

SOCI 324

GROUPS, ORGANISATIONS AND

THE INDIVIDUAL

Session 11 – Altruism/Prosocial Behaviour and
Volunteerism

Lecturer: Dr. P. Mamle Tetteh, Department of Sociology
Contact Information: ptetteh@ug.edu.gh



UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

School of Continuing and Distance Education

2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

- I am certain you have read or heard accounts of how people have helped others in various times of need. You may have yourself helped others or been helped in major and or minute ways. In this session we shall explore the subject of prosocial or helping behavior. Why do people help and what are their motives for helping? When are people more likely to help and or not help? Are certain people more prone to helping behavior than others?
- To answer these questions, we shall define and explain the concept of Prosocial behavior. We shall also list and explain the motives people have for engaging in or not engaging in prosocial behavior. Again, we shall look at the people who commit themselves to long term acts of prosocial behavior by volunteering their time and other resources. Our focus shall be to examine the motives of volunteers and the benefits of volunteerism. Finally, though it is important to help and be helped, people respond differently to being helped. We shall finally explore how it feels to be helped.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Definition of the concept of Prosocial behavior
- Examination of the motives people have for engaging in prosocial behavior
- Identification of some factors that prevent prosocial behavior in an emergency situation
- Identification of both internal and external factors that engender prosocial behavior
- The definition, incidence and implications of volunteerism
- Individuals responses and perceptions of being helped.

Reading List

- Read chapter nine of the required text and the article on this session posted on Sakai.



Topic One

DEFINING ALTRUISM/PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR



What is Prosocial Behaviour?

- Altruism is not an easy concept to define. Some attempt to define the term has looked at it in a **motivational sense** – defining it thus as:
 - “A helping act motivated primarily by an anticipation of its positive consequences for another individual” (Franzoi, 2000).
- The motivational definition emphasizes the motives or reasons for performing a helping act. The notion is that the altruistic individual acts more out of concern for another than for what he is getting out of it. But do people really act for others rather than for self?
- Reinforcement theories suggest that all behavior is basically motivated by self concern or interest. But critics of this position have said that it is difficult to determine or measure people’s motives. Also some acts done (in emergencies) may be done without conscious thought because the individual may not have had time to think about his actions. On this score the motivational definition has been criticized as being narrow in scope.



What is Prosocial Behaviour?

- The **behavioral** definition, says altruism is ‘any conduct that helps another, regardless of the helpers motives.’ This definition is broad in scope covering all forms of altruistic acts which could be motivated by selfish reasons or could be purely accidental.
- But its broadness of the definition also poses a problem in the sense that, classifying all helpful acts together may obscure some important differences in helping behavior. Despite the problems associated with each approach the behavioral definition is what is most often used in the scientific literature. Some examples of behavioral definitions of prosocial behavior include:
 - “Truly selfless acts that benefit only the person in need that can include heroism in that they involve risk for the helper” (Baron and Branscombe, 2012).
 - ‘Actions by individuals that help others with no immediate benefit to the helper’ (Baron, Branscombe & Byrne, 2009).

Topic Two

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR



Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

- This theoretical perspective suggests that prosocial acts are motivated solely by the desire to help someone in need. The basis of this hypothesis is that prosocial behavior derives from empathy. Thus, we help others when we 'put ourselves in their shoes' and attempt to feel as they do and see things from their perspective. Empathy makes us offer help expecting no rewards in return-we just want to end the negative or painful plight of others.
- Baron et al (2009) explain that it is complicated to help when many victims are involved because it is impossible to feel empathy towards many people at once. When this happens, people are more likely not to help at all. Hence, under such conditions, one victim is used as the face of the plight of many as people tend to be able to identify with one victim than many.



