

Prosocial behavior: importance of empathy in modern society



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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore some of the different variables that influence the importance of empathy in modern society. These studies seek to answer the research question, how important is empathy in modern society? The goal is to analyze the different variables that influence the importance of empathy in modern society and determine whether biological, motivational, cognitive, and social processes all contribute to our prosocial tendencies or if one topic is the source of our empathy.

Prosocial Behavior: Importance of Empathy in Modern Society

Empathy is something that comes naturally to us from birth. We only learn what it is we are doing later through school and understand that empathy stems from the emotions we share with others and the intentions of individuals to help either come from the sense of a greater self or how it will later benefit the individual.

How important is empathy in modern society? Let's find out. The current research on prosocial behavior covers a broad range of topics that include biological, motivational, cognitive, and social processes (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, and Schroeder, 2005). Many studies cover what specifically influences people to help others the source of variation in procs social tendencies and the unique ways in which societal and parental perspectives facilitate the development of prosocial behavior in children.

This literature review will discuss helping at the interpersonal level, the origins of pro social tendencies, and the pro social actions performed by

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parents/ individuals to influence children. It is also important to review some specific influences such as how gender plays a role in prosocial behavior, individuals upbringing, certain disorders, and how emotions can have consequences for someone's behavior. People's emotions compel actions, leading them to react to certain situations. These factors are connected to the self-determination theory promoting satisfaction and in-turn, motivation to act.

If this study is important because it will further address some of the different variables that influence the importance of empathy in modern society. Understanding the current status of the research done on prosocial behavior will greatly benefit the future direction of this field. The study of personal behavior has a long history and the limited knowledge of this field has led to many people turning away from researching prosocial activity.

Review of Literature

Prosocial Behavior on an Interpersonal Level

Prosocial behavior is any voluntary action taken to help out another person. Altruism and Prosocial behavior are two words that constantly appear throughout these studies. Altruism is the desire to help others without an expectation of a reward. There is a slight difference of the definitions of each term. Prosocial behavior is the helping actions a person takes, and altruism is a motivation for an action. When it comes down to it, people really only care about their self-interest. " An economic view of human behavior people are motivated to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs" (Penner et al., 2005). Humans mostly want something positive to come out of what <https://assignbuster.com/prosocial-behavior-importance-of-empathy-in-modern-society/>

they have done. Why would anyone waste their energy on something that doesn't benefit them when they could do something else that changes their life for the better. This seems to be how people in cities act, for example, why would someone help a homeless individual on the street when they can spend that money on themselves at a later point. Some people will keep the money due to their current financial status, but someone help the homeless individual because they are humble. They can relate to their situation and want to help better the homeless persons life because in turn, it will fill them with positive feelings.

Why people help. What makes some people help and not others? Is it empathy arousal? Situational factors? Maybe humility? All of these play some kind of role in why people help each other. " Humility appears to be an important personality quality related to helping others in need" (Labouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012). In this study, researchers were looking to see whether a humble person would be more helpful in an unexpected situation than a less formal person. Some big features of humility include low selfishness and fair mindedness, which may indicate that a person of humility would be more likely to help someone in need. Linking humility with a humble person may result in an individual who offers more of their time to volunteer or contribute their resources to someone else who needs it more. This makes sense someone who understands another person's situation has either experienced or been in a similar situation and someone who doesn't judge others by their appearance or status in society. Some people are just not humble and lack empathy.

Lack of Empathy." Persons with a holier-than-thou attitude, arrogance, or sense of superiority" (Labouff et al., 2012). These individuals are the ones to blame their circumstance on other people and always kick people to the ground when it benefits them. They would rather better their own self-image. This lack of empathy can, in most cases, be related to anti-sociality. Antisocial behavior and prosocial behavior do not go hand-in-hand. Individuals with antisocial behavior are "presumably more superficial and selfishly motivated by extrinsic rewards, such as expectations of reciprocity or social recognition and status" (White, 2014). There is not sense of doing something out of the kindness of the heart. There always has to be some type of external motivation that quickly grabs the attention of the individual. Without this, they would show personality traits such as boredom, recklessness, and irresponsibility because nothing matters to them if they don't get anything out of it.

