

Prosocial Behaviour and Diffusion of Responsibility: Helping Friends and Family over Strangers

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. V. Gordon Rose's Psychology 300 course *Critical Analysis of Issues in Psychology*. The assignment asked students to write a thesis-based research paper on any topic pertaining to the course material; a lecture on prosocial giving served as the springboard for this writing. The paper uses APA citation style.

Although humans are capable of unkindness, they are capable of greater kindness that transcends the former in strength and scope. From donating for hurricane relief to giving directions to a lost tourist, from tutoring a younger sibling to calling 9-1-1 for an injured motorist, humans are surprisingly adept at a wide variety of prosocial behaviours, defined as voluntary acts performed in order to benefit another individual (Aknin et al., 2013a). Such prosocial behaviours can be planned or spontaneous, be in serious or in not serious situations, and be doing a direct act or giving indirect help (Smithson, Amato, & Pearce, 1983). Notably, prosocial behaviour is not indiscriminate. While any individual may be the recipient of prosocial behaviour if the circumstances warrant it, humans are more likely to behave prosocially in certain situations but not others, and toward certain individuals but not others. Specifically, humans are more motivated to direct their prosocial behaviour toward friends and family, and less so toward strangers (Cialdini et al., 1997; Eisenberg, 1983; Maner & Gailliot, 2007; Preston & de Waal, 2002). This is a well-established phenomenon found in nonhuman animals as well (Chang, Winecoff, & Platt, 2011; Stevens, 2010; de Waal, Leimgruber, & Greenberg, 2008). One question that arises is why this preference exists at all. If all humans have worth, they are equally deserving of our aid, but the biased nature of our actual prosocial behaviours does not reflect this view. Although several explanations have been posited to elucidate our proclivity to help close others

over strangers, one mechanism that has been unexplored in this context is diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latane, 1968). Humans are less motivated to behave prosocially toward strangers rather than family and friends due to the interplay between diffusion of responsibility and group size.

One alternative explanation that has been postulated is Hamilton's (1964) inclusive fitness theory, which attempts to explain prosocial behaviour directed towards biological relatives. According to the theory, the reproductive success of an individual is calculated by including not merely the individual's number of personal descendants, but also the additional descendants of the individual's relatives as well; this is due to the individual sharing a proportion of genes with the relatives. Altogether, both the direct fitness of the individual and the indirect fitness of genetic relatives contribute to the individual's inclusive fitness (Nettle, 2009). Since the indirect fitness of genetic relatives contributes to the individual's inclusive fitness, maximizing the genetic fitness of relatives is to the individual's advantage, and therefore the individual is motivated to behave prosocially towards relatives. A related concept is kin selection, an instance of inclusive fitness. Kin selection refers to natural selection favouring behaviour that helps a biological relative (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, & Fehr, 2010). Because of these evolutionary motives, people have a bias towards distributing their assistance and resources to relatives over strangers, particularly relatives with whom they share more genes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).

While widely accepted and supported, inclusive fitness theory is not without its problems. For one, there is some evidence that rather than genetic relatedness, the closeness of emotional ties may be the issue. Korchmaros and Kenny (2006) conducted a study where participants indicated their willingness to help an immediate or extended family member; while degree of emotional closeness predicted helping, degree of genetic relatedness did not. As well, kin selection does not explain the helping of elderly, infirm, or otherwise infertile relatives who have no children and can no longer have children and thus cannot propagate their genes. Furthermore, inclusive fitness theory does not explain the surprisingly common instances of family estrangement, which is a deliberate communication severance between family members (Conti, 2015). Familicide, the murder of family members, also does occur—more commonly than other mass homicides at work, in shopping malls, or at schools (Liem, Levin, Holland, & Fox, 2013). All these factors do not support inclusive fitness theory as the motivation to maximize the reproductive success of genetic relatives is not evident in such cases.

Another alternative explanation that has been put forward is Trivers' (1971) reciprocal altruism theory, which attempts to explain prosocial behaviour directed towards nonrelatives based on the principle of reciprocity. This is the idea that one individual helps another individual who reciprocates by returning the favour at some point in the future, and both individuals mutually benefit (Nettle, 2009). The implication of this is that opportunities to build and strengthen long-term social relationships should be favoured, as these relationships permit the chance to reciprocate. When helping a friend, there is the chance that he or she will help us back; when helping a stranger with whom we will never have further contact, there is no chance of reciprocation. Therefore we are more likely to help friends, with whom we share a reciprocal relationship, over strangers. This notion is reflected in Aknin, Dunn, Sandstrom, & Norton (2013b), where the emotional rewards of prosocial spending are greatest when social connections are facilitated. Young children also demonstrate the inclination to help friends rather than nonfriends, even when the latter is in more need (Paulus, 2016), illustrating the priority of social ties, and by extension, the opportunity to be reciprocated.

