffle & Sosis, 2007; Xygalatas et al., 2013). Finally, detailed ethnography adds important context for interpreting the results– CMC, NVM, & YVV spent 4 months living in the community.

2. Methods

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger research project in a Zapotec village in the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca, Mexico. We collected data in two waves: baseline (May-June 2022) and *fiesta* (October 2022). During each wave, participants were invited to complete a survey and a Public Goods Game (PGG). Here, we briefly introduce the study setting and methods.

2.1 Study setting

Like many indigenous Oaxacan communities, the village (population 430) is semi-autonomous from the Mexican government, self-governed under a traditional system locally known as *usos y costumbres* ("customs and traditions"). This system involves collective decision-making, communal control of resources, ingroup justice, and community service obligations. As part of this, each male citizen serves a series of unpaid leadership positions called *cargos* (literally, "burdens").

The annual five-day *fiesta* honors the town's patron saint, Saint Francis of Assisi. The celebration involves many instances of collective ritual, including traditional dancing, music-making, processions, and Catholic masses (Figure 1). Although the *fiesta* formally lasts five days,

associated preparations and celebrations last for a month and a half (Figure 2, Figure S1). Throughout this time, *cargo*-holders and other villagers host smaller gatherings that involve dancing and processions, for example to celebrate the donation of bulls to be eaten during the *fiesta*.

Although the *fiesta* is a community endeavor, participation varies. First, while the community is predominantly Catholic, 23% of villagers are Pentecostal Evangelicals (INEGI, 2020). The Evangelicals view the adoration of Catholic saints as idol worship and therefore do not celebrate the *fiesta*. Second, some citizens– including *cargo*-holders, their wives, single mothers, and widows– serve obligatory roles in the *fiesta*. They must provide labor during the *fiesta*, such as coordinating events or working in the communal kitchen. These obligations supersede religious affiliations; Evangelicals must fulfill their duties. Shirking one's duties is punished, typically with a fine.

For a more complete ethnographic description of this community and the *fiesta*, see Supplemental Material S1.

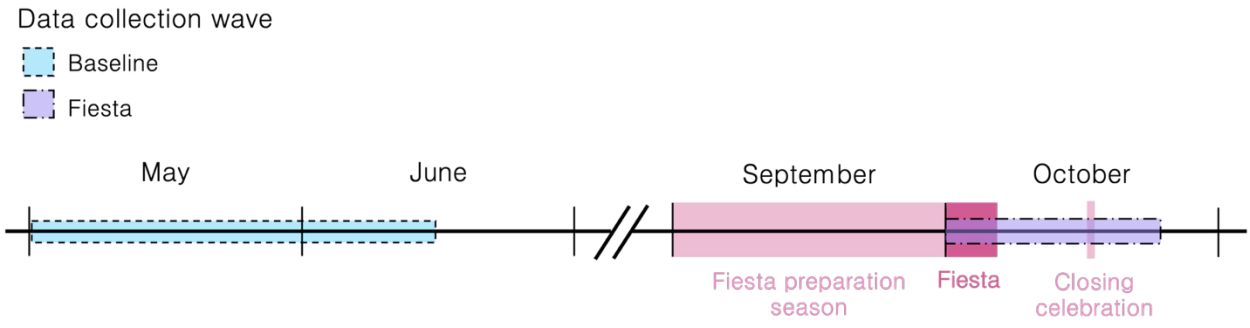


Figure 2. Data collection timeline. Data were collected in two waves, baseline (May-June 2022) and *fiesta* (October 2022). The *fiesta*, which lasted for 5 days in early October, was preceded by about a month of preparatory celebrations and followed by a closing celebration (10 days after the end of the *fiesta*). During the *fiesta* wave, survey data were collected during and soon after the *fiesta*, depending on participant availability. Because the Public Goods Game took longer and participants were very busy during the *fiesta,* all *fiesta*-wave PGG data were collected after the *fiesta* (between 2-22 days after the *fiesta*, mean = 8 days).

2.2 Participant recruitment and sample size

After an extensive and comprehensive recruitment process involving door-to-door canvasing, 48 participants completed the baseline survey. However, over the course of data collection, 12 participants dropped out (see Supplement S2.1), leaving 36 survey participants (18 female, with a mean age of 44.8). Robustness checks indicate that participant attrition was not biased and therefore unlikely to impact the study's results (S3.7). Of these participants, 34 also completed a post-*fiesta* survey module about *fiesta* participation. A subsample of 27 participants (15 female, mean age of 40) completed both waves of the Public Goods Game. Two of these participants were removed from the PGG analysis because they got fewer than 70% of the test questions correct, suggesting poor understanding of the game. This leaves 25 participants in the PGG sample. Two of these participants did not answer the *fiesta*-wave material security question, meaning that PGG models controlling for this variable have a sample size of 23 in the *fiesta* wave. All participants gave verbal informed consent before each round of data collection. This research received approval from the Harvard University Area Institutional Review Board (Protocol # IRB21-1632).

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected in two waves, baseline (May-June 2022) and *fiesta* (October 2022) (Figure 2). During the *fiesta* wave, survey data were collected during and soon after the *fiesta*, depending on participant availability. Because the Public Goods Game (PGG) took longer and participants were very busy during the *fiesta,* all *fiesta*-wave PGG data were collected after the *fiesta* (between 2-22 days after the *fiesta*, mean = 8 days).