Negative State Relief Perspective

- This suggests that instead of helping because we care about the victim and want to reduce their pain, we help because we want to reduce our own negative emotions.
- This hypothesis suggests that unhappiness is the motive for engaging in prosocial behavior and not concern for our victim. Thus, people may want to avoid the stress (dissonance) of not helping when they see someone in need and so just go ahead to help. For instance if you saw a child, lost, hungry and crying but did nothing about it, it may haunt you for a while and make you feel bad that you did nothing to help a needy child.
- Sometimes however, the unhappiness people experience may not be related to the victim. People may just be unhappy about something and just engage in prosocial acts to get over their own pain. For instance a woman who has lost her baby at birth may decide to devote her time to counseling mothers who have experienced a similar fate because besides helping the latter, she herself gets over her own depression at her loss.

Empathetic Joy Perspective

- This suggests that helping brings a sense of accomplishment to the helper. The view is that ‘helpers respond to the needs of the victim because they want to accomplish something and doing so is in and of itself rewarding’ (Baron et al, 2009).
- This is why people seek to have feedback about the help they have offered. Thus, if the motive is just empathy, then feedback was not important-you offer help and forget about it. But where people want to know if their help produced the desired results, then the motive is more than just empathy.

Competitive Altruism Approach

- This perspective explains that people help because it boosts their status and reputation. Helping is costly because the helper invests time, money and other resources in order to help. That s/he is not obliged to help, but still goes ahead to help at these costs, makes a helper gain respect in the eyes of people.
- For example, if I have a hundred thousand cedis, I can choose to spend it on myself. However, if I choose to use that money to refurbish the children's block in a public hospital, I may gain the admiration of society and possibly be honored for the gesture.
- Again the greater the costs involved in helping, the greater the status and reputation that goes with it. Thus, the competitive altruism approach indicates that obtaining and enhancing ones status and reputation is a major motivation for engaging in prosocial behavior.

Kin Selection Theory

- This theory provides an evolutionary explanation for pro-social behavior. According to evolutionary theorists one of the main goals of all organisms is the perpetuation of its species. Thus, all organisms, humans included, engage in a struggle of the 'survival of the fittest' to ensure that their genes get into the next generation.
- One way of achieving this is by helping others who share the same genes. Thus we are more likely to help others with whom we are closely related than to help those to whom we are not. Research suggests that people are like likely to help a relative than a non relative in an emergency. Again people were seen to help younger kin who have more life ahead of them (and potential to perpetuate the genes) than older kin in times of emergency.
- Does this theory in any way explain the dilemma of whom to save-if you found your wife or mother drowning? How about saving the life of a mother or an unborn child? What do you think the choices are likely to be based on the kin-selection theory of altruism?

The Reciprocity Theory

- This suggests that limiting help only to ones kin will not help us transmit our genes to the next generation. In other words, kin help alone does not have survival value. Help must be extended to all other persons whether related or not because help is often reciprocated. That is, when you help others, you receive help in return even if not from the same people you offered help to.
- Thus, offering mutual help to fellow humans who may not be kin benefits everybody. We are likely to help people who have previously helped us. If that person is not available we may extend the help to the kin of that person or a neutral person altogether.
- However, the degree to which a favour obligates you may act as a put off rather than making you offer help in return. For instance, if someone consistently reminded you of some help he offered you and demands that you help him, you may feel blackmailed and the tendency to help may be reduced.

Topic Three

THE BYSTANDER EFFECT AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR



The Bystander Effect

- Though people often go to the help of victims in an emergency, there are also instances when nobody goes to the help of people who need help.
- Research into the reasons why people do not respond in emergencies was first carried out by Darley and Latane after the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York City. In this crime, Miss Genovese was assaulted by a man in a location where people could see and hear what was going on. However, no one came to her aid nor reported the incident to the police.
- The questions that followed when this crime was reported were why nobody went to the aid of this lady? Over the years, a number of researches have followed the initial classic one by Darley and Latane to determine how people respond in emergencies.



The Bystander Effect

- The bystander effect refers to the notion that effective responses to an emergency are less likely to occur (and more likely to be delayed if they do occur) as the number of bystanders increases.
- Let me explain this by recounting a scenario I witnessed at the airport. An elderly man who was waiting to clear his luggage collapsed and fell. It was apparent that the man was sick and needed help. Now, (1) suppose I was the only person who witnessed this incident or (2) there were many other persons who witnessed this incident, as in fact was the case; in which instance, do you think the man was likely to be helped? When his fall was witnessed by one person or when it was witnessed by many other people?
- Well, common sense would suggest that, the more people who witness an emergency, the more the victims are likely to receive help. But, research evidence has shown that this is not the case at all. Often, the more bystanders who witness an emergency the less likely that the victim will receive help.

