

**Prosocial Behavior: Helping, Sharing, and Caring
Behaviors**

Depth Paper

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Introduction

When I was a child of about eleven, an incident occurred in school that confused me a great deal. I was a seventh-grader in a middle school with the students separated into tracks according to scholastic ability. We had different teachers for most subjects and for homeroom period. It was my misfortune that my homeroom teacher, who was also my math teacher, was a nasty and mean-spirited woman who I thoroughly disliked. I was not openly antagonistic towards Mrs. R, since math was my worst subject and I figured that I needed all the points I could get with her. As time went on however, it became clear to me that she was actually a bully, which was behavior I did not entirely understand how to handle with an adult. One day during a math quiz, she accused the child who sat in front of me of cheating on the test. I cannot remember now how it was that I was certain that this was a false accusation, but I was. Next thing I knew, I was challenging her in front of the whole class and demanding that she leave the other kid alone. Predictably,

she sent me to the principal's office. In short order, he was calling my parents to appear at school the next day.

The conversation in my house that evening was the part that was confusing. On the one hand was my mother asking why I had to concern myself with other people's business. Her view was that it was no concern of mine. She saw my job as simply being a good student and not getting into trouble. My father, who listened to my story about the teacher being a bully and picking on this child for no reason I could see, was actually quite sympathetic. I kept reminding him of all the reading I had been doing about the Holocaust and what I had learned about personal responsibility for speaking up and speaking out. He grudgingly accepted that while hardly an issue of life or death, perhaps there was a principle here that deserved acknowledgement.

I heard my parents arguing for a long time after they sent me to bed. My mother wanted to punish me and set me straight about priorities. My father assured her that he would "fix things up" with the school and that there was no need to punish me. In the end, he prevailed as he frequently did in their relationship, which is not to suggest that she modified her opinion in the least. He came to school with me the next day and met with the principal,

using his most effective and reasonable lawyer tones. By the time he was done, the principal was assuring him that I was an A-OK kid and he would talk with Mrs. R about being fairer in her dealings with students. On the way out, my father admitted he was actually quite pleased with me and that he would square things with my mother. His suggestion was that I do my best to avoid further conversation with her about this issue, as it would only keep her upset with me. I continued to wonder exactly what part of what I had done was wrong and why. I knew I was going to have to work even harder in math just to stay even and in that, I was not disappointed.

This incident for me indicated not only the large disparity between my parent's views of the world and how to operate in it but I think it illustrates one key aspect of the great divide on prosocial behavior. There is on the one hand, a view that advocates what I would call a more *engaged stance* in the world, where there is a sense of connection to others and a systemic perspective around working for the common good. On the other hand, there is a *detached stance* that focuses on me and mine, and regards too much involvement with or by others as intrusive and inappropriate. My parents, in many significant ways, embody those two ways of being in the world. I believe many of the

conflicts between them were the manifestation of these colliding worldviews. Significantly, in old age, my father has become more like my mother, as he has become more insular and closed to new information and new ways of thinking.

I never had much doubt that the more engaged stance was where I personally wanted to be to the best of my ability. What I have never done until now is think about this topic in a way that went beyond my own personal history and psychological makeup. Now I wonder about the underlying assumptions and values that lead someone to adopt one posture or the other. What are the conditions under which someone chooses to engage in what Kohn calls "caring, sharing and helping" behaviors? Why do most people in Western societies regard altruistic behavior as the exception rather than the norm? Why is cynicism, self-interest, and what Kohn calls the "rhetoric of negation" so prevalent today? What are the personal and societal consequences of a belief system that rewards individualism and individual achievement almost exclusively? As a society, why do we disregard evidence from communal cultures that show value in significantly different patterns of behavior than our own? In this paper, I will explore some of those questions, recognizing that I bring

some biases with me as I do that. The beliefs and experiences that shaped that seventh-grader have remained essentially the same over the course of my life, and they predispose me to look for the evidence that confirms prosocial and altruistic behavior as an essential part of humanity, which can be nourished and encouraged in myriad ways.