All data were collected in-person by the first three authors, who were living in the community during the study period. Surveys and PGGs were administered in Spanish to Spanish-

speaking or fully Spanish-Zapotec bilingual participants. Apart the PGG decision data (coins in envelopes), all data were collected on tablets.

2.4 Survey measures

2.4.1 Repeated measures

At both baseline and post-*fiesta*, participants responded to survey questions designed to measure perceptions of group cohesion, prosocial attitudes towards ingroup members, ingroup trust, and household economic stability. For details regarding these measures, see Table 1. See S2.2 for further detail, including information about steps we took to adapt these measures to this field setting, such as the use of visual Likert scales.

2.4.2 Fiesta participation measures

The *fiesta*-wave of data collection included survey questions about donations to the *fiesta*, *fiesta*-associated work obligations, and how the participant felt during the *fiesta* (free-response). In addition, for each of the 5 days of the *fiesta* plus one day before and after, we asked participants whether they participated in collective ritual activities: attending mass, participating in a religious procession, participating in a general procession, playing music in the band, dancing traditional dances (*jarabes*), and performing a dance for an audience (*danzas*). We also asked about participation in other *fiesta* activities, such as doing communal labor or watching dance performances. A Collective Ritual Index was created by summing and then standardizing counts of participation in mass, processions, music-making, and dancing. Because people may have participated in a single activity more than once on a given day, these totals likely underestimate participation.

Table 1. Repeated survey measures

Variable	Category	Description	Source
Willingness to Help (Generalized Altruism)	Ingroup Altruism	"I would help a fellow community-member, even if they could never return the help" (5-point response scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree")	
Likelihood of donating to sick child	Ingroup Altruism	Responding to a vignette, participants reported their likelihood of donating to the family of a sick child for hospital bills (5-point response scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely").	
Likelihood of supporting widow	Ingroup Altruism	Responding to a vignette, participants reported their likelihood of bringing food or other support to a widow after her husband's death (5-point response scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely").	
Identity fusion	Cohesion	Measure of porousness between one's personal and collective identities and visceral feeling of "oneness" with the group. We used the Visual Identity Fusion Scale (Fig. 3).	Adapted from Swann et al. (2009), following Purzycki & Lang (2019) 11/2/26 11:50:00 AM
Shared Fate	Cohesion	Measure of perceived interdependence. Scale includes items like, "When my community feels good, I feel good" and "My community and I rise and fall together" (5-point response scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). To create the scale, we averaged across 5 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$ [95% CIs 0.67, 0.86]).	Ayers et al. (2023)
Trust	Ingroup Trust	"How much do you trust people in this community?" (5-point response scale from "trust completely" to "distrust completely")	
Material security	Economic stability	"How certain are you that you will be able to buy or produce enough food to eat in the next month?" (5-point response scale from "very uncertain" to "very certain")	Purzycki et al. (2016)

Notes: These measures were collected in both waves of the survey: baseline and post-*fiesta*. For more details about these measures, please refer to the Supplemental Materials (S2.2

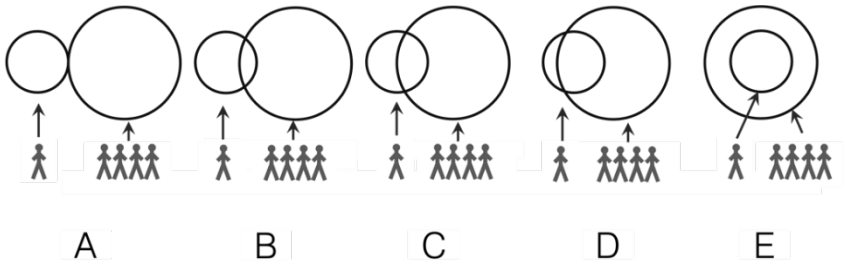


Figure 3. Visual Identity Fusion Scale (adapted from Swann et al., 2009). Participants were asked: "In each of these images, imagine that you are the little circle, and this community is the big circle. Using these pictures, how emotionally close do you feel to this community?"

2.5 Public Goods Game

To measure cooperative behavior, participants played an anonymous, one-shot Public Goods Game (PGG) with three other community members. In this game, each player was asked to divide a cash endowment of $100 MXN (ten $10 MXN coins, about $5 USD total) between two envelopes: a "self" envelope and a "common fund" envelope (Figure S3). Players kept any money that they placed in the "self" envelope, while contributions to the common fund envelope were doubled and then divided evenly between the four players. Payouts from both envelopes were made in a lump sum several weeks after participating. In this classic behavioral economics game, contributions to the common fund are understood as a measure of cooperation. The group can do best if everyone contributes to the common fund; however, an individual can do best if they free ride while the rest of the group cooperates. For more details about the PGG, see Supplemental Materials S2.3.

