**Eliciting Values and Social Norms from Folktales -**

**Insights From a Novel Folktale Database**

LONG ABSTRACT

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*Abstract*

*It is often maintained that most values, norms and moral systems are largely time-invariant but empirical evidence supporting that claim has been virtually non-existent. This study is a first step to change that. Since folktales, such as legends and fairy tales, are often transmitted virtually unchanged from generation to generation, we rely on them to extract information about the values, norms, and attitudes held dear by different societies in the past. On the basis of some 19,000 folktales from 122 countries, we have produced a “historical world values survey”. We take advantage of recent developments in artificial intelligence in order to elicit values and norms from folklore texts. Our analysis shows differences and commonalities in these across different world regions and cultures. It allows us to compare historically prevalent values and norms with contemporaneously held ones.*

*Keywords: folktales, fairy tales, culture, values, norms, moral systems, moral foundations.*

*JEL classification:* A13, D90, K00, O10, Z10

This paper is part of a larger project in which we rely on different kinds of folklore as sources of information regarding the values, norms, and attitudes held dear in historical societies. To date, we have collected more than 19,000 pieces of folklore from all over the world. In this paper, we analyze the values and social norms that are promoted in various folktale traditions. Particular emphasis is placed on values and norms that have been shown to be conducive to development. The concrete values and norms analyzed include those facilitating exchange (such as honesty), encouraging entrepreneurship (such as innovative behavior, acceptance of moderate risks, encouragement to try again even after having failed once), non-discrimination (such as based on gender, race, religion, language, or family membership), and res publica (altruism, willingness to contribute voluntarily to the provision of public goods etc.).

The term folklore refers to “all the forms of cultural learning passed on by word of mouth or personal example in any group … Folklore includes all the traditional forms of expression that circulate without the aid of books” (Jones 2013, 2). Folktale scholars hold that it is one common function of folktales “to preserve and promote cultural and personal values… In traditional fairy tales morals typically center around the preservation of existing values and the maintenance of social stability” (Ashliman 2004, 4). Fairy tales would be “veritable catalogs of ancient beliefs and practices… (ibid., 15). This is why we extract a historical world values survey from our folktale database.

In constructing the database, one important criterion was that folktales should be at least 120 years old to be included in the database. Determining the geographical origin of folktales has been a vexing question in folklore research. For our database, this is a non-issue as long as a particular folktale has been transmitted over many generations in a particular region because we assume that the values and norms promoted in these fairy tales will have been transmitted in the respective region. This implies that some folktales might belong to numerous traditions.

To be included in the present analysis, we required that we have at least 30 pieces of folklore from a specific folktale tradition. As of today, that is the case for 122 countries covering all continents. To elicit the values, norms and attitudes promoted in fairy tales we rely on two complementary strategies: the first one consists in feeding ChatGPT with a folktale and ask it to identify up to five values and norms promoted in a particular piece. This is, hence, a very open approach. In the second approach, in addition to the folktale proper, we feed ChatGPT with a survey instrument containing some 60 variables. This approach is, hence, a lot more structured than the first one.

This database will enable us – and other researchers – to deal with quite a few questions. These include the issue to what degree contemporaneous entrepreneurial behavior can be explained by norms encouraging such behavior in folktales. It also includes the question whether contemporaneous discrimination is based on values and norms promoted in folktales. We are currently preparing a follow-up study in which we try to elicit historically valid informal institutions defined as commonly known rules whose non-compliance is sanctioned by members of society.

Our database can be considered a historical world values survey. By comparing historically prevalent values and norms with contemporaneously held ones, it will help us better understand what values and norms are time-invariant and which ones are subject to change. By relying on network analysis, we will be able to identify those values enjoying a high degree of centrality in a specific society. We expect this to be policy-relevant as network analysis enables us to understand how various values and norms are connected with each other in different societies.

References

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