Social psychology theories and prosocial behaviour

Using social psychology theories, discuss the situational factors that affect the likelihood that people will engage in prosocial behaviour. What is the evidence for these effects, and how might changes in our society affect the likelihood of people acting prosocially?

Introduction

Societies strive for more social cohesion and better integration of members in the community, to foster wellbeing; thus it is important to study ways of achieving better interpersonal relationships. Research indicates that some situational factors increase prosocial behaviour in society. According to Dovidio et al (2006) prosocial behaviour is influenced by biological, psychological, and environmental and social factors. " Prosocial behaviour is voluntary behaviour intended to benefit another. Thus, it includes behaviours such as helping, sharing, or providing comfort to another" (Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs, 2007, p. 1). In addition, Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs (2007) argue that prosocial behaviour is important for the quality of close relationships and interactions with other individuals and groups. People in groups help each other more in time of need or distress, and societies need people to help each other in order to successfully have a healthy and peaceful society. This essay would explain three social psychology theories; the need-to-belong theory, the self-categorization theory, and the sociometer theory. These theories would be discuss with research about situational factors that affect the likelihood of prosocial behaviour, and how societies could increase these probabilities.

Social Psychology Theories

Three psychology theories are examined in order to discuss the situational factors that affect the likelihood that people will engage in prosocial behaviour. According to Fiske (2012), these theories are linked with social core motives: these need-to-belong theory is linked to the social need to belong, and reflect the reasons why people want to be part of groups. Secondly, self-categorization theory is related to the social motive of understanding people's motived for sharing social accounts. Thirdly, sociometer theory is associated with the social motive of self-enhancing where people assert themselves.

1. Need to belong theory

Baumeister (2012, 3) claims that humans' minimum need for forming and maintaining social relationships drives human behaviour, emotion and cognition. The need to belong to groups makes people follow social norms and to act accordingly to social standards, in order to feel accepted and integrated into the community. Several studies observed that excluded people are more likely to engage in aggressive, non-cooperative, and disruptive behaviours. For example, excluded minorities result in less academic performance, more prone for violence and crime, and lack of engagement in prosocial activities (Baumeister, 2012, p. 30). Also, Baumeister claims that the government has the duty to make more social connections because of the increasing individualism, decreasing social connections, and continuing small families and relationships. Therefore, the need to belong theory could suggest that people are more likely to act prosocially in order to feel included in the society.

2. Self-categorization theory (SCT)

Turner and Reynolds (2012, p. 3) clarify that the self-categorization theory explains in what circumstances people perceive themselves as individuals and as members of groups, and its repercussions. Groups change people's behaviours and attitudes in accordance to expected behaviours in order to maintain their membership in the group. The group impact on member's attitudes and behaviour depends on the level of internalization of belonging to a group (Turner and Reynolds, 2012, p. 15). The authors suggest that it is possible to change core people's features by altering the norms, values and beliefs that delineate that particular group. They suggest to use social identities to foment cooperation within subgroups, and deeper integration to a group (Turner and Reynolds, 2012, p. 24).

3. Sociometer theory

Sociometer theory claims that people's actions are based in protecting and increasing their value in relation with others, therefore enhancing the probabilities of acceptance in society (Leary, 2012, p. 3). It has been suggested that through evolution human begins have been able to survive because of living in supportive groups. Acceptance and affiliation of these members facilitated natural selection over those members who did not follow the norms nor values of the community, and who were rejected (Leary, 2012, p. 12). People with low self-esteem also lower their value in relation with others, and this could lead to depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug problems, and other troublesome behaviours. (Leary, 2012, p. 13). In addition, according to the sociometer theory, there are three problems related with dysfunctional behaviours. First, rejection creates negative feelings in people, and foster abnormal interpersonal behaviour, usually

creating depression, anxiety, and hostility. Second, people normally strive higher relational value with desirable social means, but rejected people are more prone to be involved with deviant groups because their standards are lower. Third, people ineffectively accepted make distances and devalue themselves in relation with other individuals, and lower their self-esteem, increasing their probabilities to engage in problematic behaviour, such as drug abuse, and violence (Leary, 2012, pp. 22-23).