2.6 Data analysis

We used Linear Mixed Effects Regressions (LMER, R package "lme4", version 1.1–23) to analyze the results. In the basic analysis, for participant *i*:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Fiesta_i + \sigma_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where:

- Y one of the following outcome variables: identity fusion, Shared Fate Index, trust, willingness to help, likelihood of donating to the family of a sick child, likelihood of bringing support to a new widow, or PGG allocation
- $Fiesta$ is a categorical variable that equals 0 for baseline and 1 for *fiesta* data collection wave
- σ is the random intercept for participant i
- ε is the error term

Changes in economic stability between waves could impact cooperation in the PGG and willingness to help needy ingroup members. To avoid omitted variable bias, it is therefore important to control for changes in material security in the altruism and PGG analyses. At the same time, if material security is affected by the *fiesta* itself, including this control would introduce post-treatment bias into the estimates. To balance the opposing threats of omitted variable bias and post-treatment bias, we ran all altruism and PGG models with and without the material security control (PGG: Table 2; altruism measures: Tables S1 & S2). Results reported in the Main Text do not control for material security, with the exception of PGG behavior, since this measure is particularly prone to being impacted by changes in material security.

To increase power in this small sample, we stacked variables that measure similar constructs. To capture altruism, we stacked the two altruism vignette outcomes, creating a dataset with 2 observations per participant at each timepoint. We note that Willingness to Help is not correlated with the vignette measures (Likelihood of donating: r = 0.13, p = 0.28; Likelihood of helping widow: r = 0.06, p = 0.64) although they are correlated with each other (r = 0.37, $p <$ 0.001). This suggests that the abstract Willingness to Help and more concrete, locally-relevant vignette questions may capture distinct dimensions of prosociality. Hence, we did not stack

Willingness to Help with the other two measures. Similarly, we did not stack our two measures of cohesion, identity fusion and Shared Fate Index. These measures are not correlated (r = 0.16, p = 0.19), suggesting that they capture distinct dimensions of cohesion. LMER models analyzing the stacked outcome include crossed random intercepts for participant and outcome measure (R package glmmTMB, version 1.1.3).

Finally, we ran several robustness checks. First, because survey questions used 5-point Likert Scales and responses were often clustered towards one end of the scale (see histograms in S3.8), we reanalyzed those outcomes by fitting Cumulative Link Mixed Models (CLMMs) with a logit link (R package "ordinal", version 2022.11-16). Second, because outliers can unduly impact results in such a small sample, we ran Influence Analysis (R package "influence.ME", version 0.9-10) to identify overly influential participants in the main models. We then re-ran those models with the most influential participants removed (details in S3.1.2). Third, since some participants did not complete the PGG until several weeks after the *fiesta*, we analyzed PGG behavior for the sub-sample of participants who played the game within 1 week of the end of the *fiesta*. Prior research suggests that the psychological impacts of collective ritual can last at least a week, and sometimes up to 3 weeks (Páez et al., 2015), although others have found that effects peak during the ritual (Singh et al., 2020). We limited this robustness check to players who participated within 1 week of the *fiesta* (N = 18). This analysis can be found in S3.5.

Below, we report coefficients, 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs), p-values, and degrees of freedom, formatted as p(df).

2.7 Materials & data availability

Study materials, data, and analysis scripts are publicly available at: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/AF75N.

3. Results

3.1 Changes in prosocial psychology from baseline to post-*fiesta*

From baseline to after the *fiesta*, results suggest that ingroup altruism declined. Figure 4 shows that the strongest evidence is for a decline in Willingness to Help. After the *fiesta*, there was a 0.44 standard deviation decline in people's willingness to help a community member who couldn't return the help (full sample: β = –0.44, 95%CI [–0.85, –0.02], $p(35) = 0.04$, Table S1, Column 1; Non-Evangelical subsample: β = –0.58, 95% CI [–1.06, –0.10], $p(26) = 0.02$, Table S2,

