

# How should we understand human pro social behaviour



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Pro-social behaviour can be described as any action that benefits the physical or psychological well-being of another (Hogg & Vaughn, 2008). This includes altruism; an act with no selfish motives such as praise or recognition (Batson, 1991; cited in Hogg & Vaughn, 2008). The reasons for such behaviour have been largely debated bringing forth two social psychological perspectives to be presented and critically evaluated in this essay. The evolutionary approach suggests that pro-social behaviour is innate. In contrast, the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM) and social learning theory believe pro-social behaviour is a product of socialisation, experience and normative influences. The present essay seeks to create a broader understanding of behaviour by integrating these perspectives and considering additional situational factors that may be influential.

Evolutionary theorists perceive pro-social behaviour as adaptive, aiding the survival of the species in addition to the self. One way in which this natural selection can be explained is through kin selection; the bias towards helping others with similar genetic make ups. According to Hamilton (1964) this benefits survival as it is the inclusive fitness of the species rather than individual fitness which increases the chances of successful gene transmission. Support comes from Burnstein, Crandall and Kitayama (1994; cited in Hogg and Vaughn, 2008) who asked participants to imagine themselves in a series of dangerous situations and found more help was given to relatives. Thus, pro-social behaviour can be understood as a process which maximises survival of genes.

In evaluation, kin selection cannot explain cases where complete strangers help each other. Trivers, 1971 proposed reciprocal altruism; helping

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unrelated others is beneficial for survival because this help is likely to be returned. This is illustrated in the prisoner's dilemma, an imaginary scenario where two individuals are imprisoned for a co-operated crime and each is given the opportunity to implicate the other. If neither does both are set free, but if one is implicated the partner receives a harsher sentence than if each had implicated the other (Dawkins 1989). Axelrod identified the winning strategy; the Tit for Tat method; co-operate on the first move and on each subsequent move replicate what the partner did on the previous move (Dawkins, 1989). This nice and forgiving strategy can be applied to the evolutionary perspective as it is based on reciprocal altruism; co-operating with others is beneficial to long-term survival.

Evidence of the evolutionary perspective comes from cases of animals being altruistic. Wilson (1974) acknowledged that social animals all have altruistic attributes. This is strong evidence for an innate component to pro-social behaviour as animals have not been influenced by society. However, there is a lack of evidence with humans and it is questionable whether we can generalise as there are many cases where people do not behave pro-socially. Buck and Ginsberg, (1991; cited in Hogg and Vaughn, 2008) revised the theory and proposed there may be a 'communicative gene' rather than an 'altruistic gene'. This involves emotional signals and social bonds which may lead to pro-social behaviour if it is encouraged.

This encouragement can be explained by the SSSM, which suggests that we may be born with innate learning strategies but all other behaviour is a product of what we have learned through socialisation or cultural norms (Levy, 2004). Social learning theory is embraced by the model. This focuses <https://assignbuster.com/how-should-we-understand-human-pro-social-behaviour/>

on childhood and the concept of reinforcement; rewards for positive actions increase the likelihood of repeated behaviour. Evidence to support comes from Fisher (1963; cited in Hogg and Vaughn, 2008) who found that when children were given bubble gum for sharing, they were more likely to share in the future. However, social learning theory cannot explain cases where people behave pro-socially when there is no opportunity for rewards. Even though there may not be explicit rewards people may help to gain self esteem and social approval.

This can be explained by the SSSM's belief that pro-social behaviour is a product of the norms that society expects people to conform to. Humans are motivated by a fear of rejection and a desire for social approval. Goulder (1960; cited in Hogg and Vaughn, 2008) believes there are two universal norms that people are expected to follow. The first is the reciprocity norm; help given should always be returned. This can lead to selfish helping where people only help for something in return. The second is the social responsibility norm which suggests help should be given to those in need even when there is no reward. However, Teger (1970; cited in Hogg and Vaughn, 2008) argues that people only conform to these norms because they want to be perceived as a good citizen. Thus a helping norm is more of an ideal than a behaviour.

There is evidence that a person's culture will determine the extent of pro-sociality. Oliner and Oliner (1988) interviewed Europeans who saved Jews during World War 2 and found that over half acted because it was encouraged by cultural norms. Despite this evidence, if all behaviour is solely a product of our upbringing then surely there would be extreme variations in <https://assignbuster.com/how-should-we-understand-human-pro-social-behaviour/>

human behaviour; but universals in the way people act do exist, suggesting that there must be some innate component of pro-social behaviour (Levy, 2004).

Both explanations have strengths and limitations, thus an integration of the two theories should be considered in order to gain a more complete understanding. Evolutionary theory is not sufficient enough to explain pro-sociality completely, we may be predisposed to act however the final decision depends on the person's upbringing and the immediate circumstances (Hogg & Vaughn, 2008). Piliavin (1981; cited in Hogg and Vaughn, 2008) introduced the bystander-calculus model which incorporates both biological and social factors. He suggests that we are physiologically aroused by an event, but this doesn't necessarily motivate people to take action.

Two types of concern can result from this arousal. The first is personal discomfort; people feel motivated to reduce their own distress leading to selfish helping. However if a person's history allows them to identify with another, then empathetic concern is experienced leading to altruistic helping. Thus innate components and upbringing interact. In addition to this, the circumstances of the situation are likely to be influential. If the costs of not helping are high, people may feel motivated to help. Fultz et al., (1986) found participants were more likely to help in the public condition, where behaviour had more chance of being socially approved, supporting the normative influences explanation.

Overall, both perspectives are likely to interact producing a more complete understanding of pro-social behaviour. The evolutionary perspective states humans have a predisposition to act pro-socially; but this is not always the case. The decision to help will depend on what they have learnt through socialisation and cultural norms. Environmental factors such as the immediate circumstances of the situation are also influential. A major weakness of the evolutionary perspective is the lack of evidence with humans. It is difficult to distinguish whether a person is helping because of innate tendencies or environmental factors. Future research could look at tribal cultures not affected by normative influences and investigate whether selfish behaviour is a transgression which causes expulsion from the group. If so, this may suggest evidence for innate pro-sociality being beneficial to survival.