

Hunger and Hoarding

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Suzanne Collins' futuristic trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, takes place in Panem, a totalitarian nation of obscene wealth and pervasive poverty. Its twelve districts are all impoverished, but District 12, the coal-mining region formerly called Appalachia, is the poorest of the poor. Citizens struggle to eke out a living in the mines, but hunger is the norm and the unfortunate routinely die of starvation.

Panem is the opposite of a welfare state. There is no dole, no safety net—certainly no 47 percent. Indeed, there is no institutional sharing at all. Katniss Everdeen, the tale's hero, nearly starves to death as a child, and later turns to hunting and foraging to provide for herself and her family. But she expects no handouts, nor does she receive any.

In some ways, District 12's plight is not unlike that of our primitive human ancestors, who also had to devise strategies to get by in a world of scarce resources. They also hunted and foraged for plants, and they also faced periods of debilitating hunger. But our ancient ancestors came up with a better solution to the problem of scarcity. They embraced communal values, in words if not in actions.

That's the theory of psychological scientists Lene Aaroe and Michael Bang Petersen, both of the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Aaroe and Petersen believe that resource sharing was so crucial to human survival that it became deeply engrained in our collective psyche, where it remains today. Indeed, modern social welfare policies and institutions may be simply a modern manifestation of an ancient mental strategy to coerce widespread sharing.

The scientists decided to explore this notion in the laboratory. They wanted to see if the physiological state of hunger leads to verbal endorsements for the idea of sharing—redistribution—which could in turn prod the more fortunate to share willingly what they have. To test this, they recruited volunteers and had them fast for four hours. Then half of these hungry volunteers drank a soda sweetened with sugar, while the others drank an artificially sweetened soda. This left some volunteers satiated, while others remained hungry. The scientists measured their blood sugar before and after, and low blood sugar served as a marker for hunger.

After drinking the sodas, all the volunteers were asked to express their agreement—or not—with several statements about social welfare. They expected that those who remained hungry would voice more support for institutional sharing policies—and they did, clearly. The hungry volunteers were much more supportive of the idea of state welfare programs.

Do these words translate into action? Does the embracing of communal beliefs lead to magnanimous giving to needy others? The answer is no. When the volunteers were given an actual opportunity to distribute their own resources, the communitarian effects of low blood sugar were completely nullified by the countervailing motivation to hoard resources. As described in an article forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*, the hungry volunteers moralized but did not ante up when given the

chance. Put another way: “Talk is cheap.”

Apparently, the public endorsement of communal sharing is a gambit—a strategy to get others to part with their resources. When it comes down to it, it seems that hunger pangs activate two strategies, which work together to alleviate need. We talk the talk to get others giving, but we defend our own cherished resources from the takers.

Excerpts from Wray Herbert’s blogs—“We’re Only Human” and “Full Frontal Psychology”—appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and elsewhere.