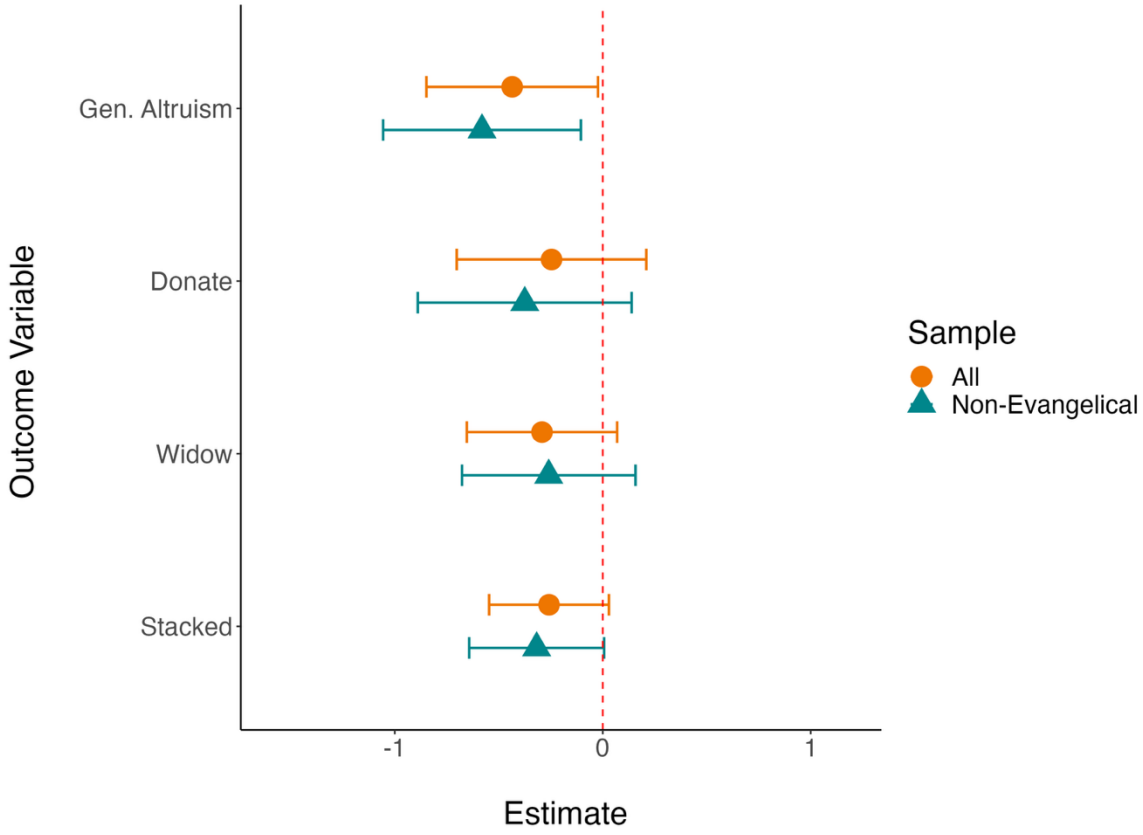


Figure 4. Evidence of declines in ingroup altruism from baseline to post-*fiesta*. This plot shows LMER estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the full sample (36 participants) and the non-Evangelical subsample (27 participants). *Generalized altruism* asked participants to state their level of agreement with the statement, "I would help a fellow community-member, even if they could never return the help." *Donate to a sick child* and *Bring food to widow* represent responses to vignettes wherein participants were asked how likely they would be to help a community member in need. *Stacked* shows the analysis of a stacked dataset, wherein the two vignette-based measures of altruism are collapsed into a single column (4 observations per participant). All continuous variables have been standardized. All models include random intercepts for participant. The stacked model includes crossed random intercepts for participant and altruism measure.

Column 1). There is likewise evidence of declines in the vignette measures of ingroup altruism, although there is more uncertainty in these estimates. After the *fiesta*, we observed declines in the reported likelihood of bringing food or other support to a new widow (β = –0.29, 95% CI [–0.65, 0.07], $p(35) = 0.11$, Table S1, Column 5) and of donating to the family of a sick child (β = –0.25, 95% CI [–0.70, 0.21], $p(35) = 0.28$, Table S1, Column 3), although the 95% confidence intervals are wide and include 0. When these two vignette measures are stacked (4 observations per participant), there is evidence of a moderate decline in altruism in both the full sample (β = –0.26, 95% CI [–0.55, 0.03], $p = 0.08$; Table S1, Column 7) and non-Evangelical subsample (β = –0.32, 95% CI [–0.64, 0.01], $p = 0.05$; Table S2, Column 7), although the 95% CIs on these coefficients just include 0.

When the most influential participants are removed, evidence of declines in altruism remains. In many cases, influential participants were pulling the coefficients on measures of altruism towards 0. So, removing them tends to result in larger negative coefficients that are more precisely estimated (see S3.1.2, Tables S3 & S4 for details). Analyses using mixed effects ordinal logistic regression (CLMMs with a logit link, more appropriate for Likert scale responses) yielded very similar results to the linear models (details in S3.1.1).

There is no strong evidence of a change in group cohesion from baseline to post-*fiesta*, as measured by identity fusion (β = 0.08, 95% CI [–0.21, 0.36], $p(31.3) = 0.58$) or Shared Fate Index (β = –0.17, 95% CI [–0.54, 0.19], $p(35) = 0.35$). Finally, there was flatly no change in trust from baseline to post-*fiesta* (β = –0.01, 95% CI [–0.38, 0.37], $p(34.4) = 0.97$).

3.2 Changes in cooperation in the Public Goods Game from baseline to post-*fiesta*

From baseline to post-*fiesta*, evidence suggests that contributions to the common fund in the Public Goods Game declined. Controlling for changes in material security, contributions to the common

fund were $14 MXN smaller after the *fiesta* (β = –13.89, 95% CI [–28.34, 0.56], $p(24.9) = 0.06$, Table 2, Column 2), although there is uncertainty in the estimate, with the 95% CIs just including zero. Contributions to the common fund declined from a mean of about $54MXN at baseline to about $40MXN after the *fiesta*. Results are similar in the non-Evangelical subsample (β = –15.71, 95% CI [–32.21, 0.78], $p(20.6) = 0.06$, Table 2, Column 4). In the full sample, Influence Analysis revealed two influential participants, who pull the coefficient in opposite directions. When these participants are removed, the decline in contributions to the common fund is more precisely estimated (β = –14.64, 95% CI [–26.36, –2.92], $p(21.8) = 0.02$, Table S5, Column 4). Finally, results from the sub-sample of 18 participants who completed the *fiesta*-wave PGG within 1 week of the *fiesta* show similar evidence of declines in contributions to the common fund (β = –16.41, 95% CI [–33.63, 0.80], $p(16.6) = 0.06$).

