S1E4: Transcript

The third in a special, 5-part Covid 19 conversation series

with Athena Aktipis

Cooperation Amidst Catastrophe

Tava Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert, and in every episode of this podcast, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you a conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how those discoveries can be translated into practical tools.

This episode is the third in our five-part special series focusing on Covid-19. Today Richard talks with Athena Aktipis, co-director of the Human Generosity Project, about the results of her study of cooperation during the pandemic. Professor Aktipis discusses the insights both past and current research offer about the extent and the limits of human generosity during catastrophic events.

Athena Aktipis: I am Athena Aktipis. I am an associate professor in the Psychology Department at Arizona State University. I also direct the Interdisciplinary Cooperation Initiative at ASU, and I co-direct the Human Generosity Project, a multi-method, multi-site, really interdisciplinary project that we have to look at cooperation and sharing across societies. And our goal is really to understand the interplay between biological influences on cooperation and sharing and the cultural influences.

Richard Sergay: You call yourself a cooperation theorist. What does that mean?

Athena Aktipis: Cooperation as a topic is one that spans a lot of different disciplines. So, you know, there are psychologists who study how humans cooperate. There are sociologists who look, you know, at society in terms of larger scale cooperation. There are evolutionary biologists who look at how all sorts of different species evolve to cooperate with each other or not. Even aspects of microbiology have to do with cooperation because microbes

can cooperate with each other. And of course in anthropology, it's also a huge topic. So there's always different disciplines, including all those that I've mentioned, but also computational modeling can be used to look at cooperation, economic models can be used to look at cooperation. So the list goes on. I mean, almost every discipline intersects with trying to understand human social behavior and cooperation in some way. And so I think, you know, to really study cooperation effectively, and to really understand how we as humans cooperate with each other, when we're generous, when we're not, all of these questions fundamentally require us to engage with a lot of different perspectives and disciplines in order to really understand what's going on.

Richard Sergay: In fact, you've mentioned that it is a multidisciplinary approach. Tell me who's on your team.

Athena Aktipis: We have many anthropologists on our team who have spent altogether, if we add them all up, a couple of decades in the field, working with hunter-gatherers, working with pastoralists, really seeing how cooperation is happening on the ground. We have psychologists on our team who are looking at behavior in online games, and by online games, I really mean experiments that we set up online for people to play. And then there's computational modeling, that's a huge part of the project. And then, you know, we have a lot of other projects as well that are part of my lab where I and we collaborate with people across many other disciplines. So in my work on looking at cancer from a cooperation theory perspective, I actually work with clinicians, I work with cell and molecular biologist, I work with geneticists to try to understand how cancer actually can be looked at as cellular cheating, because our bodies are really made of cooperation. All of the cells in our bodies are cooperating and coordinating their behavior all the time to make us functional, and cancer is essentially a breakdown of that cooperation. With that project, it's extremely interdisciplinary, really leaning on the biology side in terms of cancer biology, but we're also working with ecologists to try to quantify what's happening inside the body in terms of the ecological dynamics. And that also involves looking at things that have to do with cooperation happening even among cancer cells. Essentially, depending on which topic we're working on, the teams that we build are composed of individuals that span many, many different disciplines.

Richard Sergay: Tell me about the genesis of your study around cooperation and the pandemic.

Athena Aktipis: We meet regularly, the Human Generosity Project, my lab research group. And very early in March, we had one of my colleagues visiting, Peter Todd, who I've known for years, and he and I were both aware that there was a growing concern about what was not yet declared a pandemic, coronavirus, Covid-19. It was a growing problem, but at that point WHO had not declared it a pandemic. We met with my lab, including my grad students and undergraduate students, and we just started talking about how are people approaching this? Are people worried about this? And, and it was partially a conversation just about wanting to give everybody a chance to talk about where they personally were at. But we also realized that it was a important opportunity to potentially study how people's behaviors and motivations might get changed. Of course, at that point we had no idea what the scale was going to be, but we saw that something was brewing that was potentially going to have very major effects on us.

