

# Social Psychology

## Lecture 12: Prosocial Behavior

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In our previous lesson, we explored the concept of aggression, specifically distinguishing between its two main forms: hostile and instrumental aggression. We examined gender and cultural variations in aggressive behavior, as well as the different causes of aggression as explained by various theories. We also discussed the multiple influences that contribute to aggression, and devoted considerable time to understanding bullying. Finally, we wrapped everything up with some proven strategies for reducing aggression and found that the best method for reducing aggression is stopping it *before* it even happens.

In this lesson, we will explore the concept of prosocial behavior. Specifically, we will examine the different types of helping proposed by McGuire (1994). We will also look at gender differences in helping, exploring who is more likely to help and under what circumstances. Then, we will discuss the major theories that explain why we help, including empathy, social norms, and evolutionary factors. After that, we will consider whom we are most likely to help whether friends, family, strangers, or those similar to ourselves. Finally, we will conclude with practical, evidence-based strategies to increase prosocial behavior in everyday life.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Define prosocial behavior and distinguish between egoistic and altruistic helping.
2. Describe gender differences in helping tendencies.
3. Compare the major theories explaining why we help others.
4. Identify key factors that influence helping behavior.
5. Suggest practical strategies to increase prosocial behavior.

## Prosocial Behaviors

- Behavior designed to help another person
- It is a positive form of social action
  - **Egoistic helping** is helping with the expectation of something in return. Motivated by self-interest.
  - **Altruistic helping** is helping with no expectation of a return. Motivated by genuine care and concern for another person's well-being.

## Types of Helping (McGuire, 1994)

- Casual help → *giving directions*
- Substantial help → *lending money*
- Emotional help → *listening*
- Emergency help → *saving someone*

## Gender and Helping

- Men generally help more than women, and they are more likely than women to help strangers.
- Women not only receive more offers of help in certain situations but also seek more help. They are twice as likely to seek medical and psychiatric help. They are the majority of callers to radio counseling programs and clients of college counseling centers.
- The differences appear in non-routine tasks, such as emergencies (e.g. assisting with car trouble or rescuing a drowning child)
- Women tend to help in more long-term, nurturing ways (e.g. providing emotional support or taking in an elderly parent)
- These gender differences are greatest
  - when there is an audience.
  - when there is potential danger involved in helping.
  - when the person in need is female.
- The source of these differences may not be genetic, but instead may be due to the gender norms that men should be heroic and women should be nurturing, or perhaps men's and women's beliefs about their own capabilities.
- A woman may not believe she has the strength to pull the child out of the pounding waves, and a man may not believe that he would know how to tend to the needs of an elderly

person. These gender differences in helping have been demonstrated to hold up across cultures.

- Men's chivalry toward lone women may have been motivated by something other than altruism. Mating motives can motivate displays of heroism. Not surprisingly, men more frequently helped attractive than unattractive women.

## WHY DO WE HELP?

### A. Evolutionary Perspective

#### Kin selection

- the tendency of people to help their close relatives, even at great cost to themselves, in the hope that one's genes are carried on.
- Compared with neglectful parents, parents who prioritize their children's welfare are more likely to pass their genes on.
- **Study:** Burnstein, Crandal, and Kitayama (1994)
  - The study tested the idea that natural selection favors helping behaviors that increase the survival of shared genes
  - Method: Using hypothetical scenarios, the researchers asked participants to choose whom they would help when only one person could be assisted.
  - Findings:
    - In life-or-death situations → Participants were significantly more likely to help close kin over distant kin; also favored helping the young over the old, the healthy over the sick, and the wealthy over the poor.
    - Everyday favors (non-life-threatening) → Participants gave less weight to kinship; instead opted to help the very young or very old, the sick over the healthy, and the poor over the wealthy.

### B. Socio-cultural Perspective

#### 1. Norm of Reciprocity

- People usually help others who have helped them.
- Doing a favor for someone increases the likelihood of getting that favor returned.
- The benefit to the recipient must be high and the cost to the helper must be relatively low.
- The likelihood of their positions being reversed in the future must also be high.

### **Experiment (also encountered in Lesson 6)**

- Regan (1971) tested whether we comply with people because we like them or because we feel indebted to them.
- **Participants:** 77 male undergraduates
- **Method:** A "confederate" (an actor) was made to be either likable or unlikable.

The confederate either:

- Brought the participant a soft drink (the favor).
- The experimenter brought the drink (control).
- No drink was given at all (control).

The confederate later asked the participant to buy raffle tickets.

- **Result:** Participants who received a soda from the confederate bought twice as many raffle tickets as those who received no favor. It didn't matter if the participant liked the confederate or not. Even those who found the confederate unpleasant felt compelled to buy tickets if they had accepted the soda.