Table 2. Evidence of a decline in cooperation in the Public Goods Game

	Contributions to the Common Fund ($MXN)			
	Full sample		Non-Evangelical	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Fiesta	–12.00 (–25.48, 1.48)	–13.89+ (–28.34, 0.56)	–13.81 (–29.54, 1.92)	–15.71+ (–32.21, 0.78)
Material security		4.98 (–4.15, 14.11)		5.26 (–3.84, 14.39)
Random Eff.				
Sub.Std. Dev.	12.17	11.92	6.97	6.43
Obs(*N*)	50(25)	48(25)	42(21)	41(21)

Notes: LMER estimates with 95% confidence intervals. *Contributions to the Common Fund* shows how many pesos of their $100MXN endowment participants contributed to the common fund in the Public Goods Game. *Material security* asked participants how certain they were that they would be able to "buy or produce enough food to eat in the coming month". This variable has been standardized, with higher values indicating greater certainty. The columns labeled "Non-Evangelical" show results from the sub-sample of non-Evangelical participants (Catholics and non-religious). All models include random intercepts for participants. The sample size row shows the number of observations, with the number of participants in parentheses.

*** p < 0.001, ** p <0.01, * p < 0.05, + p < 0.07

In contrast, material security increased from baseline to post-*fiesta*: after the *fiesta*, participants reported feeling 0.30 standard deviations more certain that they could buy or produce enough food in the coming month (β = 0.30, 95% CI [–0.01, 0.62], $p(22.4) = 0.06$). In the discussion section, we will discuss how this change likely reflects seasonality.

3.3 Participation in the *fiesta*

On average, Catholics and non-religiously affiliated participants took part in 15.6 *fiesta* activities, including 6.8 collective ritual activities (dancing, processing, music-making, and attending mass) (Figure 5). 54% of non-Evangelicals who had no *fiesta*-related obligation still did communal work on at least one day of the *fiesta*. Evangelicals who had a *fiesta*-related obligation

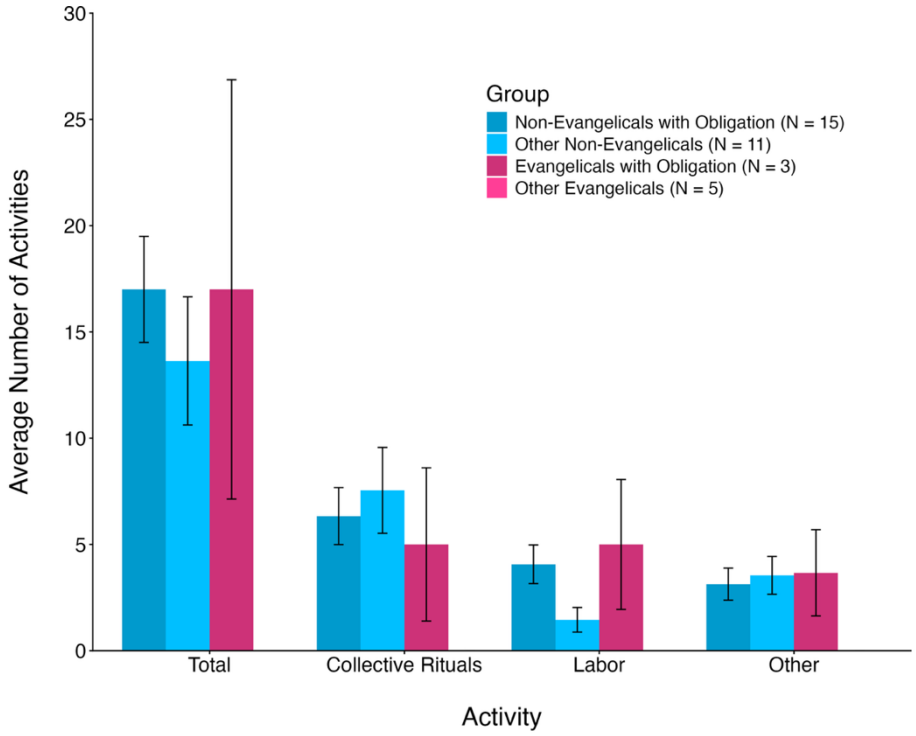


Figure 5. Participation in *fiesta*-related activities. Participants are subset by religion and by whether they had an obligation to do *fiesta*-related work (for example, *cargo* duties that required them to serve food in the community kitchen; coordinate dance performances; or ensure safety at the rodeo). Non-Evangelicals include Catholics and those with no religious affiliation. To estimate participation, we asked participants whether they had participated in various activities on each day of the *fiesta* plus one day before and one day after (0 = no, 1 = yes). "Collective ritual" activities include dancing *jarabes*, performing a *danza*, processing, attending mass, and playing music in the band. "Labor" activities include working in the community kitchen and other collective labor associated with the *fiesta*. "Other" activities include amusements such as watching the rodeo, dance performances, basketball tournament, or sparkler show.

