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TALK

ADAPTIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF EPIDEMIC STORIES AS A PROTECTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AGAINST INFECTIOUS DISEASES

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ABSTRACT

Epidemics, like the recent COVID-19, are humanity's deadliest disasters, impacting societies across health, psychology, social, and economic domains. A unique legacy of devastating infectious diseases, found across cultures, are epidemic stories explaining disease ethology and providing behavior guidelines during outbreaks. This aligns with the theory that storytelling, a universal human behavior, serves as an adaptation increasing chances of group survival by transmitting fitness-relevant information. We tested this premise among indigenous Asmat people in SouthPapua, Indonesia (n = 100, Mage = 43.38 , SDage = 15.42). The relationship between knowing stories of past infectious diseases and being afraid of the COVID-19 was assessed only for participants aware that there was a COVID-19 in Papua and in the world (n = 87). Knowledge of epidemic stories was positively associated with both: (1) being afraid of the COVID-19, $r(85) = .38$ [.18, .55], $p < .001$, and (2) social isolation, $r(85) = .25$ [.04, .44], $p = .020$. Next, social isolation was compared between participants who knew stories with isolation recommendations when facing contagious diseases (n = 11) and participants who knew stories about contagious diseases but without isolation recommendations (n =76). On average, participants knowing isolation stories (M = 4.50, SD = 0.39) declared higher social isolation during COVID-19 than participants who did not know stories with isolation recommendations (M = 3.20, SD = 1.80), Welch's $t(74) = 5.48$, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = .999. The outcomes support the hypothesis that epidemic stories may function as an adaptation for survival.