### **Experiment: Dunfield & Kuhlmeier (2010)**

- **Participants:** 21-month-old infants
- **Method:** Infants were introduced to two actresses.
  - First actress (Helper): Attempted to give the baby a toy, but due to an incline on the table, the toy rolled away, and the baby could not receive it.
  - Second actress (Non-Helper): Showed the baby the toy but did not offer it.
- **Key point:** In both cases, the baby did not actually receive the toy.
- **Test Phase:** The two actresses sat side by side. The experimenter placed a toy on the table, and it fell off, rolling just out of reach of both actresses (who both reached for it but could not get it). The baby, however, could reach the toy.
- **Results:** Infants were significantly more likely to hand the retrieved toy to the actress who had previously *attempted* to give them a toy (the Helper). They were less likely to help the actress who had simply shown them the toy without offering it (the Non-Helper).
- **Conclusion:** Even at 21 months old, infants remember and respond to others' *intentions*, not just outcomes. Babies reciprocate helpful behavior even

when the initial attempt was unsuccessful. This supports the idea that the reciprocity norm (the tendency to return favors) emerges very early in human development.

## **2. Norm of Responsibility**

- This norm states that a person will feel more compelled to help others if he feels a sense of responsibility to his society and its members, without regard to future exchanges.
- Example of this is donations to charity and social activism
- Moral & social obligation drives this norm
- This sort of generous giving occurs only when we feel that the victims are not responsible for their situation; if we cast blame on the victim, we will not help.
- If they seem to have created their own problems (e.g., by laziness, immorality, or lack of foresight), then, the norm suggests, they don't deserve help
- We help "deserving" others, but we also blame victims.
  - **The Just-world Belief**
    - The world is a fair and equitable place, with people getting what they deserve in life.
    - Thus, people in need of help "must have done something" to deserve their plight.

## **3. Norm of Social Justice**

- This norm states that people should help only when they believe that others deserve assistance.
- In North America, being deserving means either possessing socially desirable personality characteristics or engaging in socially desirable behaviors.

## **C. Learning Perspective**

### **Observational learning in children**

- Can initially teach children how to engage in helpful actions.
- Talking about helpful behavior can have some effect.

### **Prosocial modeling in adults**

- Adults who act in a prosocial way can influence people to do the same.
- Adults' modeling of altruism can have a powerful effect on the altruistic tendencies of children that can last well into adulthood

## Cultural Differences

- Norm of reciprocity appears universal.
- Norm of social responsibility shows strong ingroup-outgroup distinctions in collectivist cultures, but overall the norm appears stronger in those cultures than in individualist societies.

## Rural vs. Urban

- In rural areas, people help more than in urban areas
- Reciprocity among humans is stronger in rural villages than in big cities. Small schools, towns, churches, work teams, and dorms are all conducive to a community spirit in which people care for one another.
- Compared to people in small-town or rural environments, those in big cities are less willing to relay a phone message, less likely to mail “lost” letters, less cooperative with survey interviewers, less helpful to a lost child, and less willing to do small favors
  - **Urban overload hypothesis** – states that city dwellers constantly face an excess of sensory and social stimuli. To prevent cognitive overload, urban residents adapt by tuning out distractions, keeping to themselves, and becoming less outwardly altruistic to strangers

## Residential Mobility

- People who have lived in one place for a long time are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors.
- Knowing your neighbors builds trust and reciprocity

## INFLUENCES ON HELPING

### 1. The Bystander Effect

- A phenomenon in which as more people are present, each individual is less likely to help.
- Explanations:
  - **Audience Inhibition Effect** – people are inhibited from helping for fear of negative evaluation by others if they intervene and the situation is not an emergency.
  - **Diffusion of responsibility** – the belief that the presence of other people in a situation makes one less personally responsible for events that occur in that situation.

- When Latané, James Dabbs (1975), and 145 collaborators “accidentally” dropped coins or pencils during 1,497 elevator rides, they were helped 40 percent of the time when one other person was on the elevator and less than 20 percent of the time when there were six passengers.

## 2. Time Pressures

- Another circumstance that promotes helping is having at least a little spare time; those in a hurry are less likely to help.
- **Experiment:** Batson, Cochran, Biederman, Blosser, Ryan & Vogt (1978)
  - **Participants:** 40 male University of Kansas students
  - **Procedure:** Participants directed to an experiment in another building. On route, all encountered a male confederate slumped on the stairs, coughing and groaning. Two independent variables manipulated:
    - Time pressure (late vs. plenty of time)
    - Importance to experimenter (vital vs. not essential)
  - **Result:**
    - Plenty of time + unimportant appointment → usually stopped to help
    - Late + very important appointment → seldom stopped to help

## 3. Attraction

- People are more likely to help others whom they perceived as attractive
- Experiment: Benson, Karabenick, and Lerner (1976)
  - Participants: 442 males and 162 females (total N = 604)
  - Procedure: Researchers left a completed graduate school application form in the phone booth, accompanied by:
    - A photograph of the applicant (attractive vs. unattractive)
    - The applicant's race (black vs. white)
    - The applicant's gender (male vs. female)
    - A stamped, addressed envelope to the graduate school
  - Dependent variable: Whether the participant mailed the application
  - Findings:
    - Physical attractiveness → Attractive applicants received significantly more help than unattractive applicants

- Race → White applicants received more help than Black applicants (participants were all white)
- Gender → There were no gender effects, either based on the gender of the helper or person being helped.

