

Facilitate or impede helping behaviour psychology essay



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It has often been assumed that animals were in the first place rendered social, and that they feel as a consequence uncomfortable when separated from each other, and comfortable whilst together; but it is a more probable view that these sensations were first developed, in order that those animals which would profit by living in society, should be induced to live together,... for with those animals which were benefited by living in close association, the individuals which took the greatest pleasure in society would best escape various dangers; whilst those that cared least for their comrades and lived solitary would perish in greater numbers. (Darwin, 1871, pp. 80)

Charles Darwin believed that pro-social behaviours probably evolved through natural selection in many species an argument which very few within the evolutionary sciences may question, including that of whether many species including human beings are able and sometimes willing to act pro-socially toward others and even total strangers (Darwin, 1871). There is evidence that voluntary actions that benefit others are rooted in both human and animal behaviour, with humans being identified as the most pro-social primate species and one of the most prosocial of all species (Wilson, 1980). What is debatable within the psychological sciences is what drives pro-social behaviour, why are there stronger forms of pro-sociality where individuals risk significant injury or even death for the welfare of another person or even a group and are these pro-social actions selfless or selfish in nature (Hogg & Vaughn, 2011).

Pro-social behaviour has been defined as voluntary actions performed that are intended to benefit another individual or group of individuals (Eisenberg & Musson, 1989), in addition however, it can also be further defined as

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actions that whilst benefitting another person, are done without any expected reward for the self (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Pro-social behaviour is often referred to as helping or altruistic behaviour; however there is a distinction between how these different classifications are perceived within the social sciences. Pro-social behaviour describes acts that have positive social consequences and are perceived positively by society in direct contrast with that of anti-social behaviour (Wispe, 1972 as cited in Hogg & Vaughn, 2011). Helping behaviour is viewed as a sub-category of pro-social behaviour as it is intentional and has direct benefits for another individual or group (Hogg & Vaughn, 2011). Altruism is again viewed as sub category of pro-social behaviour and refers to an act that is performed to benefit another, usually at some cost to oneself. True altruistic behaviour is deemed to be selfless, with no expectations of personal gain or for some ulterior motive (Batson, 1991 as cited in Hogg & Vaughn, 2011).

Some of the philosophical concepts of pro-social behaviour often have their roots set in religious connotations. The commandment 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' is a basic tenet in Judaism and the parable of the Good Samaritan, who pitied and helped an injured man (Luke 10: 29-37), often is cited as an example for Christians. This essay will discuss several psychological and social theories that are associated with the pro-social behaviours such as sharing, comforting, rescuing, volunteering, giving and helping. Despite there being many differing perspectives this essay will focus on only a few theories and whilst looking at the empirical evidence to support them, attempt to explain phenomena such as soldiers performing acts of heroism to save their comrades, fire fighters risking and losing their

own lives whilst rescuing people, such as from the within the collapsing World Trade towers in New York on 11 September 2001 and acts of individuals such as Oscar Schindler who undertook huge personal risks to save hundreds Jews in Nazi Europe during World War II.

Several biological approaches that imply a genetic argument for pro-social behaviour will be discussed including evolutionary theory, which claims that pro-social behaviour developed to preserve the survivability of the species and that there is a genetic link which enhances our instincts to help others (Gangestad & Simpson, 2007). When viewed through a sociobiological lens, both kin selection, with its claims that individuals are more likely to incur detrimental costs to themselves when providing help to those who are closely related to them (Hamilton, 1964) and reciprocal altruism, with its argument of by helping another individual, you will help yourself via reciprocal beneficence, something that is claimed to have been a major factor of human social life for thousands of years, will indicate that both approaches lean towards the evolutionary approach to pro-social behaviour (Allison, 1992).

By looking at more cognitive approaches such as bystander theory, which resulted from the work of Darley & Latane (1970) following the Kitty Genovese murder in 1964 and looks at the reasons why individuals help or in some cases do not help, and the social exchange theory and the cost and rewards model as proposed by Piliavin, Rodin and Piliavin (1969), which through social exchange theory suggests that individuals will only help when the perceived rewards of helping outweigh the costs to themselves. By looking at each of these approaches and their supporting evidence it is <https://assignbuster.com/facilitate-or-impede-helping-behaviour-psychology-essay/>

hoped to be able to determine whether pro-social behaviour is a selfless or selfish act, what factors facilitate or impede its implementation and whether it is influenced by social, culture or biological constraints.

