

# The Need for Semantical Understanding of Prosocial Behavior in the Workplace

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**Abstract**—Within the domain of prosocial behavior, the most intense debate centers on the degree to which behavior is the result of an altruistic personality in combination with situational, cultural, gender, and contextual factors. In the recent years, attempts to narrow the parameters of this discussion have focused on subsets of prosocial behavior such as: altruism versus self-interest, helping behaviors sustained over time versus one-time events, personality variables versus situational context, the origins of empathy, as well as others related topics. Prosocial behavior is not an organized topic confined within one discipline. A review of the literature reveals that psychologists, philosophers, economists, sociologists, and others all have distinct and often conflicting points of view. More conceptual work on social competence and the development of interpersonal competence in peer relationships is relevant to better understanding of prosocial development. It would benefit the broader field of developmental sciences, if the boundaries among content areas had more fluidity.

**Keywords**—Altruism, Empathy, Poignancy, Predisposition, Prosocial Behavior, Tempered Radical.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE term prosocial behavior was introduced in the early 1970's, in the aftermath of the Kitty Genovese murder, in New York (Kohn, 1990). One definition represents prosocial behavior as "any act performed with the goal of benefiting another person" (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2004). Interestingly, this is not an organized topic confined to a single discipline. Even a superficial review of the literature tends to reveal that: psychologists, philosophers, economists, sociobiologists, and others all have distinct and often conflicting points of view. If one accepts the Aronson et al. (1996) definition, probing question of why prosocial literature seems to bypass other helping behaviors, such as certain forms of advocacy and activism becomes relevant.

Kohn (1990, p. 6) contends that "biological determinism"

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is still a dominant factor in the way that both researchers and the public perceive behavior. He suggests the prevailing paradigm in Western societies, and particularly in America in the 20th century, is that our behavior is genetically," as an astonishing array of behaviors are seen as being "just human nature." Those Aspects of social and economic structure that privilege some, over others, are too often justified, as both correct and inevitable. Kohn (1990) traces this point of view back to the history of philosophical and religious thought.

The Oliners (1988), among others researchers and philosophers, comment on Freud's description of the natural viciousness of man, which is just barely contained behind "public persona." From a psychoanalytic view, the constraints imposed by society teach individuals, to curb our instinctive aggressiveness and help others. The psychoanalytic view suggests that such help is not altruistic, since it is embedded in satisfying the self. This view further appears to align with traditional religious teaching about "wickedness and evil." Kohn (1990) suggests the position of simple-minded "good versus evil" is a false dichotomy, unsupported by facts.

Kohn (1990) also proposes that a more useful frame "human nature" argument is in through recognizing several key constraints. Kohn (1990, p. 7) suggests human nature is itself a social product, and that there is no nature without an environment and a cultural context. "The real alternative to biological determinism is human choice." He further notes that it is erroneous to assume that genetically inherited traits are fixed, and not subject to modification. His view implies that the possibility for change may lie within biology itself. In lieu of this concept, one must ask; if it is not obvious that self-interest is governing our behavior, then what does guide our choices?

## II. "FEED YOUR MIND"

Daloz (1996) and his colleagues, illuminates this notion with poignancy. Daloz and his contemporaries selected to extensively study 100 individuals whose lives demonstrate a "commitment to the common good." study. In Their conclusion, notes "While no single experience can ensure a committed life, we found one common thread in the life experience of everyone we studied; we call this a constructive engagement with otherness." This summarization refers to encounters or interactions with others, who are in some way

different from one's family or tribe. Such interaction tends to challenge rigid boundaries of "me" and "mine," thereby opening a larger sense of the world.

While it might be argued that Daloz et al.'s observation is no different from the notion of "perspective-taking" mentioned within literature focusing on the development of empathy, the explication is portrayed in an interesting way. Noting the role of "meaning-making" at the core of living and melded with the constant interplay between self and others, they write, "We will act in a manner, congruent with how we ultimately make meaning, with what we finally can and cannot trust, with what we feel we can and cannot do" (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996). This leads to the concept of a "public parent," defined as a parental figure who conveys concern and care for the wider community. In their study, more than half of the people had at least one such parent, who helped to shape the notion of prosocial behavior in their mind.

### III. PUBLIC PARENT

The notion of "public parent" is further confirmed by Oliner & Oliner (1988), who stated: "The differences between the basic values and world views of rescuers and non-rescuers can be traced in part to their parents' significantly different views about appropriate standards and the importance of self and others" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Interestingly, "parents of the rescuers" relied significantly less on physical punishment when children behaved badly with all others. Using explanations and reasoning, parents encouraged children to appreciate others' feelings. The Oliners (1988) further theorize, "When adults voluntarily abdicate the use of power in favor of explanation, they are modeling appropriate behavior toward the weak, on the part of the powerful." While equally unconventional as non-rescuer parents, the parents of rescuers were significantly less likely to emphasize "obedience."