Defining the territory

The term *prosocial behavior* was introduced in the early 1970's in the aftermath of the Kitty Genovese murder in New York (Kohn, 1990). At that time, there was a strong degree of interest in exploring why 38 neighbors ignored the pleas and calls for help from a woman being repeatedly stabbed and ultimately murdered by her assailant. As Kohn points out, the term *prosocial* is so broad that it becomes essentially meaningless. If, as one definition goes, *prosocial behavior* is "...any act performed with the goal of benefiting another person" (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2004 p. 382), how is it possible to differentiate the meaning or motivation or consequences between a ten dollar donation to charity and rescuing a drowning child? Many researchers have attempted to narrow the parameters of discussion by

focusing 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 and others. This is not a tidy topic confined within one discipline. Even a cursory review of the literature reveals that psychologists, philosophers, economists, sociobiologists, and others all have distinct and often conflicting points of view. If one accepts the Aronson definition noted previously, I would ask why the literature labeled *prosocial* seems to bypass other helping behaviors such as certain forms of advocacy and activism. Harquail notes a number of behaviors in the organizational literature that certainly would seem to fit such a definition including tempered radicalism, issue-selling, group advocacy and activism (Harquail, 1996). I think this area of research is far from mature. Appropriate boundaries still require definition. Additionally, the difficulties inherent in many of the typical research methods frequently result in data with limited explanatory ability. With those caveats in mind, I now turn to some of the underlying issues that frame the debates within the field.

Lenses that shape our assumptions

Kohn argues that biological determinism is still the dominant factor in the way that both researchers and the public think about behavior. He suggests that the prevailing paradigm in Western societies, and particularly in America in the 20th century, is that our behavior is largely determined by our genes (Kohn, 1990). We describe an astonishing array of behaviors as being "just human nature" without a deeply critical analysis of the evidence. Kohn suggests that this view persists because it appears to be common sense, it is simple and straightforward, it offers an escape from personal responsibility, and it preserves the status quo. Those aspects of our present social and economic arrangements that privilege some over others are justifiable as both correct and inevitable. He traces this point of view back in the history of philosophical and religious thinking. One key thinker in this stream was Thomas Hobbes. In the seventeenth century, Hobbes described the aggressive and destructive behaviors prevalent around him and concluded that such behavior was indeed proof of the "natural" tendencies of humans. He apparently did not consider that such behaviors could be the reactions of individuals acting within a society already significantly shaped by an ethic of egoism.

Hobbes was not alone in this view. The Oliners, among others, comment on Freud's description of the natural viciousness of man, just barely contained behind the public persona (Oliner & Oliner, 1988). In the psychoanalytic view, the constraints imposed by society teach individuals to curb their innate aggressiveness and help others. The psychoanalytic view is that such help is not altruistic, since it is rooted in satisfying the self. This view accords with much traditional religious teaching about wickedness and evil. Kohn suggests that taking a position of simple-minded "good versus evil" is a false dichotomy, unsupported by facts. By way of example, he uses several types of current research to show that previous assumptions about aggression being innate in humans are incorrect. I found his reports of soldiers in battle and the amount of coercion and dehumanization of the enemy required to overcome the revulsion to killing quite astonishing. It was a reminder to me of the pervasive influence of religious and psychoanalytic thinking which legitimates a view of the "animal nature" of humanity in my own less than fully conscious assumptions.

Kohn suggests that a more useful frame for the "human nature" argument recognizes several key constructs. He says that human nature is itself a social product and that there

is no nature without an environment and cultural context. As he sees it, "...the real alternative to biological determinism is human choice" (Kohn, 1990 , p.19). He goes on to note that it is a fallacy to assume that genetically inherited traits are fixed and not subject to modification. Citing Robert Cairns he notes, "Biochemical and physiological mechanisms are the servants of social adaptation, not the other way around," (p.22). This suggests that the possibility for change lies within biology itself. If it is not obvious that self-interest is the sine qua non governing our behavior, then what does guide our choices?

Competing schools of thought

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. I am setting aside here those researchers and writers who essentially reject the notion of volitional prosocial or altruistic behavior by using evolutionary psychology or sociobiology to explain, and essentially negate, helping behavior. I chose not to review that group of writers in depth. Of the materials I did review, I think they cluster

in two categories. For those who lean heavily in the direction of an *altruistic personality*, the contributing factors show some interesting overlaps. Kohn, the Oliners, Eisenberg, Astin and Leland, and Daloz et al., are strong advocates for the idea that an altruistic personality does exist and further, that it is not a quick or accidental creation, but is rooted in childhood and developed over a lifetime. A corollary to the notion of the *altruistic personality* is the development of empathy. The definitions and likely sources of empathy vary somewhat within this group but most would concede that the ability to share in, and care about, the affective life of another is an important part of an altruistic orientation. Eisenberg has noted that regardless of other distinctions, virtually all current definitions of empathy include "sharing of affect" as a primary component (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987).

A second group of researchers would concede something that approaches what we might call a *helping predisposition*, but they are less inclined to view this as a major personality construct. In this group, I would place Harquail, Myerson and Scully, Ashford and Dutton, and Spacapan and Oskamp. Most of these researchers are discussing behavior that occurs in business organizations and it may be that their reluctance to frame their findings

using language like altruism and empathy is a reflection of that context.