Causes of the Bystander Effect

- Darley and Latane in their classic experiment on the bystander effect attributed it mainly to the **diffusion of responsibility**. When more people witness an emergency, no one helps because all the witnesses assume that someone else will do it. Thus, all of us who witnessed this old man fall just stood by and offered no help immediately, because everybody wanted to clear the ambiguity of the situation and also assumed that somebody will help this man-which delayed the help in this instance.
- Besides the diffusion of responsibility, it has been said that the bystanders do not help in an emergency or delay in doing so because of **the fear of social blunder**. Sometimes people are uncomfortable and afraid to act (over react) and appear foolish to other bystanders. Thus, though bystanders may be upset about an emergency such as the fall I narrated above, they may wait for somebody to make a move first, before they follow. Thus, if nobody makes a move to help, a bystander is likely to think 'perhaps it is not an emergency after all if everybody else is looking on and doing nothing about this'.

Topic Four

STEPS ALONG THE PATH TO PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR



The steps to Prosocial Behaviour

- Latane & Darley (1970) conceptualized helping behaviour as a culmination of a series of cognitive choices. Whether an individual will offer help or not in times of an emergency depends on the choices the individual makes in relation to a number of issues.
- **Noticing (or failing to notice) the Emergency:** The first decision is to notice the emergency, because if you do not notice the problem you cannot provide help. We could easily go past problems unnoticed because we are too busy, in a hurry, pre-occupied with our own thoughts or because we are just not looking.
- For instance you may walk past a parked car, where the driver has his head on the steering wheel. This driver may just have collapsed, but if you did not see this or did not pay much attention to it, you are unlikely to offer help as compared to if you did.



Steps to Prosocial Behaviour

- **Correcting Interpreting the Situation as an Emergency:** The next decision after the emergency is noticed is to interpret the situation as an emergency. Often we have limited or incomplete information about the incidents we witness. Thus, we often wait to get additional information to decide if an incident we are observing is an emergency. Thus, when we are not sure an incident is an emergency, we tend to hold off, obviously because of the fear of social blunder.
- Using our example above, you could be of help to this driver if you correctly interpret seeing him with his head on the steering as an emergency. But you may perhaps come to this conclusion after you have stood for a while and observed this driver to be sure that the situation really was an emergency. If however you imagine that he may be waiting for somebody, you will not go to offer any help because the situation according to your interpretation is not an emergency.
- Thus, many emergency situations involve some degree of ambiguity. When people are not sure of what is happening they hold back waiting for extra information – especially information that suggests that there is no need to be concerned when the individual is reluctant to help anyway! Generally, when an emergency happens each person bases his interpretation of the event on the reactions of others (bystanders). Baron et al (2009) explain that the tendency for bystanders to hesitate and or do nothing about an emergency is known as **‘pluralistic ignorance’**.

The Steps to Prosocial Behaviour

- **Assuming Responsibility to provide help:** Though you may notice a problem and correctly interpret it as an emergency, if you do not believe it is your responsibility to help, you are unlikely to help.
- For instance, if you saw someone drown in a pool in the full view of a lifeguard, you are most likely to think 'this is the lifeguard's responsibility not mine' and you are unlikely to help even if you could swim. However should you witness this incident alone, you may take care of it because there is no alternative.

Steps to Prosocial Behaviour

- **Deciding How to Help (The Competence of the Bystander):** When all three conditions above have been met the fourth decision is how the victim should be helped. The question following is 'do I possess the skills to do help?' If you witnessed someone drown, would you decide to help if you cannot swim?
- Thus, when emergencies require special skills only a few bystanders may be able to provide the needed help. The concern of bystanders in exposing their own inadequacies in such instances may make them likely to rationalize that others will help. At best, they may call others who have the skills to come to the aid of the victim.