Table 3. Emotions during the *fiesta* were mixed

Valence	% of Sample	Examples
Negative	35%	• "Stressed due to my obligations [as a *cargo*-holder]." • "Stressed, and tired feet." • "Hectic. Worried about the *fiesta* turning out well." • "Angry that [the leaders] didn't organize the *fiesta* well."
Neutral	21%	• "Calm, passing the day" • "Normal, normal daily life" • "Same as always"
Positive	44%	• "Happy to see my countrymen return and to be convivial with my neighbors." • "Excited that the *fiesta* happened again [after COVID]; it's wonderful that people are convivial, and that people come from other communities." • "Happy, proud to be serving all the people, the townspeople, the visitors." • "Happy, because the *fiesta* was really wonderful."

Notes: Table summarizes responses to the free-response question, "How did you feel during the *fiesta*?" Responses were coded for emotional valence (negative, neutral, or positive).

(N = 3) participated in an average of 17 *fiesta* activities, including 7 collective ritual activities, whereas Evangelicals who had no obligation (N = 5) did not take part in any *fiesta*-related activities.

In addition to a $500MXN cash contribution required of all households to help fund the *fiesta*, 50% of Catholic and non-religiously affiliated participants made a voluntary donation, while none of the Evangelical participants donated. Voluntary donations– which included cash, food, costumes for the dances, and decorations– ranged in value from $200MXN (~$10USD, a little less than local average daily wage) to $10,000MXN (~$500USD), with an average value of $2,755MXN (~$135USD). When asked why they donated, the top reasons that participants gave were that: they simply wanted to help; it is local custom to support the *fiesta*; and they had made a vow to a saint to donate something.

When asked how they felt during the *fiesta*, participants gave mixed responses (Table 3). About 44% of participants reported feeling positive emotions, including happiness, pride, and

excitement. Meanwhile, about 35% of participants reported feeling negative emotions during the *fiesta*, including stress and fatigue associated with *fiesta*-related responsibilities and annoyance at the poor organization of the *fiesta* by the town leaders. The remaining participants reported neutral emotions (e.g. "normal" and "same as always").

3.4 Exploratory analyses of moderating effects of *fiesta* participation and *fiesta* emotions

Given the small sample sizes, any analyses with interactions must be considered exploratory. First, to test whether actual participation in collective ritual activities had any moderating effects on outcomes, we included a two-way interaction between data collection wave and Collective Ritual Index in the model. Although evidence for an interaction effect emerged in several models, overall, we found no clear patterns in either the full sample or the non-Evangelical subsample. The strongest evidence suggests that there is a negative interaction on vignette measures of ingroup altruism, which would indicate that people who participated in more collective ritual activities saw a greater decline in ingroup altruism from baseline to post-*fiesta*. For example, when the two vignette measures of altruism are stacked, results reveal a negative interaction between data collection wave and Collective Ritual Index ($\beta = -0.35$, 95% CI [–0.64, –0.05], $p = 0.02$, Figure S5). However, for most outcomes, analyses revealed no evidence of interaction (for full results, see Supplemental Materials S3.2).

Second, after discovering that participants experienced a wide range of emotions during the *fiesta* (Table 3), we explored whether emotional valence had any moderating effect on outcomes. Prior research has found that emotional experience can play an important role in the psychological and behavioral impacts of collective ritual (Whitehouse et al., 2017; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014). Therefore, we included a two-way interaction between emotional valence and data collection wave in the models. Results reveal evidence of a negative interaction between data

collection wave and valence of *fiesta* emotions among non-Evangelicals on identity fusion (β = –0.74, 95% CI [–1.33, –0.15], $p(19.1) = 0.02$) and Shared Fate Index (β = –0.86, 95% CI [–1.89, 0.17], $p(23) = 0.10$). As illustrated in Figure 6, non-Evangelical participants who reported positive emotions showed signs of increases in identity fusion and Shared Fate Index, whereas those who reported negative emotions may experience declines in these measures of cohesion. In the full sample, the coefficient on the interaction term remains negative for identity fusion (β = –0.48, 95% CI [–1.18, 0.21], $p(27.5) = 0.16$) and Shared Fate Index (β = –0.64, 95% CI [–1.50, 0.23], $p(31) = 0.14$), but the coefficients are more imprecisely estimated and the 95% confidence intervals include 0. There is little evidence of any interaction between data collection wave and emotional valence on other outcomes (Supplemental Materials S3.3).