Returning to the first group, a key finding is that the ability to connect with others in a meaningful way, to see the similarities across differences, is a critical component in the development of helping behavior. In a study completed in 1996, Daloz et al illuminate this notion with particular persuasiveness. Daloz and his colleagues selected 100 individuals whose lives demonstrate a "commitment to the common good" for extensive study. In their conclusions, they note "While no single experience can insure a committed life, we found one common thread in the life experience of everyone we studied. We call [this] *a constructive engagement with otherness*" (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996 p.54). By this, they are referring to encounters or interactions with others who are in some way different from one's family or tribe. Such interaction challenges rigid boundaries of *me and mine* to open a larger sense of the world. While it might be argued that this is no different from the notion of perspective-taking that is often mentioned in the literature dealing with the development of empathy, I think they have explicated that idea in an interesting way. Noting the role of meaning-making at the core of living and the constant interplay

between self and other, 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" (p.27). This leads them to the idea of what they call a "public parent", a parental figure who is active in a manner that conveys concern and care for the wider community. In their study, more than half of the people had at least one such parent whose example and related conversations helped to shape the notion of prosocial behavior in their child's mind.

This same notion figures prominently in the study done by Oliner and Oliner of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews during WWII. This is a unique study of a very specific group of people in a moment of time and circumstances probably unparalleled in history. The degree of personal risk involved, the issue of duration in that many rescued Jews had to be cared for in hiding for several years, the strength of contravening social norms against seeing the Jews as human beings worth saving, the logistical complexity of the many tasks involved in saving one life, and other issues make this situation highly unusual. The Oliners found that "To a large extent, then, helping Jews was less a decision made at a critical juncture than a choice prefigured by an established character and way of

life" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988 p.222). The rescuers said they "had no choice" and what they did was "ordinary" because their behavior was simply woven into the very fabric of their being. "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" (p. 160).

In addition, parents of the rescuers depended significantly less on physical punishment when children behaved badly with others. Using explanations and reasoning, they encouraged children to appreciate others' feelings. The Oliners 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" (p. 183). A very large percentage of the rescuers also reported parental involvement in the community, with values that emphasized caring for others, social responsibility, empathy for people in distress, relationships not dominated by criteria of current or potential economic usefulness, and a generally liberal, inclusive sensibility. While not any more socially unconventional than non-rescuer parents, the parents of rescuers were significantly less likely to emphasize

obedience. A few rescuers did acknowledge that they had saved Jews because their minister, spouse, or parent had requested they do so, but for over 87%, their decision to help stemmed from concerns of equity or care.

Eisenberg has been conducting research on empathy and the development of prosocial behavior since at least the early 1980's. Drawing on the work of many other researchers, notably Hoffman and Staub, she has produced a large body of data to support the notion of a prosocial personality in adulthood, with its roots in childhood. In one of her later studies, she reviewed both participants and friends reports of prosocial characteristics at three different points in young adulthood for 32 men and women. Using interviews, mothers' reports, observed behavior in school, and several paper and pencil instruments, she compared the data with data collected on the same participants since childhood. She was particularly interested in this study in looking at the relationship of prosocial moral reasoning to prosocial behavior at various ages. She concluded this study with the report that "results...strongly support the view that there is a prosocial personality disposition, at least in middle-class individuals in Western culture"(Eisenberg, Guthrie, Cumberland, & Murphy, 2002 p. 1003). Perhaps more

interestingly, she also noted, "...stable individual differences in empathy-related responding emerge by childhood and likely account for some consistency over time"(p. 1004). The findings also suggested that prosocial moral judgment plays a role in the prosocial tendencies of young adults and correlates positively with empathy-related responses at younger ages. This study did not explore the contributory factors to a prosocial disposition in any depth but was simply documenting that such a phenomena does exist and shows stability over time.

In another article, Eisenberg stressed a point that Kohn, the Oliners, and others make as well. Eisenberg noted that while empathy (or sympathy as it is also called by some researchers to the confusion of nearly everyone) 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" (p.11). In addition to that side of the equation, Kohn noted on the other side that, " ...empathy may lead to helping, then, but helping does not imply empathy" (Kohn, 1990 p.127). It may be that one's moral code demands that one take action or that one is obeying a directive from an authority figure. Additionally, it has been pointed out that a predisposition

represents an inclination towards a given type of response, not an absolute or constant behavior in every circumstance (Oliner & Oliner, 1988). Perhaps the larger point I want to make here is that the difficulties surrounding the definition and measurement of a concept such as empathy and the role it does or does not play in the demonstration of prosocial behavior constrains even our best attempts to look at a subject so complex and nuanced. 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 that, "...the research concerning sympathy and empathy lacks much in the way of both conceptual and methodological sophistication" (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987 p.311).