Situational Factors and Prosocial Behaviour

There are many situational factors that affect how people act prosocially. For example, people are more likely to engage prosocially if the cost of helping is low, if the person is attractive, if there is no one else who could aid, if they are in a good mood, and if they have been exposed to prosocial models (Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs, 2007, p. 2). In addition, personality also plays a role; for example, shy people are more likely to help others in a situation where they won't be exposed. (Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, Firske (2001) claims that the presence of bystanders can interfere with prosocial behaviour in a negative way.

Regarding the need to belong theory, people who have been exposed to prosocial models reflect the importance of following societal norms in order to feel included. Secondly, SCT says that they can change people's attitudes and beliefs if it is changed in their group; therefore, based on the situational factors mentioned above, people can be taught about the bystander effect to diminish its effect, and to encourage helping others disregarding their mood, appearance of the victim, and the cost-calculation. This would foster a more

harmonious society, where people help each other with less trivial impediments. Finally, the sociometer theory would suggest that people would engage more in prosocial activities if they are included in society, and feel valued in regards to others.

Prosocial Behaviour

According to Dovidio et al (2006) prosocial behaviour is influenced by biological, psychological, and environmental and social factors.

1. Biological : Trivers (1971) introduced " reciprocal altruism", where people are more likely to help others because of the probabilities of receiving their help, thus increasing their survival opportunities. For instance: identical twins (sharing 100% genes) are more likely to help each other than fraternal twins (share 50% of genes) (Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs, 2007, p. 3). According to the need-to-belong theory, reciprocal altruism could be a societal norm in the community, therefore people would engage in this behaviour to feel accepted. SCT would suggest that reciprocal altruism could be internalized in new groups in order to foster prosocial behaviour. The sociometer theory would claim that reciprocal altruism contributes to the acceptance of the group, therefore member would help more others.

2. Social learning and cultural influences : from childhood people are taught social norms, such as the *norm of reciprocity* and the *norm of social responsibility* (De Cremer & van Lange, 2001). Several parenting skills of providing support, prosocial values, and behaviours of helping

others tend to foster prosocial behaviours in children (Krevans& Gibbs, 1996). Limitation: cross-cultural variations in helping. Some evidence are: Robert Hampson (1984) claims that status in the peer group is associated with the level of group acceptance and type of prosocial behaviour. In addition, Francesca Gino and Sreedhari Desai (2012) argue that childhood memories produce moral purity, which elicits to greater prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, Authoritative parents' models are linked with teaching prosocial behaviour to their children (Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs, 2007, p. 3)

According to the need-to-belong theory, parents would teach social norms and skills of prosocial behaviour in order to feel part of the community. Secondly. SCT suggests that these norms can be internalized to groups and subgroups in order to increase social cohesion, and prosocial behaviour. Finally, sociometer theory would claim that parents teach these social values in order to increase the relational value of their children compared with others who do not help.

3. <u>Empathy and Altruism</u> : both empathy and altruism could stimulate prosocial behaviours (Batson, 2006). Some evidence is: firstly, some argue that prosocial behaviour is always based on selfish reasons. For example, people help to enhance their mood or to avoid negative feelings. (Eisenberg, 2007). Secondly, Batson et al. (2007) concluded that empathy produces altruistic motivation to help others and is independent of egoistic motivation. Thirdly, Findlay et al. (2006) claim that more empathic children are link to greater prosocial behaviour. Fourthly, Simpson & Willer (2008) argues that prosocial behaviour

happens even when there are not reputational incentives. Finally, Nancy Eisenberg et al. (1989) argue that sympathy partially facilitates prosocial dispositions in early stages and it is consistent overtime.

According to the need-to-belong theory empathy and altruism could be practiced in order to feel part of society. SCT would suggest that altruism and empathy could be internalized in the values of groups, and increase prosocial behaviour. Finally, the sociometer theory would claim that empathy and altruism would be use to increase member's relational value to others, and to be more accepted in society; therefore people would practice them more if they were more suggested to society.

Conclusion

The need-to-belong theory, the self-categorization theory and the sociometer theory explain the psychology behind why people act prosocially, which is mainly based on being part and influence by a group, and feeling accepted and integrated. These social psychology theories could be applied in prosocial behaviour research, including biological, social learning and cultural influences, empathy and altruism, and situational factors. These studies suggest that several factors, such as parenting, socialization, level of empathy, altruism, mood of people, among others, play an important role in internalizing prosocial values in society. There are high probabilities of increasing the probabilities of prosocial behaviour with teaching people their importance for belonging into the community.