

Christopher Kavanagh

Recent research on extreme ritual events have focused on their ability to generate 'prosocial' behavior amongst performers and observers (Xygalatas et al., 2013) and this has been hypothesised to relate to dysphoric experiences encouraging the formation of the intense relational bonds characteristic of identity fusion (Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014). This paper reports the results of efforts to test these predictions using quasi-experimental field research methodologies at two Buddhist and two Shinto firewalking festivals in Japan. Responses to questionnaires were collected in the pre-ritual and post-ritual period to examine whether, in line with previous research, more prosocial attitudes & behaviors and more inclusive self-identities were evident in the post-ritual period. The results demonstrate that observers and performers respond differently to extreme ritual events with fusion-like bonds being directed at more relational targets for performers and at the broader community for observers. Evidence for elevated prosocial behavior and more inclusive self-identification proved extremely limited and, additionally, substantial differences were found between the Buddhist and Shinto events. The results offer some support for existing evolutionary theories concerning the role and psychological effects of extreme rituals but also raise questions about generalizability and highlight the need for further cross cultural and intra-cultural replications of findings.