Another perspective shared by these researchers is the recognition that people engaged in prosocial behavior extending over time generally have the ability to see the bigger picture or have a systems perspective. Astin and Leland researched the histories of seventy-seven women leaders working for educational and social justice for women in higher education over a roughly thirty-year period ending in the 1990's. They conclude that the ability to frame the issues systemically was a powerful driver for

these women, 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 p.70). The Oliners refer to this same notion using quite different language. They discuss the complex mechanics that needed planning to safely maintain even one person in hiding with food so scarce and with informers everywhere. They highlight the ability to conceptualize that the Jews were in a situation not of their own making as the propaganda suggested, but simply because they were the object of Nazi hatred and fanaticism. Daloz et al discuss the crucial nature of systemic thought to grasping the complexities of modern life. In their study population, most of the participants reject as insufficient an interpersonal frame which may hold a measure of truth, but "...is limited and often distorted in the absence of a larger, systemic perspective" (Daloz et al., 1996 p.114). This awareness contributes to prosocial behavior and allows those engaged in it to be effective despite discouragement and difficulty.

Before turning to the second set of researchers and writers, I think it is important to note that although I have concentrated here on some of the key similarities in findings from a fairly divergent set of research data, I do not mean to imply that there are no differences among them. I have focused on the similarities because they stood out to me and shaped a persuasive picture of the roots of prosocial behavior within a social psychology perspective. Additionally, it is important to mention that all of these researchers would agree that the decision to help is a complex interaction between the prosocial disposition and the specific circumstances at hand which may include comprehension of the need, the risk involved, resources, being asked for help, and other variables.

Turning now to the second group of researchers, we have a focus on helping behaviors primarily within the context of contemporary business organizations or health-care. These researchers seem to be more inclined to view situational factors as influencing a person's choice to act than the group reviewed above. That is not to suggest that they would line up at the end of the spectrum proclaiming that prosocial behavior is a myth as some social exchange theorists argue.

Harquail investigated the advocacy behavior of sixty-one women in one large organization representing about 51% of the salaried employees. In this study, advocates were those who attempted to change the distribution of influences, resources, and power within that organization for the benefit of group members, i.e. women. Her study suggests that stronger social identification leads to group advocacy and that feeling responsible to the group mediates between social identification and advocacy (Harquail, 1996). Among a number of both qualitative and quantitative measures to assess such issues as the degree of connection and responsibility the participants felt towards women in general, past experiences of discrimination and the like, Harquail used the proactivity scale devised by Bateman and Crant in 1993 to measure the predisposition to take action. While not the same as a measure of prosocial behavior, its use in this study to control for individual differences in the predisposition to take action to change a situation seems worth noting. On average, participants in the study were slightly proactive. Advocacy behaviors in the study included hiring women for key roles, addressing pay parity problems, support for working mothers in terms of more liberal policies on flextime and maternity leave, and vigorous fighting against stereotyping.

In her conclusion, Harquail says that the data suggest that, "...advocacy may not result from general, personality-level characteristics. Advocacy has a more specific source—it is driven by social identification with the group (Harquail, 1996 p.185). She is, however, careful to note that in this study, she has conceptualized what she calls "group advocacy" as cognitive and rational and has not explored "moral outrage" or other emotions as a source for behavior.

Meyerson and Scully 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 her organization, as well as to a cause or ideology that is at odds with the dominant culture in that organization. The tempered radical, angered by injustice, challenges the status quo while carefully navigating the potential shoals and rapids of organizational life. These individuals face a continuous struggle between personal and professional identities that may be at odds with one another. Using their own experience as one example, these researchers describe their struggle as strong feminists in both the graduate business schools and business organizations where they work, to honor the often-conflicting aims and purposes of each side of their

identity. In their view, the tempered radical's experience of ambivalence "...resembles the experiences of marginality and biculturalism..." which can provide the detachment to recognize that there are issues to be addressed (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). It is a difficult role to maintain over a long period, with pressures from each side to embrace more fully its position to the exclusion of the other. "Steering a course between assimilation and separatism is a central and defining issue for the tempered radical "(p. 594).

While I actually agree that such a phenomena as "tempered radicalism" does exist in modern organizations, the authors do not suggest, in any way, how or why this particular group of change agents comes to be this way. Since many people enter organizational life with multiple and conflicting identities, this research does nothing to address the question of why some people would choose the risk of engaging in prosocial behavior. It seems descriptive but not particularly explanatory to me.