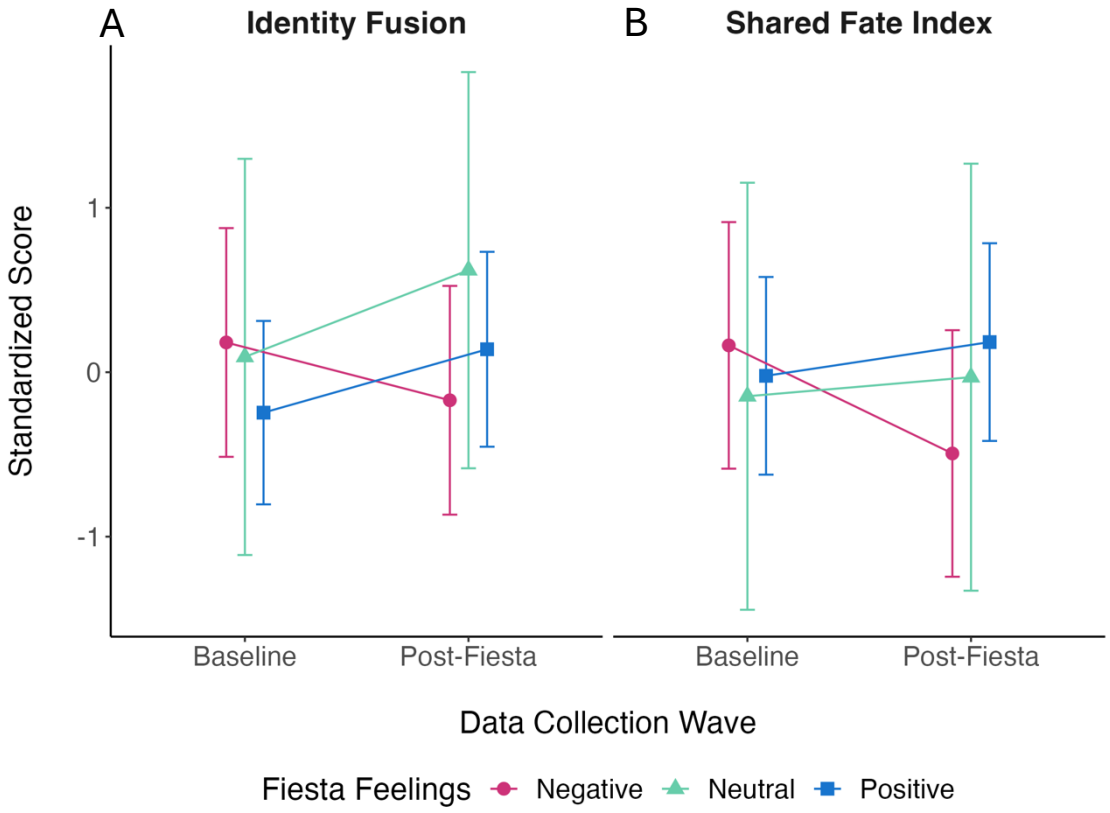


Figure 6. Interactions between *fiesta* emotions and data collection wave on (A) identity fusion and (B) Shared Fate Index. The regression lines show fitted values and 95% confidence intervals produced by LMER models predicting identity fusion and Shared Fate Index from the interaction between data collection wave and valence of emotions felt during the *fiesta*. The models include random intercepts for participants.

4. Discussion

Our results do not support the hypothesis that cohesion and cooperation increased in the community after the *fiesta*, a large and complex collective ritual. From baseline to post-*fiesta*, there were no changes in cohesion or ingroup trust. Moreover, there is evidence of a decline in ingroup-oriented altruism and cooperation. These results are not driven by Evangelical participants who disapprove of the *fiesta*; the patterns hold even when Evangelical participants are excluded from the analyses. These findings contrast prior research in both lab and naturalistic settings, which has consistently found evidence that collective rituals enhance group solidarity and prosociality (Jackson et al., 2018; Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010; Páez et al., 2015; Reddish et al., 2013; Wen et al., 2016, 2020; Xygalatas et al., 2011, 2013).

Although we did not find the expected increases in cohesion and cooperation, we found evidence that the *fiesta* demands substantial cooperation within the community. The *fiesta* was a huge cooperative endeavor, involving both obligatory and voluntary cooperation. *Fiesta*-related norms required community members to contribute their time, energy, and money to ensuring that the *fiesta* was a success. In addition to obligatory contributions, we found that half of the non-Evangelical participants made a voluntary donation, and the majority provided voluntary labor. Moreover, ethnographic observations revealed a custom of hospitality during the *fiesta*, wherein villagers prepared extra food at home and welcomed friends and neighbors to eat and socialize. Finally, the lengthy *fiesta* season (Figure 2, Figure S1) featured many smaller celebrations, each of which involved a mutual support institution called *gozona* (Curtin et al., Forthcoming). Villagers supported the host by contributing goods (cash, food items) and labor, which the host will slowly reciprocate over the coming years. Together, this evidence suggests that the *fiesta* does encourage cooperation within the community.

Why, then, do we see an apparent decline in altruism and cooperation after the *fiesta*? One hypothesis is that community members experience cooperation fatigue after such an intense period of cooperation. Villagers may feel that they have done enough for the community during the *fiesta* season and are thus less willing to help or cooperate with ingroup members. In interpreting low Dictator and Ultimatum Game offers among the Hadza hunter-gatherers, the anthropologist Marlowe (2004) raised a similar possibility. He suggested that food-sharing within Hadza camps led to "weariness", and that low offers reflected an attempt to escape from constant sharing. A similar dynamic could be at play after the *fiesta*, as participants seek reprieve after an intense period of cooperation. A complementary hypothesis is that normative expectations about cooperation change following the *fiesta*. There may be a community-wide understanding that everyone deserves a break, and cooperative norms weaken for a period. Given that community members are *obliged* to provide a large portion of the labor and financing for the *fiesta* (and may be punished for failing to contribute), a third alternative is that intrinsic prosocial motivation is crowded out by external forces after the *fiesta*. Extrinsic motivation– in the form of reward or punishment– can weaken intrinsic motivation (Frey & Jegen, 2001). Finally, it is possible that the religious divisions within the community contributed to the observed effects. Our analyses of the non-Evangelical subsample confirm that the declines in prosociality are not driven by Evangelical participants. However, the presence of Evangelicals who either did not participate or unwillingly participated (e.g. due to obligations as *cargo*-holders) may have impacted the attitudes of non-Evangelical participants.