The Relationship between Empathy and Antisocial Behavior. This research has taught us that empathy arousal is correlated to influence whether or not individuals will help someone in need or not. Some other factors that may influence this is someone in need or not. Some other factors that may influence this is someone's willingness to help based on race and nationality. It's said that these factors influence how someone treats another individual. People who look similar, as in, they see some self-characteristics of themselves in another person, affect an individual's choice as well. One characteristic that is universal is sympathy. Research shows "that inducing sympathetic concern is likely to foster helping" (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Giunta, 2010). No matter how anti-social or humble someone is, more than likely, if

they feel sympathy for someone, they will help them out. A question left unanswered is if there is something structurally different about people's brains who are humble or antisocial, that would be very intriguing to find out.

Prosocial Tendencies and Individual Differences

According to the Evolutionary theory, evolutionary theorists define "altruism [...] in terms of consequences" (Penner et al., 2005). This is different than previously mentioned, as altruism was a term for motivation. These theorists "agree that prosocial tendencies exist in humans because of genetically based predispositions to act pro-socially" (Penner et al., 2005). In terms of evolution, humans have evolved because we communicate and work together. Pushing everything discussed earlier to the side, studies suggest that people are more willing to help based off of "relatedness." What this means is people aren't being anti-social when they don't help out strangers, but they are just less inclined to help because they are "family" or someone very close to them that they consider family. This takes us back to barbaric times, worrying about one's own inclusive fitness, what will benefit themselves more in the long run and in the generations to come. One study showed that "both Americans and Japanese reporting that in a "life-or-death" circumstance, they would be more likely to help healthy relatives (who presumably were more likely to reproduce) than nonhealthy relatives" (Penner et al., 2005). This just goes to show that maybe people do things from an evolutionary standpoint because they want the strongest to survive and the weak to die off. This is a very barbaric way of looking at things, but it makes sense. Maybe people are choosing whether or not to help out because they view people at a lower status to be weaker and those who help out

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because they are going through similar situations view them as equals instead as lesser.

Prosocial Tendencies create “ heroes”. There are four competitive perspectives of moral heroism: “ moral action is primarily instigated by situational pressures, another holds that moral excellence entails the full complement of virtues, the third asserts a single superintending principle, and the fourth posits different varieties of moral personality” (Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop, 2010). The question is, is heroism essentially banal? People praise “ heroes” for risking their lives to save someone else in a fire for example, or swimming out into rapids to save someone drowning. These acts aren’t just any ordinary doing, especially when risking their own life for someone else. We can connect this to being humble, or maybe even situational factors, like being the only person in the immediate area to save someone’s life. That would make someone consider if it’s worth their life or not. If they did not take action, would they be considered evil? “ The banality of evil is matched by the banality of heroism” (Walker et al., 2010). When these situational forces play a role in springing someone from not doing anything to doing something or vice versa, would they feel guilty if they thought they made the wrong choice?

Helping Behavior and Guilt Proneness. The definition of guilt is a feeling of having done wrong or failed in an obligation. This emotion can be seen negatively by many, but this emotion directly relates to humbleness. People who are guilty, think, feel, and act in a more ethical behavior because they are ashamed and have a lower limit of guilt making them “ equals” with other people who have made wrong choices as well. Guilt proneness is <https://assignbuster.com/prosocial-behavior-importance-of-empathy-in-modern-society/>

related to “ conscientiousness, agreeableness, empathy” (Torstveit, Sütterlin, & Lugo, 2016). These terms come from The Big Five and empathy has been covered extensively. These qualities have shown to lead to helpful behavior and the feeling of responsibility for another person’s well-being. If an individual were to leave someone trapped in a burning house, they would feel responsible for that person’s well-being because they are the only person in the immediate proximity. They would have to live with the fact that they did not take action and would feel this sense of responsibility for not acting.

The relationship between heroes and guilt. It’s clear that there are links to being a “ hero” and being humble and being “ evil” and feeling guilt. There were attempts made by Gagné (2003) to make the engagement in prosocial behavior “ mandatory” within certain settings by using an incentive system. This is seen as a way to increase the amount of prosocial behavior we see from day to day. Some examples for these incentives included benefactor plates, donor dinners, and gifts to people who contribute to charities.