Steps to Prosocial Behaviour

- **Deciding whether to help (to implement the help):** Making the ultimate decision to help in an emergency is influenced by several variables. A person weighs the costs and benefits of helping before often stepping in to help.
- For example, you may notice an armed-robbery attack and correctly interpret it as an emergency- but are afraid to intervene for fear that you may be shot or killed in the process.
- Or perhaps you may not want to stop to help someone whose car has broken down on the highway because you may think it is a ploy by robbers to get you to stop. Thus, it is only after a cost-benefit analysis is done and the costs are often not too 'costly' that people really decide to intervene in emergencies.

Sample Question



Topic Four

SITUATIONAL FACTORS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR



Situational Factors

- Social research has indicated that we are likely to help others **Similar to Us**. I explained early on that people are more likely to offer help to kin than to non kin because of the desire to perpetuate our genes. However, it is also known that help has and is often extended to total strangers in many instances. What features of these strangers make it likely that they will be offered help? Research has indicated that we are more likely to offer help to people who are similar to us whether in looks, ethnic background, gender, age, nationality etc.
- We are also more likely to help people who are not responsible for their problems than those we think are. Thus, **help inhibiting disgust** is elicited for individual's deemed responsible for their plight, whereas **help fostering empathy** is elicited for individuals perceived as the victims of unfortunate circumstances (Weiner 1980).
- Can you imagine how you would feel if you offered to help someone and s/he told you off? I am sure you will be so embarrassed and possibly angry. Hence, when people think that the victim would refuse their offer they stay off.



Situational Factors

- In doing a cost-benefit analysis of whether to help or not, we would consider what threats that helping a victim poses to our physical and social status. If there is no threat, we may offer help, otherwise we do not.
- Which request for help are you likely to meet-big or small ones? Whether we would help or not depends on the type of help, and whether we think our help will make any difference at all. For instance, if a person needs a hundred thousand cedis to undergo surgery, you may not be able to help this fellow because the money involved is huge- or you may withhold your contribution of a ten cedis because you may think it is too small to make any difference.

Situational Factors

- It has been suggested that people living in small communities are more helpful than urban dwellers. Urban dwellers are less helpful because of the stress of urban life which causes them to keep to themselves. This notion derives from the- **urban overload hypothesis** – the theory that people living in cities are constantly bombarded with stimulation so they keep to themselves so as not to be overwhelmed by the happenings around them.
- Again it has been said that living in one area for a long time builds attachment to a place and its people. Thus, people who have lived in an area for a relatively long time are more likely to help out of a concern for their neighbors and concerns with their reputation in the community.

Internal Factors

- **Empathy:** The tendency for people to experience empathy-emotional reactions that are focused on or oriented towards other people and include feelings of compassion, sympathy and concern towards others (Batson & Oleson, 1991).
- Batson et al (2003) explain that empathy 'consists of affective and cognitive responses to another's person's emotional state and includes sympathy, a desire to solve the problem, and taking the perspective of the other person'. Empathetic people put themselves in the place of the victim and see a thing from the latter's perspectives.
- The affective (feelings) component of empathy emerge early in childhood as even children can experience it (children often cry when they observe other children cry). But the cognitive aspect of empathy (when we try to put ourselves in another's' shoes and see things from their perspective) develops later in life-from adolescence.

Empathy Perspective taking

- (Batson et al, 2007) have identified three types of perspective taking namely:
 - **'The imagine other'** perspective-where you imagine how the other person perceives an event and how s/he must feel as a result. Those who take this perspective experience pure empathy that results in helping behavior.
 - **'The imagine self'** perspective-where you would imagine how you would feel if you were in the victims situation. Those with this kind of perspective also experience empathy but it is often tainted with self interest which can interfere with helping behavior.
 - **'Fantasy'**- feeling empathy for a fictional character. This involves some emotional reaction to the pain, sorrows, joys of characters in movies, books etc. This is the kind of empathy that brings makes you cry when you watch or read about someone's joy or sorrow in a movie or book.
- We are all born with the biological capacity for empathy, but our specific experiences determine whether this potential becomes a vital part of our lives or fails to manifest itself. Thus, socialization and exposure to helpful models influences a persons' tendency to be empathetic.