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size. Although the within-subject design makes the most of the data, the fact remains that analyses with such a small sample warrant caution. Most of the effects reported in this paper are imprecisely estimated, with 95% confidence

intervals that include 0. Moreover, the effect sizes are probably inflated (the "winner's curse", Button et al., 2013), meaning that we cannot make strong claims about the magnitude of the declines in altruism or cooperation.

Nonetheless, we believe that these data deserve attention. It is notable that we consistently observe declines in all four measures of ingroup altruism and cooperation, across all model specifications. The sensitivity checks show that the observed declines are not driven by outliers; in fact, when the most influential participants are removed, estimates tend to become more negative and more precisely estimated. Together, these results suggest a real signal, although future studies with larger samples should further probe the psychological and behavioral effects of Oaxacan patron saint festivals.

Another limitation of this correlational study is that changes from baseline to post-*fiesta* may be caused by an unobserved variable. To account for the most obvious alternative– changes in economic stability over the study period– we showed that our results are robust to controlling for material security. This is an important control, since we would expect that willingness to help a community member or contribute in the PGG would decrease if economic stability worsened. There was a small increase in inflation in Mexico during the study period (INEGI, 2023), and prices of some staple goods in the region increased. Interestingly, we found that material security *increased* over the study period. We interpret this as reflecting the local agricultural cycle. Baseline data were collected near the end of the dry season, before crops could be planted, whereas the post-*fiesta* period was very close to the corn harvest (staple crop). However, because our measure of material security did not capture actual "cash on hand", it is still possible that *fiesta*-related expenditures drove the observed declines in prosociality.

Similarly, the absence of a clear moderating effect of ritual participation could be compatible with an omitted variable, rather than the *fiesta*, causing the observed changes. We found no consistent pattern of interaction between Collective Ritual Index and data collection wave on outcomes, although the low power means we cannot rule out an effect. The little evidence that did emerge suggested that people with higher ritual participation experienced a *greater decline* in vignette-based measures of altruism compared to those who participated less. This would be in line with some of the interpretations discussed above (e.g., people who participated more may experience more "fatigue" after the *fiesta*). However, the low power means that we cannot draw firm conclusions about the moderating effect of ritual participation.

Given that several studies have found a positive relationship between collective ritual and group cohesion (Jackson et al., 2018; Páez et al., 2015; Power, 2018), the lack of change in cohesion from baseline to post-*fiesta* is puzzling. It is possible that the null effect is an artifact of low power. However, our exploratory analyses point to a moderating effect of emotional valence on cohesion: participants who reported feeling positive emotions during the *fiesta* perceived a greater increase in cohesion compared to those who felt negative emotions. While some researchers have proposed that rituals characterized by high levels of *dysphoria* have a potent effect on cohesion (Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014), these results suggest that positive emotions during ritual can better bond groups in some cases.

This study points to new avenues for research into the social and psychological effects of *fiestas*. If they do not enhance cohesion and cooperation, why do costly Oaxacan *fiestas* persist? One possibility is that *fiestas* do foster group solidarity, but the effects emerge over the longer-term– either after a post-*fiesta* dip, or ontogenetically as people grow up participating in many *fiestas.* As a preliminary step, future research should test whether Oaxacan communities with more

fiestas are more cohesive and cooperative. Second, *fiestas* may shore up networks of social support within the community via mutual support (*gozona*). *Fiestas* provide an important context for ritual exchange and mutual support in Oaxacan communities (Beals, 1970; Ramos Gil, 2017; Stephen, 2005). Social network research should probe whether *fiestas* enhance the cohesion of social support networks (Power, 2018). Finally, *fiestas* may improve or sustain peaceful intergroup relationships in a region where intergroup conflict is common (Cook, 2014; Dennis, 1987; López-Bárcenas, 2004; Yannakakis, 2008). During the *fiesta*, outsiders from nearby communities visit and partake in the festivities. The *fiesta* may function as a credible signal of the community's ability to cooperate on a large-scale (Mehr et al., 2021). Future work should examine the psychological impact of these rituals on visitors from nearby communities.

Broadly, this research adds nuance to the literature on collective ritual. To our knowledge, this is the first study to document declines in altruism and cooperation after a collective ritual. We also found that, despite dancing, music-making, and processing, participants on average experienced no increase in perceived cohesion. These results suggest that not all collective rituals have psychological effects on cohesion or ingroup-oriented prosociality. Future research should investigate the temporal dynamics of the psychological impacts of collective rituals and consider moderating effects of emotional valence. While the sample is small, we hope that this study will motivate more research into complex, real-world collective rituals and how they shape social psychology in societies around the world.

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6. Declarations

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

7. Declaration of generative AI use

During the preparation of the manuscript, Claude Sonnet (v4.6) was used for minor assistance with coding in R. The first author has reviewed and verified the code.

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