Unfortunately, this did not work. A question many have is why it didn’t work and why did it, in some cases, deter people away? One answer could be that these incentives make the act of helping others contingent. People were only helping others because they were getting something in return instead of doing it because they cared. One study required “ mandatory volunteering” which doesn’t make sense because mandatory is required when volunteering is more altruistic. “ When people feel obligated or controlled by external contingencies” they no longer enjoy what they were doing, and it becomes more of a chore. According to the Self- determination Theory, when “ human

beings have basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Contexts that support the satisfaction of these needs will promote a person's enjoyment of activities and the autonomous self-regulation of behaviors" (Gagné, 2003). Moving back to heroism and guilty proneness, someone will feel like a hero when they enjoy the act of helping others. When there is a contingency like " mandatory volunteering," one might feel guilty because they feel responsible for not completing something that shouldn't be mandatory in the first place.

How Children Learn from Prosocial Behaviors

Emotions of empathy and guilt influence adults just as much as they influence children. " Emotions, [...], shape behaviors of many types, not just prosocial and anti-social behaviors" (Roberts, Strayer, & Denham, 2014). A child is constantly surveying its surroundings through Freud's psychosexual stages. They need to be flexible to adapt to different circumstances and with that comes ego control. The ability to change one's level of ego control is critical because in some situations it is important to be creative and spontaneous while other situations require focus and determinism. To tie this back to guilt and empathy, children with moderate ego control are expected to have " higher levels of adaptive guilt, which requires the ability to respond in behaviorally well-regulated ways (Roberts et al., 2014). When it comes to empathy, the relation is not going to be as strong because it is less dependent on behavioral regulation.

Cognitive Empathy. The definition of cognitive empathy refers to the capacity to take the perspective of others and the understanding of

emotions. What if that person has a disorder? How does it affect their understanding of emotions? Looking at Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) more specifically, this disorder is commonly known for the deficit in social and communication skills for children. There are “ impairments in emotion recognition as a component of cognitive empathy using a variety of pictures and short film clips of emotional facial expression” (Deschamps, Been, & Matthys, 2014). Even by taking early action to intervene and try to improve the social behavior of children with ASD. Is a child who is unable to properly assess facial expressions considered anti-social? Actually, children with Autism are very expressive and social. It still remains unclear how early in children’s development does cognitive empathy deficits emerge.

Role of the Parents. This study begins by explaining that “ parenting [should] encourage the child to take the perspective of others and help children develop cognitive empathy and child prosocial behavior (Farrant, Devine, Maybery, and Fletcher, 2012). There is a big emphasis for parents to visually display and encourage “ socialization of empathy” and “ prosocial behavior. As explained earlier, children start to explore and develop through the psychosexual stages. As they develop, so does their prosocial behavior. The mother needs to produce emotional empathy in the child’s early years to show how to respond and reciprocate empathy. The development of prosocial behavior starts early and should not be shoved to the side for a later date. “ The importance of maternal socio- emotional availability and responsiveness is highlighted by research, which found that children’s empathic responses at two and four years of age were predicted by the degree of maternal socio-emotional availability, and responsiveness shown

towards the children when they were aged between 9 and 15 months” (Farrant et al., 2012). It is important to teach children the important emotion of empathy because it determines how they will treat others later in life.

Future Direction

The future research for each topic chosen is related in some way. All the research scientists have conducted have been limited by a few factors, amount of people participating in study, ethical issues, and hitting different perspectives to get the bigger picture. The bigger picture here is how can we better confirm relationships between children and parents to receive and reciprocate empathy. After this bond is secure, continuing to empathize with children as they develop into their adult years. Teaching them prosocial behaviors, how to be humble, how to have sympathy towards others. Doing things from the good of their heart instead of expecting some type of reward. All of these topics show the importance of empathy in modern society.

Conclusion

Empathy plays a key role in how we treat others in society today. Let’s take social media for example. We see generous acts of kindness every day on YouTube, Facebook, and every other social media platform. Some of these acts may be out of the kindness of people’s heart, but there are some who profit off of these videos and don’t give back to the community. These are the underlying motivations that people have when posting these videos online, hoping to become internet famous and gain more followers. This should not be the motivation behind helping others out. It is very important <https://assignbuster.com/prosocial-behavior-importance-of-empathy-in-modern-society/>

that parents understand the role they play in teaching their children empathy and how beneficial it will be if we are a giving society who looks out for one another instead of being selfish and only caring about one's self-image. The main point emphasized throughout the paper is the importance of empathy in modern society and how all these topics are directly connected to one another in one way or another. In order to examine this relationship further, further research focusing on prosocial behavior and empathy is encouraged.

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