#### 4. Similarity

- People are more likely to help others who are perceived to be similar to them than those individuals who are not.
- **Experiment:** Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher (2005)
  - Participants: University students who were fans of Manchester United soccer club
  - Procedure: Participants completed questionnaires designed to activate their identity as Manchester United supporters. They were then asked to walk to another building. Along the way, they encountered a staged accident where an actor (jogging) slipped, fell, and appeared injured.
  - Manipulation: The actor wore one of three types of shirts:
    - Own team's shirt (in-group)
    - Rival team's shirt (out-group)
    - Plain unbranded sports shirt (neutral)
  - Findings: Fans were much more likely to help the victim if they were wearing their own team's shirt (in-group, 92%) rather than a rival team's shirt (out-group, 30%) or a generic sports shirt (out-group, 30%).

#### 5. Mood

##### Feel good, do good.

- Happy people are helpful people.
- This effect occurs with both children and adults, regardless of whether the good mood comes from success, from thinking happy thoughts, or from any of several other positive experiences.
- Good mood makes us interpret events in a sympathetic way
- Helping another prolongs the good mood, not helping deflates it.
- Good mood increases self-attention.
- **Experiment:** Dariusz Dolinski & Richard Nawrat (1998)
  - Setting: Streets of Warsaw, Poland, in areas known for illicit parking

- Participants: Drivers who parked illegally became unwitting participants (N = 50 per condition)
- Procedure: Researchers placed a paper behind the windshield wiper (where tickets are typically placed). The paper looked like a police ticket but was actually an advertisement. After drivers read the paper and experienced relief, a confederate approached asking for help completing an M.A. thesis questionnaire
- Findings: The study demonstrated that individuals who first experience fear (thinking they have received a parking ticket) and then sudden relief (discovering it is just an ad) show dramatically increased compliance (62%) with subsequent requests compared to control groups (32%).
- **Experiment:** Alice Isen, Margaret Clark, and Mark Schwartz (1976)
  - Method: Researchers had confederate call people who had received a free sample of stationery 0 to 20 minutes earlier. The confederate said she had used her last dime to dial this (supposedly wrong) number and asked each person to relay a message by phone.
  - Findings: The individuals' willingness to relay the phone message rose during the 5 minutes afterward. Then, as the good mood wore off, helpfulness dropped.

### **Feel bad, do good.**

- People who are guilty are more likely to help.
- Church-goers are more likely to donate money before, rather than, after confession.
- Negative-state relief hypothesis
  - People will also provide help to alleviate their negative state while observing or thinking about another's suffering.
  - Witnessing another's suffering can induce empathy — which includes both a cognitive and emotional component and includes the feeling of compassion for others and that of seeing the world through the eyes of another individual.

## **DOES TRUE ALTRUISM REALLY EXIST?**

### **The Empathy-altruism Model**

- When we feel empathy for a person, we will attempt to help purely for altruistic reasons.

- Someone will be more likely to help another person if that other person's welfare is at stake.
- This is particularly the case if the helper has nurturing feelings toward the other person.
- In fact, protecting another's well-being is often enough to encourage helping behavior, even if no egoistic motivations to help exist and, remarkably, even when helping is costly to oneself.
- This suggests that people truly can help in selfless ways and that altruistic behavior exists.

### **Social exchange theory**

- If we do not feel empathy, then **social exchange theory** will come into play.
- States that human interactions are transactions that aim to maximize one's rewards and minimize one's costs. The theory does not contend that we consciously monitor costs and rewards, only that such considerations predict our behavior.
- Helping can be rewarding in 3 ways:
  1. It increases the probability that someone will help us in return in the future
  2. It can relieve the personal distress of the bystander
  3. It can gain us social approval and increased self-worth
- People who score high on **empathic concern** are those who habitually feel warmth and compassion for unfortunate others. Person helps to relieve the other person's suffering (e.g., "They need help so I want them to be okay")
- Those who score high on **personal distress** tend to become anxious and uneasy when seeing others in need of help. Person helps to escape their own negative feelings (e.g., "I feel awful seeing this so I'll help so I stop feeling bad")

### **How do we increase helping?**

1. Modeling prosocial behavior
2. Education

**Enlightenment effect** – it suggests that learning about psychology can bring about changes in behavior. Research has shown that learning about the bystander effect results in an increase in helping in group situations.

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