Together with Peter Todd and a few of my graduate students and a group of team members, including an emergency room doctor and a colleague of mine who works in natural resources and is also a commander in the National Guard, an artist who on our team, a person who works in English literature at ASU, so a very diverse cross-disciplinary team, we put our heads together to think, you know, well, what kinds of questions do want to ask people now and then follow? And so we put together the survey really focusing primarily on questions about social behavior, but also about how people were thinking about the future and how they were thinking about risk. And up to this point, the parts that we've had a chance to look at, really have to do with cooperation and interdependence.

Richard Sergay: So give me some examples of the types of questions you would ask in your survey.

Athena Aktipis: One of the things that we asked about in the survey was essentially, to what extent do people feel like their outcomes, what happens to them, is tied to outcomes for all of humanity or for their neighborhoods? So this is basically to assess this construct of interdependence, really, you know, how interdependent do you feel with your neighborhood or with all of humanity? So the items for those were, "When all of humanity succeeds, I feel good." Or, "when my neighborhood succeeds, I feel good" or, "all of humanity and I rise and fall together." At least for these interdependence

items, people's ratings on them went up significantly from before the pandemic was declared to several weeks after that. What we saw is that this really important shift that happened for people in terms of quarantine being implemented and people really, you know, switching to a different way of life, especially for the first month or so of the pandemic, that potentially influenced interdependence overall.

Richard Sergay: And what did it mean specifically for cooperation?

Athena Aktipis: Some of the questions for cooperation that we asked are, "how willing would you be to let somebody live in your house while they're having their house fixed?" And also, "how much do you agree with the notion that helping people when they're in need is the right thing to do?" So we had several different questions. What we found there was mixed. So we saw an increase in people's willingness to actually let somebody who is not a citizen of their own country live in their house if they're having it fixed, which we were kind of surprised by, but that was interesting to us. So contrary to, I think what some people are thinking or were thinking about the pandemic, it didn't seem to have a negative effect on people's willingness to help somebody who's not a citizen of their own country, at least in that particular way. But we actually found a decrease in people's endorsement of the idea that helping people when they're in need is the right thing to do, both for people in your neighborhood and for people who are not a citizen of your own country.

Personally, maybe I'm a little disappointed I would have liked to see that people were, were endorsing that more. But I think it's quite possible that what happened with the pandemic is that there was a shift of priorities. And I think for a lot of people, a focus, a little bit more on making sure that your needs and your family's needs are taken care of. And that's a really legitimate response, at least initially when there's a big change, but we don't know for sure why the changes happened in the way they did. I'm really just speculating now as to why we saw some of the patterns that we did.

Richard Sergay: And I'm curious how you break this down demographically, culturally, religiously. Are there data sets that you're parsing now that help us understand cooperation on various demographic levels?

Athena Aktipis: Actually, our last round of data collection, we had a bunch of additional questionnaires that will let us then see if people views, approaches

attitudes now, essentially, can sort of in retrospect, predict how they changed over time over the course of the pandemic, because we have the same cohort of participants now. So we can ask them questions now and then look at how their responses relate to the way that their responses changed over the course of the pandemic.

Richard Sergay: What's your working thesis about cooperation and the pandemic? Does humanity take a positive pro-social role in helping one another?

Athena Aktipis: There's sort of two levels on which I can answer that question. One is a very academic one, which is, it's quite likely that people's awareness of their interdependence with others is something that because of the nature of the pandemic, it is a virus that is spread through contact and dependent on the practices of people in the community that you live in, you could be more or less at risk. That nature of that threat fundamentally highlights our interdependence with one another. I predict that these changes in interdependence are likely to be something that is relatively stable, I think so long as people do understand the pandemic in that way.

The other side of the sort of, you know, more academic approach is in terms of cooperation and people's intentions to cooperate their motivations, to cooperate, and their actual behaviors in terms of cooperating. Those, I think can vary a lot when people are under threat. Sometimes they become more sort of constricted both in terms of thinking about the short term and thinking about the individuals closest to them, maybe not thinking about individuals who are more distant to them, but sometimes threats do expand people's sense of who is a part of their world. We saw some hints of that with the results that people were more willing to let someone who is not a citizen of their own country live in their house while that person was having their house fixed.