Despite a first look at pro-social behaviour from a psychologist perspective being carried out by McDougall (1908), who claimed that pro-social behaviour was due to the parental instinct resulting in tender emotions, little scientific research was performed in this area until psychologists reacted to the non-responsive actions of 38 alleged witnesses to the brutal murder of Katherine “Kitty” Genovese in 1964 (Rosenthal, 1964). Following this incident, significant research has been carried out in attempt to understand pro-social behaviour from a broad range of biological, motivational, cognitive, and social processes (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005).

In the 1970s, biologist Edward Wilson introduced a new field of study, sociobiology, in order to study the social behaviours of animals and humans that were purely motivated by the organism’s own biology (Wilson, 1980). Evolutionary psychologists have referred to his work, where he documented examples of many different animals and insects ‘helping’ each other, as evidence from the animal world that pro-social behaviour is a pre-programmed biological function of humanity rather than a behaviour that can be socially learnt or nurtured (Simpson & Beckes, 2008). Throughout human evolutionary history, people lived in small groups or bands, often resorting to working, hunting and protecting each other in order to ensure survival of the group and so that any future generations could prosper (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989).

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In 1859 Darwin's theory of evolution focused on survival of the fittest, indicating that pro-social behaviours and even altruistic tendencies would play a large part in this theory (Darwin, 1871). However, what Darwin's theory cannot explain is why some acts of pro-social behaviour involved such self-sacrificial actions? Evolutionary theory suggests that pro-social tendencies exist within individuals because of genetically established bias to act pro-socially and because of the evolutionary success of such individuals who displayed such behaviours (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). It is suggested that pro-social behaviour can be viewed from a selfish perspective where individuals will only engage in such altruistic behaviour to protect someone who shares their genes and so ensuring continuation of the gene pool will be passed onto future generations. This forms the basis of inclusive fitness theory more commonly referred to as kin selection (Hamilton, 1964).

Kin selection is based on the presupposition that individuals are more willing to act pro-socially if the individual or group involves factors that relate to the successful transmission of the altruist's genes to the next generation (Foster, Wenseleers, & Ratniecks, 2006). Hamilton (1964) devised a rule which predicts altruistic action will be favoured when the rule is satisfied: $rb > c$, where b and c represents the benefit to the individual being helped and the cost to the helper, respectively and r refers to their genetic relatedness (Hamilton, 1964; Gardner, West, & Wild, 2011). It is fair to say that most of the research on gene-centred models for the evolution theory of pro-sociality in humans has tested predictions derived from kin selection theory with studies performed on insects and animals. Investigations into the degree of

genetic relatedness between helpers and recipients of help was measured and compared with how resources are distributed and it was found that relatedness only had to be greater than zero for altruism to evolve (Queller & Strassmann, 1998).

Burnstein, Crandall and Kitayama (1994) conducted several studies where they experimentally manipulated different variables that were relevant to kin selection. These included the benefits versus costs of help to the recipient, the recipient's age, gender, and degree of relatedness with the helper. They reported the likelihood of assistance being provided increases with the degree of genetic relatedness especially when the help being provided could save the recipient's life. They also found that helpers are willing to give more assistance to healthy related individuals than to unhealthy non-related persons (Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994)

In contrast to kin selection, if two genetically unrelated individuals were to provide mutual benefits to each other and these benefits are perceived as being greater in value than the costs to each of the individuals, both individuals should benefit through the economic principle of gains in trade, this is the principle that forms the basis of reciprocal altruism theory (Trivers, 1971). In evolutionary terms this leads to the premise that as result of genetic pro-social tendencies, individuals were able to selectively enter mutually beneficial transactions with non-related individuals and trustworthy partners (Simpson & Beckes, 2008).

The bystander effect as proposed by Darley and Latane (1970), is a concept of social psychology that describes the pro-social behaviour of individuals

who by circumstance are witness to an emergency situation, and what affect other bystanders or lack of, will have on their actions. The bystander intervention paradigm was developed following the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964. It was reported that a total of 38 witnesses to the rape and murder of Ms Genovese outside her apartment building in an attack which lasted for more than half an hour (Rosenthal, 1964). The failure of the witnesses to provide help or assistance triggered the series of investigative studies by Latane and Darley. One such study performed in a laboratory setting, an individual who witnesses someone having an epileptic fit was found to be less likely to seek assistance for the victim if they believed there were other witnesses present and observing the same emergency (Darley & Latane, 1968).

