

# Psychology – pro social behaviour essay sample



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My assignment is based on the discussion of pro social behaviour through social psychology findings and whether it's thought to be selfish, selfless or both. Pro social behaviour refers to "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals" (Eisenberg and Mussen 1989, 3). These behaviours include a broad range of activities such as sharing, comforting, rescuing, and helping. Pro social behaviour is helping someone with no thought of reward or compensation. In this discussion I will argue that there are cases of selfish and selfless pro social behaviour. The literature suggests that pro social behaviour has only been researched since the 1970's. Social scientists started using the term as an antonym for anti social behaviour.

A person who doesn't expect recognition for helping someone is seen to be doing a selfless act. A simple example of this would be if a person witnessed a car accident, an impulsive reaction would be to run and help. The person doesn't stop to think what they would benefit from assisting so therefore this act can be considered selfless pro social behaviour. Another example would be a person donating money to a charity anonymously, if no one knows who donated the money then the person is getting no gratitude for it. However one could argue that there is a small degree of selfishness involved as the person may feel some self gratitude. It can also be argued that some charities have employees who are paid on commission, being paid for the 'harder' they work. Therefore they are benefiting financially (reward / compensation) despite carrying out these kind acts. Is the help performed in these tasks motivated by the prospect of some benefit for ourselves, however subtle?

This draws the discussion of Pro Social behaviour, Selfless or Selfish?

According to the theory of universal egoism, people are fundamentally selfish and altruism is impossible – altruism is defined as the principle or practice of unselfish concern for or devotion to the welfare of others (opposed to egoism) ([www. dictionary. refrence . com/browse/altruism](http://www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/altruism)). Pro social behaviour can be confused with altruism, they are, in fact, too distinct concepts. Pro social behaviour refers to a pattern of activity, whereas, altruism is the motivation to help others out of pure regard for their needs rather than how the action will benefit oneself. This has been and still is the dominant ethos in social science, including psychology. Similarly, sociobiologists consider acts of apparent altruism to be acts of selfishness in disguise. Mc Dougall (1908) proposed that sympathetic instincts are responsible for altruistic acts. Only about twenty psychological studies of helping were "published before 1962 but the murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 opened up the flood gates of research into bystander intervention and altruism (Schroeder et al., 1995). The Kitty Genovese murder also introduced the concept of the unresponsive bystander to denote people's typically uncaring attitude towards others in need of their help.

It is thought remarkable that out of thirty eight witnesses not a single one did anything to help. These findings make me question for an individual to intervene in an emergency what factors or influences are involved. As previously mentioned altruism acts are described as carrying out a non reward act like helping someone who has been knocked down. Is this because of an individual's good nature or is it because nobody else is there to help? In the Genovese case did the presence of others determine nobody

else stepping forward? I can further discuss the blend of altruistic and self interested motivations. Egoism, seen as extreme self interest, occurs when self importance or a need to feed one's own image is the motivator. An example of this is making a large monetary donation to a university for the purpose of having a lecture theatre named in your honour. Mutual benefit occurs when a person assists another with an expectation that that person, or another, will one day do something to return the favour.

An illustration of this is covering a colleague at work and expecting the same back in the future. A known example of egoism is the case of Tania Head. She claimed that she survived the September 9/11 attacks, and she set up a support group to console people who had lost loved ones. Tania said she was on the 78th floor of the South Tower, making her one of only 19 survivors who had been at or above the point of impact when the planes hit. She used this claim of survival to gain much exposure and remind the public of the survivors that were struggling and gained more charity donations. Tania's claims were proven false, she was not in the twin towers and did not lose a loved one. However she did donate time and effort to raising money for victims of 9/11 and greatly highlighted their plight.

While Tania's behaviour was egoistic, by her actions she did benefit a group of individuals whose voices would not have been heard otherwise. This is an example of pro social behaviour that is motivated solely on self interest or selfishness. Many of today's research suggest that pro social behaviour is more of a selfish act, as has been highlighted in the examples above. There are also many examples that reflect a more altruistic pro social behaviour. There was an estimated 36, 000 units of blood donated to the New York

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blood centre during the 9/11 destruction. Donators may have felt some gratification for helping but this would be the extent of their reward and compensation. They would have received no individual recognition-unlike in the Tania Head case.

Another example in the discussion of selfish and selfless pro social behaviour is acts of charity. Irish records for supporting overseas development are very much recognised. A report published on July 2010, by Global Humanitarian Assistance, ranked us as the fourth most generous in terms of donations per citizen. The Irish nation does not just dig deep for overseas, but very much at home too, to the homeless, impoverished, the disabled, the sick, the young and the vulnerable. This may signify mutual benefit pro social behaviour, as we may expect the same back if experiencing similar difficulties. However, as a nation, to donate overseas so graciously may appear more altruistic than selfish as it is anonymous. Celebrities are not short of their contributions to charity, from 'Live Aid', to 'Stand up for Cancer, to 'Childline' etc. Celebrities have already fame and fortune, so for them to donate their time and money suggest a more selfless act of pro social behaviour.

Pro social behaviour has been researched outside of humans and there are publications of these behaviours in primates, helper bees, ants, wild dogs and other species, known as biological altruism. Social scientists point to the animal world as proof that pro social behaviour is a pre programmed biological function of humanity rather than solely nurtured or learnt actions, e. g. a rabbit thumps his foot to warn other rabbits of some form of threat or danger. This would appear to be a selfless act but because it's simply part of

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their biology it's questionable about it being selfless. Psychological altruism is displayed by higher mammals, in particular, primates and, especially human beings. According to Brown (1986) the closeness of kinship is construed very differently from one society to another. So there is no simple correspondence between perceived and actual kinship. If altruistic behaviour directly reflected actual kinship, it would be possible for adoptive parents to give their adoptive children the quality of care they do.

As a species, much of our behaviour is altruistic, and as Brown (1986) says ' human altruism goes beyond the confines of Darwinism because human evolution is not only biological in nature but also cultural and indeed in recent times primarily cultural. Overall, with the research and reading that I've done, it's hard to argue that pro social behaviour is a non reward / compensation act despite people's best interests at heart and the want not to receive gratification. I was very much trying to sway to the side of selfless, but examples have been strong enough to show that even the smallest of good deeds will result in some self gratification.

However, there are many varied ways of displaying pro social behaviour, having different levels or concepts of selfless and selfish reflections i. e. egoism, mutual benefit, altruism. Although altruism is motivated mainly out of a consideration of "another's needs rather than one's own, it does not display ' obvious' external rewards. Further research will always result in more discussions and debate with selfless verses selfish. The concept of pro social behaviour and its psychological foundations are extremely important in further research and practice in a number of fields, including education, social work, criminal justice and law. As much as our biology encourages us

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to engage in pro social behaviour, research is starting to suggest now that people are weighing up the cost of helping (Lante and Darleys Decision Model). It appears there will always be what appear to be selfless acts, although internally they can be somewhat selfish.

### Bibliography

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