Internal Factors

- **Inter-personal Trust:** have indicated that people high in interpersonal trust are more likely to engage in pro-social behavior than those who distrust others. Again, persons with a Machiavellian personality, full of distrust, cynicism and who are users and manipulators are less likely to engage in pro-social behavior.
- **Belief in a just world:** Helpful personalities believe in the law of Karma—that what you sow is what you reap. In other words they believe in a just world that when you do others good, you will also in turn have others do good to you. It is simply the case of the biblical ‘cast your bread upon the waters and you shall find it after many days’.
- **Social Responsibility:** Helpful individuals tend to think that we are each other’s keeper and it is the responsibility of each person to assist others in need.

Internal Factors

- **Internal Locus of Control:** Helpful personalities tend to think that you can influence the world and events positively with your good actions. They, unlike people who do not help, do not believe in the acts of fate or the supernatural that what will be will be.
- **Low egocentrism:** Helpful personalities are less competitive and less self absorbed. They tend to be more collectivistic in orientation-thinking about the good of all, rather than individualistic (thinking only about themselves).

Gender and Prosocial Behaviour

- **Gender and Pro-social Behavior:** The question here is, besides egoism or altruism, does gender in any way influence pro-social behavior. Which gender is more likely to engage in Pro-social behavior? Eagly and Crowley's (1986) meta-analytic view of 172 helping behavior studies, found that males and females differ in their willingness to engage in certain pro-social actions.
- Generally, it was found that men were more helpful than women and their helping behavior was more pronounced when: (1) There is potential danger involved in helping; (2) When there is an audience and (3) When the person (victim) involved is a female. However, when it came to other types of helping behavior such as: (1) helping a friend, or (2) caring for children or the aged; women were more willing to help than men (Trudeau & Devlin 1996).
- In children of both sexes, few gender differences were found to exist. The few that have been observed indicated that girls tend to be a bit more helpful than boys (Eisenberg et al 1996).

Sample Question



Volunteerism

- According to Baron, Branscombe and Byrne (2009) volunteerism 'is a form of pro-social behavior that requires a long-term commitment to performing helpful acts'. Thus, volunteers often must commit their time and efforts to the person in need for weeks, months and even in some cases years. For example, children orphaned by HIV/AIDS have a continuing problem that requires volunteers working with them on a continuous basis rather than just on one occasion. Thus, volunteers working with such children may be responsible for various aspects of the children's wellbeing including nutrition, medications, education and emotional and psychological counseling and support.
- Volunteers have similar characteristics and traits as people who engage in other forms of helpful behavior. They are high in empathy and believe that they should intervene in situations to help others. One different characteristic shown by volunteers is what has been termed by (McAdams et al, 1997) as, **generativity**. They define generativity as 'an adult's interest and commitment to the wellbeing of future generations'. The concern with future generations makes volunteers seek to do things that will outlive them. They may become parents, teachers of morality and look for opportunities to turn bad situations around for the good of all.

Motives for Volunteerism

Function Served	Definition	Sample Item
Values	To express or act on important values such as humanitarianism	'I feel it is important to help others'
Understanding	To learn more about the world or exercise skills that are often not used	'volunteering lets me learn through direct hands-on experience'
Enhancement	To grow and develop psychologically through volunteer activities	'volunteering makes me feel better about myself'
Career	To gain career-related experience	'Volunteering can help me get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work'
Social	To strengthen social relations	'People I know share an interest in community service'
Protective	To reduce negative feelings such as guilt, or to address personal problems	'Volunteering is a good escape from my own problems'
Source: Based on information in Clary & Snyder (quoted in Baron et al, 2009).		

Sample Question



Session Summary



References

- Robert, B. and Branscombe, N. (2012). Social Psychology. 13th Edition. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2007) Social Psychology. 6th Edition. Pearson Education Inc.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2010) Social Psychology. 7th Edition. Pearson Education Inc.