Eisenberg, specialist in socialization, moral and emotional development, socio-emotional competence, altruism, empathy, and gender role development has been conducting research on empathy and the development of prosocial behavior since the early 1980's. Eisenberg was particularly interested in comparing the relationship of prosocial moral reasoning, to prosocial behavior, at various ages. She concluded the study "results strongly support the view that there is a prosocial personality disposition in at least middle-class individuals in Western culture" (Eisenberg, Guthrie, Cumberland, & Murphy, 2002, p. 3). Perhaps more interestingly, she posits, "stable individual differences in empathy – related responding emerge by childhood and likely account for some consistency over time" (Eisenberg et al., 2002).

In an earlier article, Eisenberg stressed a point that Kohn, the Oliners, and others make. Eisenberg (et al., 2002) noted that while empathy is positively related to prosocial behavior.

It does not necessarily imply that empathy will result in prosocial actions (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). The relationship between the two is "neither direct nor inevitable" (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). Kohn noted that, "empathy may lead to helping, but helping does not imply empathy" (Kohn, 1990) It has been found that "predisposition" tends to represent an inclination toward a given type of response, and not an absolute or constant behavior within every circumstance (Oliner & Oliner, 1988). De Cremer, Mayer, Dijke, Schouten, and Bardes (2009) argue that self-sacrificial leaders motivate followers to display similar positive behaviors because these leaders stimulate goals and values that inspire self-interest for group welfare, and higher ethical standards to fulfill obligations and moral duties. Empathic values motivate followers to immolate leader's self-sacrifice by displaying prosocial behaviors. In the grand scheme of prosocial behaviors, the difficulties surrounding the definition and measurement of a concept, such as empathy mixed with the role it does or does not play constrains even the best attempts to examine the complex subject.

Eisenberg and Miller summarize many of these issues in their review of seven types of measures that purport to assess the relationship between sympathy, empathy, and altruism, with both children and adults. They conclude, "The research concerning sympathy and empathy lacks much in the way of both conceptual and methodological sophistication" (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 292).

Another perspective shared by behavioral researchers is the recognition that people engaged in prosocial behavior over time, generally have the ability to see the bigger picture. De Cremer et al. (2009) also note self-sacrificial leaders often forgo personal interests and highlight the importance of the mission as essential to the purpose of the group is. Astin and Leland studied a thirty year history of seventy-seven women leaders working toward educational and social justice for women in higher education. They surmise that the ability to frame the issues systemically was a powerful driver for these women leaders, as they could see that a sustained and visionary effort would be required. "They appeared to bring to women's concerns not only a sense of justice, but also their capacity to: conceptualize, to generate ideas, to see the "bigger picture," and to seize opportunities to elevate their ideas into tangible formats" (Astin & Leland, 1991).

The Oliners (1988), though using a different linguistic frame refer to this same notion. They discuss the complex mechanics that needed planning to safely maintain even one person in hiding, with food so scarce and with informers everywhere. Highlighting the ability of non-Jewish citizens to conceptualize that the "Jews" were in a situation not of their own making, as the propaganda suggested, the researchers inadvertently address social justice. Daloz et al. (1996), discuss the crucial nature of systemic thought in the context of the complexities of modern life. In their study, most of their participants reject as insufficient, an

interpersonal frame that may hold a measure of truth, but “is limited and often distorted in the absence of a larger, systemic perspective” (Daloz et al., 1996). This awareness contributes to prosocial behavior and allows those engaged to be effective despite discouragement and difficulty.

It is important to note that most research would seem to agree that the decision to help: is a complex interaction between the prosocial disposition and the specific circumstances at hand, which may include an understanding of the need, the risks involved, resources required, and other potential variables.

#### IV. GROUP ADVOCACY

A second area of research focuses on helping behaviors, primarily within the context of contemporary business organizations or health-care. This venue of research appears inclined to view situational factors such as influencing a person’s choice to act, rather than the group itself.

Harquail (1996) investigated the advocacy behavior of sixty-one women in one organization. Participants represented approximately 51% of all salaried employees. In Harquail’s study, advocates were defined as those who attempted to change the distribution of influences, resources, and power within that organization to the benefit of group members. Her study suggests that stronger social identification leads to group advocacy, and that “feeling responsible to the group” (1996) represents a perspective somewhere between social identification and advocacy (Harquail, 1996). Harquail applied the “Proactivity Scale” devised by Bateman and Crant in 1993 to measure the predisposition to take action. On average, participants in the Harquail’s (1996) study were slightly proactive. Specifically, advocacy behaviors in the study included hiring women for key roles, addressing pay equivalence problems, providing support for working mothers in terms of more liberal policies on flextime and maternity leave, and explicit action against stereotyping.