Cooperation is not one unitary thing. There are many different ways that people can help each other, and there are many different ways to measure it. We're likely to see diverse responses, both in terms of these different ways of measuring cooperation and then looking across individuals with different backgrounds and other characteristics that might influence them.

Richard Sergay: So needless to say, we live in a politically divided society here in the US, as well as a culturally divided society. How do you think cooperation and the results you will get break down in terms of that?

Athena Aktipis: The goal of our project is not necessarily to look at the effects of people's political association. Just speaking personally, it's really unfortunate that our society has become as divided as it has become, and that the question of how to best deal with the pandemic health effects and the economic impacts that all of that has become so politicized, because ultimately all of us as Americans or, you know, residents of this country, we share the same big picture goal of helping this country to thrive. We're all interdependent in that sense. And the political divides have really made it much harder for us to keep our collective eyes on that ball of, you know, how do we work together to help this country thrive in the many dimensions that it can. I think we need to acknowledge that interdependence that we have and the shared interest that we have in that in order to really be able to effectively cooperate to make this country into the country that we're all really proud to be a part of in terms of responding to challenges like the current pandemic.

Richard Sergay: So if I hear you correctly, I mean, you bring in essence an optimistic view of human nature to this issue of cooperation.

Athena Aktipis: When you were sort of asking me about the thesis for this project, I was kind of speaking with my scientist hat on, but I can speak a little bit more informally just about how I see this. It's actually possible to achieve really high levels of cooperation and maintain those. But once you start tearing at that fabric of trust, and people start worrying that others are trying to take advantage of the system or are succeeding in doing that, then it becomes much harder to maintain cooperation and effectively coordinate. So it's important to acknowledge the positive sides of human nature that are there, and the immense sacrifices that lots of people are making for others right now. And to appreciate the intentions and the actions that really do show that cooperation and willingness to coordinate our efforts that we're seeing in a lot of the country, despite many challenges that are going on at the same time. So there are many good reasons for us to take seriously the importance of the cooperation that is happening and help to support that and share the word about that good news, as opposed to just all of the negative things that tend to make the news feeds more than the positive things.

Richard Sergay: You've written that apocalyptic times can bring out the best in us. What do you mean by that?

Athena Aktipis: There's some very interesting work on human behavior in post-disaster context. One of my favorite books on this is Rebecca Solnit's book called A Paradise Built in Hell. And it's about in the aftermath of disasters, the spontaneous helping that arises among people you'd expect, sometimes people you wouldn't expect. This has been the case after natural disasters, after manmade disasters. One of the topics that she delves into a lot in the book is the aftermath of the major earthquake in San Francisco, right at the beginning of the 1900s. In this time, there was so much destruction, so much uncertainty, so much loss and devastation. There was a huge outpouring of spontaneous helping and people setting up places to feed others, lots of businesses stopping charging people for goods and services. All that happens without a coordinated, top-down kind of response. It's spontaneous, coming from people's desire.

And this is something that we're interested in, in the Human Generosity Project more broadly. When you do have these negative events, like at our field site in Fiji, they often have cyclones hit. And people will help each other within villages, but also when cyclones happen, sometimes the whole village is hit. Then they'll get help from neighboring villages that they have built relationships with. So you see spontaneous helping on lots of different scales and levels. You see it among individuals in the same household. You see it among people living in the same communities. Then you also see it among communities as well.

We think that this has been an aspect of human nature that has really been understudied from an evolutionary perspective. A lot of the work on the evolutionary biology of cooperation has focused on the idea that cooperation can only be stable if individuals are cooperating with people who are related to them, or if they're cooperating with people who will pay them back. Those two have really been the kind of dominant paradigms in the evolutionary biology, cooperation theory field for a very long time. We've kind of been challenging that by pointing out that actually there are a lot of situations where humans spontaneously help without expecting anything in return, and that can help them manage their risk better. And that actually can lead to higher survival in the longterm because having a network of people that you can depend on can sometimes be the difference between life and death.