Another study reviewed the question of under what conditions women would raise and promote gender-equity issues in their work organizations. This study relied on a definition of issue selling developed earlier by Dutton and Ashford in 1993. Issue selling essentially means calling the organization's attention to key trends and events that

have implications for organizational performance. The results suggest that the perceived favorability of the organizational context fosters a willingness to sell gender-equity issues in a given organization. This study queried 1,000 female managers and determined that a trusting relationship with critical decision makers and a high degree of organizational support for employee participation, which encourages prosocial behaviors, enhanced the perception of selling success. In addition, this favorable context diminished the degree of potential image risks perceived by the participants. The researchers found that the hypothesized individual differences did not affect the decision to sell gender-equity issues but they qualify their findings by noting that they may not have selected the right dispositional factors. They also report that their data confirm Harquail's findings regarding the positive relationship between strength of social identification with women and advocacy on their behalf (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998).

Spacapan and Oskamp look at helping behaviors in a quite different context than the previous researchers I have reviewed. They have surveyed a group of what they term "naturalistic studies", by which they refer to helping behavior given in real-life and primarily in the context of

on-going personal relationships (Spacapan & Oskamp, 1992). They point out the lack of clarity in conceptualizations of help in much social psychology research, suggesting that a three-category scheme of emotional, informational, and instrumental support would be useful. They also note that in addition to type of support, particular sources of support may be more helpful depending on the nature of the problem. Wills argues that it is the context of personal relationships that accounts for differences observed between lab and field studies when individuals seek help. He argues that the perceived ability of the seeker to reciprocate, a history of sharing or intimacy, the existence of communal norms as opposed to an exchange orientation and the existence of multiple sources for 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 people have a strong preference for informal sources of help such as spouses or friends for most types of situations aside from serious medical problems. Similarity between the seeker and the person he or she seeks help from is also an important consideration.

Since these and other findings reported here seem to conflict with much of the lab findings which strained my

credulity, I found this material interesting. One theme running through several of the chapters deals with the notion that even where the helper ultimately gains something by performing a helping act, such behavior should not be devalued. One example is long-term members of Alcoholics Anonymous who do not regard their support of newer members as selfless because it enhances their own self-esteem when they see how far they have come. Spacapan and Oskamp are largely of the mind that "...the old debate over whether any behavior can truly be altruistic...seems irrelevant in light of ...views that a helpful act can aid the helper as well as the help-seeker" (Spacapan & Oskamp, 1992 p.12).

Cultivating More Prosocial Behavior

The majority of these researchers offer at least some suggestions and ideas for increasing the amount of prosocial or helping behavior. The most thoughtful treatment of this topic in my opinion is that offered by Daloz et al. With a mix of a framing philosophy and specific types of actions found to increase the prosocial disposition of the study participants, these researchers suggest a path for those committed to this direction and to

bringing others along. Among their many suggestions are: exposing children at early ages to the kind of travel that helps them to see a wider and more diverse world, assisting children to learn "on-behalfness", which is their term for tasks that affirm a wider sense of purpose, mentoring environments which draw a young person into systemic awareness and higher levels of complex thought, encouraging transformational relationships with kindred spirits who are engaged with the wider world, providing safe spaces where new forms of agency can be practiced, and ensuring that positive images of the possible are "implanted in the soul".

Conclusion

This has been a fascinating journey for me. I regret that the constraints of a short paper have forced me to take such rich and complex material and reduce it to simplistic descriptions. I have a much better grasp of the debates between those who advocate for the notion of a prosocial disposition or personality and those who say no behavior is without some reward, so how can we regard any behavior as altruistic. It seems very clear at this point, that the larger question is how we can encourage people to

act from their "brighter side" as Kohn calls it, while recognizing that this is a highly complex and somewhat unpredictable process at best. My own experience using Appreciative Inquiry methodology for organizational consulting, which draws on many of the same assumptions used in the prosocial literature, suggests both exciting possibilities and significant resistance at times. Nevertheless, I think it is the avenue offering the most hope and energy for the future. Kohn says it clearly and in a way that I found very resonant when he wrote:

First, we tend to 'live down to' the assumption that we are basically selfish, or up to the assumption that we are given to act prosocially. Both of these assumptions feed on themselves. Helping is like lying: one finds it difficult to stop with just one generous act. Second, we also live down to the view that when we *do* help others it is only for egoistic reasons, and we live up to the view that we are basically altruistic. What we believe to be true about ourselves and others affects how we behave, which in turn, affects our assumptions about human nature (Kohn, 1990 p.204).

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