

On the psychology of culture:

Urban legends, mad cow disease, drinking tales, and the Mozart Effect

During the talk I'll review a number of empirical studies about how cultural ideas succeed and fail. I've attached three papers as background readings. The Emotional Selection paper shows how urban legends are selected by the social marketplace of ideas to provoke an emotional reaction. Controlling for informational content, legends that evoke more emotion are passed along more in lab experiments and are more widely distributed on the internet. Our results suggest that the marketplace of ideas will often operate to select ideas that render an emotional punch rather than ideas that are most informative or truthful. The Mozart Effect paper traces the evolution of a scientific legend--the idea that playing Mozart to children increases their intellectual ability--and shows how it evolves over time and migrates towards places in society where it seems to offer a solution for a pressing problem (i.e., states with low performance on national standardized tests). In the talk, I'll spend my time reviewing these empirical studies and two or three others that describe how cultural ideas succeed in the broader social marketplace of ideas. The Linguistic Memes paper is a review paper that discusses how these ideas might be applied to understanding the diffusion of cultural logics in organizations. It's the most speculative of the set and I won't focus on it in the talk--preferring instead to present some empirical pieces--but we're in the process of revising it so I'd appreciate feedback and reactions you have.