Meyerson and Scully (1995) advance a related notion in their framing of the “tempered radical.” They suggest that a tempered radical is an individual who identifies with and is committed to an organization, as well as to a cause or ideology that may be “at odds” with the dominant culture of that organization. The tempered radical, angered by injustice, challenges the status quo, while carefully navigating the potential shoals and rapids of organizational life. (1995) These individuals face a continuous struggle between personal and professional identities. Often, using their own experience as an example, these researchers describe their struggle as strong feminists in both graduate business schools and business organizations, where they may work. In sharing their personal insight, they honor the often-conflicting aims and purposes of each side of their own identity.

In their view, a tempered radical’s experience of “marginality and biculturalism,” can provide the recognition

that issues need to be addressed (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). According to the researchers, this role is difficult to maintain over a long period. In part, the difficulty arises as pressures of each side attempt to embrace more fully its position, often to the exclusion of others.

While the existence of “tempered radicalism” exists in modern organizations, the authors do not suggest, in any way, how or why this particular group of “change agents” forms. Since many people enter organizational life with multiple and conflicting identities, this research does not currently to address the question of why some people would choose the risk of engaging in prosocial behavior. Though the research is descriptive, it is not particularly clarifying.

Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, (1998) study reviewed the question of breaking point. In other words, under what conditions women would raise and promote gender-equity issues in their work organizations. This study expanded upon the definition of issue selling developed earlier by Dutton and Ashford (1998). When calling the organization’s attention to trends and events having implications for organizational performance, one is issue selling. Author’s data suggests the perceived favorability of the organizational context fosters a willingness to sell gender-equity issues within a given organization. The discussion indicates a trusting relationship with critical decision makers and a high degree of organizational support for employee participation, encouraged pro-social behaviors, and enhanced the perception of “selling success.” In addition, a favorable context diminished the degree of potential image risks perceived by the participants. The researchers found individual hypothesized differences did not affect the decision to sell gender-equity issues. However, they did qualify their findings by noting they may not have selected the right dispositional factors. They also reported that their data confirm Harquail’s findings regarding the positive relationship between: 1) strength of social identification with women, and 2) advocacy on their behalf (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998).

#### V. NATURALISTIC STUDIES

Spacapan and Oskamp (1992) looked at helping behaviors in a quite different context than did previous researchers. They examined a group of what they term “naturalistic studies,” by which “helping behavior arises in real-life, primarily in the context of on-going personal relationships. They point out the lack of clarity in the conceptualization of “help” across social psychology research, suggesting that adoption of three-category classification of: 1) emotional, 2) informational, and 3) instrumental support would be useful. They also note that depending on the nature of the problem, in addition to the type of support, specifying “particular sources of support” may be more helpful.

Wills (1992) argues that it is the context of personal relationships, which accounts for differences observed

between lab and field studies, when individuals seek help. He also argues that the perceived ability of the seeker to reciprocate, based upon a history of sharing or intimacy, the existence of communal norms (as opposed to an exchange orientation), and the existence of multiple sources of support are some of the factors that generally lead to higher amounts of help-seeking, than seen in typical lab settings (Wills, 1992). In addition, he reports that aside from serious medical problems, people have a strong preference for informal sources of help stemming from spouses or friends, for most types of situations. "Similarity" between the seeker and the person he or she seeks help from, is another important consideration.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study of prosocial behavior would benefit from greater integration with conceptual work on related issues. Prosocial behavior could be considered in a manner similar to most interpersonal behaviors-in terms of its appropriateness as it applies to social and personal outcomes. In many, settings, prosocial behavior is a socially appropriate behavior. Increased research and conceptual work focusing on social competence and the development of interpersonal competence in peer relationships is relevant to better understanding of prosocial development.

There are many underlying issues that frame the debate of prosocial behavior within various fields. The literature implies prosocial behavior of leaders positively affects those under their guidance. In management for example, it benefits employee moral, organizational development and culture. The "want" in leaders to inspire and help their subordinates to be successful builds strong interpersonal, growth inspired effective relationships. Clearly that the question is "How can we encourage people to act from their prosocial/"brighter side"? Certainly, it these behaviors will come forth by recognizing that it may be a highly complex and somewhat unpredictable process at best.

Finally, not only has the field of prosocial behavior been relatively intellectually remote from relevant literature on other topics, but investigators studying other issues (e.g., psychopathology, information processing, peer relationships, academic success) leading to insufficient in-depth findings in the domain of prosocial development The broader field of developmental sciences would benefit if the semantic boundaries between content areas demonstrated more fluidity.

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