Richard Sergay: And do you think we're seeing that in this pandemic, and as this pandemic unfolds over the next year to 18 months, will we continue to see that?

Athena Aktipis: Usually when bad things happen, people come together in physical space, right? And that gives them the opportunity to communicate with each other about their needs to help each other, and even sometimes without having to explicitly communicate, right? Like if you're just coming together, you can see if somebody's cold or they're hungry, and you can respond to each other in this much more direct kind of way. But because of the constraints on our ability to socialize and come together from the pandemic, a lot of that communication and coordination is happening through technology in one way or another. As unfortunate as that is, I think for us as humans, that we can't have as much of that one-on-one interaction around helping each other, in terms of studying cooperation and mutual aid, it's actually a really unique opportunity for us as researchers, because there's much more of a sort of trail left that we could potentially follow to then quantify what's going on, what the changes are and how much people were asking for certain kinds of help or even changes in the kinds of language maybe that people were using. Those are all things that we have the potential to look at that we otherwise wouldn't have been able to look at, so much of the communication has had to move to a technological platform.

Richard Sergay: What do you think some of the lessons learned will be over the next six months to a year about cooperation in the pandemic?

Athena Aktipis: There's a huge shift that's happening now among people in terms of understanding of a lot of the fundamental social structures that we've taken for granted. So all of that is potentially going to be people's responses to these questions. And we've been collecting data throughout, so we will be able to look at how did those events potentially alter people's responses? We're at a really challenging time now as a country, you know, going back to our early conversation about the unfortunate political divides, I still am holding onto hope that the situation that we're in now will at least help us to realize the value of some things that maybe we were starting to lose sight of before the pandemic.

For example, you know, and it almost seems silly to talk about this now, because it seems not really that important in comparison to a lot of the challenges that we're facing as a country, but the issue of how much our attention is taken up by our electronic devices versus actually being able to cultivate the connections between us and people in our lives who we really value. Because of the changes that have happened with the

pandemic and with social interaction as a result of it, I do think people are starting to realize how important social interaction is with the people who are close to us. And, and also, you know, the importance of being able to have conversations with people who might not be like you, and to be able to do those in person.

This is all to say, I'm a very big advocate for all of us to step outside our comfort zones in terms of wherever we're used to getting our information from, whoever we're used to listening to and to, you know, listen to other voices and not with the goal of arguing, but with the goal of understanding where they're coming from, because ultimately we share a lot more than we think. And that includes sharing a lot of the same goals for the wellbeing of our communities and our country and humanity as a whole. If we can see eye to eye on that, then maybe some good will come out of what's been a very, very challenging time for America especially.

Richard Sergay: So the pandemic actually may give us a new perspective on what's important in life.

Athena Aktipis: If we can make use of it in that way, then maybe it won't all have been for naught.

Tavia Gilbert: We hope this episode leaves you feeling hopeful about the possibility that the cooperation that has developed during Covid may sustain and transform our communities for the better post-Covid.

We'll be back in our next special episode with an exploration of the relationship between religion and community during times of crisis.

Joseph Bulbulia: A sense of social belonging is that "there are others out there that I can count on. There are others out there who care about me." Fostering social belonging would be the most important thing you can do in a pandemic response.

Tavia Gilbert: That was Prof. Joseph Bulbulia, the MacLaurin Goodfellow Chair in Theological and Religious Studies at the University of Aukland. We'll be back soon with Richard's full conversation with Prof. Bulbulia, when he discusses how religious interaction, worship, and teaching come together to facilitate group cooperation, and what we can learn from that to support us during the pandemic.

In the meantime, we hope you enjoyed today's Story of Impact. Your support helps us reach new audiences, so please take a moment to subscribe, and rate and review us on Apple Podcasts. For more stories and videos, please visit storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. This episode produced by Tavia Gilbert. Assistant producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod.

The Stories of Impact podcast is supported by Templeton World Charity Foundation.