This resulted in what is referred to as diffusion of responsibility, and can be defined by the resulting tendency of an individual towards inaction in an emergency situation due to other people being present, as opposed to an increased likelihood of them helping in the same situation if they were alone. It is suggested this is because the perceived responsibility of any helping behaviour to be performed is shared within the group of bystanders, resulting in each individual feeling less of a personal responsibility to act (Darley & Latane, 1968). It is proposed that the diffusion of responsibility increases in relation to the number of bystanders as the more bystanders there are, the less guilty each bystander will feel for not helping (Latane & Darley, 1969).

However, in the Piliavin, Rodin and Piliavin (1969) study, diffusion of responsibility was not found to be an affect. In their experiment a staged <https://assignbuster.com/facilitate-or-impede-helping-behaviour-psychology-essay/>

victim was seen to collapse on an underground train and being helped by a participating role model, under a series of varying conditions that involved the victim being of different race, socio-economic status, intoxicated as opposed to being ill and the time taken for the role model to act. The findings of this study suggested that the perception of the victim had more to do with them receiving help and assistance in conjunction with the length of time it took for the role model to intervene. The longer the time delay the less likely people to offer help, the appearance of the victim (ill as opposed to intoxicated) was also a factor on who if anybody helped. These factors had no relation on the number of bystanders present (Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969).

The implication in this study was that individuals weighed up the cost/reward benefits of helping which forms the basis of social exchange theory or rational choice theory of pro-social behaviour. The ethos behind rational choice theory is that individuals try to maximise their potential gains in benefits in relation to any costs to themselves being at a minimum (Homans, 1961; Coleman, 1990). These costs can be seen as anything that is regarded as negative to the individual such as time, physical effort or even financial loss. These costs are then weighed up against the potential rewards and benefits which can involve a multitude of factors such as companionship, social support, influence and financial gain. However, it must be said that not all benefits can be so tangible; the simple fact of being 'owed' or receiving acknowledgement for the help can in itself be sufficient reward to undertake some pro-social action (Heath, 1976; Laner, Benin, & Ventrone, 2001).

Rational choice theory can be used to explain why it is that some individuals choose to volunteer for charitable work, perform over and above their expected levels within a workplace suggests that individuals assess the benefits against the costs in order to determine how much a relationship is worth before acting in a pro-social way (Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969).

In conclusion, it has been shown that factors that determine pro-social behaviour amongst humans can be related to a number of social, cognitive and evolutionary determinates. Through rational choice theory, the costs of helping are considered before making a cognitive decision, similarly within the bystander theory, circumstances of the situation determine a conscious decision on how to act (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005).

Whereas evolutionary theory is supported through both kin selection and reciprocal altruism the argument that pro-social is either a selfless or selfish act still remains unanswered.

Within the social science disciplines the definition for pro-social behaviour and altruism varies considerably, yet there is some evidence that the belief that true altruistic behaviour does not exist appears to be changing (Piliavin & Charng, 1990). In a review of data from sociology, social psychology, economics and political science the overall compatible position is that altruistic behaviour is a part of human nature. Individuals do make sacrifices for their children and even for other individuals to whom they have no relationship with (Piliavin & Charng, 1990).

Gender has little to no effect on the whether an individual will intervene in a situation and offer help, however, it has been suggested that women have a

lower threshold for noticing when help is required. In contrast to men though, women were reported as providing more help to close friends and relatives, with the help being offered being more personal in nature, whereas helping roles for men are perceived to be more risky and protective in nature than those for women (Piliavin & Charng, 1990).

Levine (1999) states that despite bystander apathy being a long established phenomenon within the field of social psychology little has been done in the area of implementing strategies that could see an increase in bystander intervention. The evidence presented in the murder trial of James Bulger bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the Kitty Genovese case, with analysis of testimonies given by 38 bystanders indicating that their failure to intervene can be attributed to incorrect assumptions being made which served to prohibit or deflect intervention.

A review of the research into pro-social behaviour suggests that further study into the mechanisms of pro-social behaviour is required. A multilevel approach utilising all areas of the social sciences from evolutionary psychology, social psychology, sociobiology and sociology can help to define pro-social behaviour and help develop interdisciplinary collaborations and hopefully, practical strategies of the theory into applications.