However, reciprocal altruism carries a number of complications. One limitation with this theory is that it is not unequivocally corroborated. Scharpf, Paulus, and Wörle (2017), for instance, found no association between social relationships and levels of generosity among non-Western children, and thus no cross-cultural universal can be inferred. Reciprocal altruism also fails to explain prosocial behaviour toward nonkin when there is no opportunity for future reciprocity, as when either the benefactor or beneficiary is anonymous to the other party. Not only do humans regularly engage in prosocial behaviour anonymously, they often derive much happiness from such anonymous helping. Aknin et al. (2013a), for example, found that participants who engaged in prosocial spending were happier than participants who engaged in personal spending, even when the item they purchased was for a beneficiary whom they would never meet and the item would be delivered anonymously. A similar finding was reported by Martela and Ryan (2016), who found improved well-being in the benefactors despite their anonymity to the beneficiaries. What is more, the theory cannot account for the helping of elderly and infirm individuals who are too old or too incapacitated to reciprocate in the future, but such helping is incontrovertibly prevalent throughout the globe. Due to its failure to explain all forms of helping, then, reciprocal altruism theory is not wholly adequate.

Therefore, a third and final account is proposed: Diffusion of responsibility influences who benefits from prosocial behaviour. Diffusion of

responsibility is the phenomenon whereby the greater the number of bystanders present at an emergency, the less the sense of responsibility to help (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, & Fehr, 2010), resulting in less helping behaviour (Latane & Darley, 1968), although this finding is not restricted to emergencies in actuality. Accordingly, the larger the group one is in—that is, the more people who are around—the less the likelihood of helping. The applicability of diffusion of responsibility to differential prosocial behaviour towards strangers and close others may not be readily apparent, but the two are linked nonetheless. First, there is increased likelihood of being in a smaller group when around family and friends. When you have coffee with two friends, you are in a group of three; when you are at home with family, you are in a group of, say, four or five. If you are shopping with a friend, then you are in a group of two. The rest of all shoppers at the mall are not part of your “group” unless they are the recipient of your help, and here is where the process changes. If you are in a shopping mall without family or friends, you are among strangers, and your group expands to all shoppers at the mall—a much larger group than before. Since diffusion of responsibility rests on group size (helping is likely when in a smaller group and less likely when in a larger group), helping is likely when with friends and family, where the group is smaller, and less likely when with strangers, where the group is larger. This occurs regardless of kin selection or strength of social relationships. As an example, if I dine out with one friend and her wallet was misplaced, I would pay for her because nobody else can help. It is certainly true that we share a social relationship and our bond compels me to help, but I would pay for her irrespective of whether this friend is my closest friend or a less familiar acquaintance—the nature or strength of our social relationship is not the key factor; group size is. On the other hand, if I am approached by a charity or a panhandler on a bustling street, there are many others who can donate instead, so I am not inclined to do so myself. Thus diffusion of responsibility predicts whom we help and when.

There are, however, ways that the present interpretation could be rendered problematic. If the account offered here is accurate, we should be inclined to help strangers, friends, and family when we are in small groups, and not be inclined to help strangers, friends, and family when we are in large groups—in other words, regardless of beneficiary identity—due to the preponderance of group size on helping behaviours. But occasionally, group size has no bearing whatsoever on helping behaviours and the opposite pattern is found: We may help strangers, friends, and family even when we are in large

groups, and may not help strangers, friends, and family even when we are in small groups. Although empirical evidence of such controverting instances has been difficult to locate, there are isolated cases and abundant anecdotal evidence. We can all recall a time when we helped a stranger in a crowded public location, for instance, and must keep in mind that diffusion of responsibility is not absolute.

A more concrete example is helping rates in rural versus urban areas. If group size truly moderates helping behaviour, then levels of helping should be higher in rural areas, where population density is low and less people are around, and lower in urban areas, where population density is high and more people are around (Bierhoff, 2002). Indeed, this phenomenon has been thoroughly established by studies (e.g., House & Wolf, 1978; Korte & Ayvalioglu, 1981; Korte & Kerr, 1975). Yet even here there are conflicting findings—at least two studies have uncovered a curvilinear relationship where rates of prosocial behaviour are lower in small communities, higher in intermediate-sized communities, and lower in large communities (Amato, 1983; Steblay, 1987). This illustrates that even with solidly established phenomena such as the rural-urban helping difference, there is sporadic data to contradict it and accordingly not support diffusion of responsibility, as the curvilinear relationship is inconsistent with the linear relationship predicted by diffusion of responsibility. However, the presence of sporadic data that challenges diffusion of responsibility does not invalidate its clear and widespread influence. Without question, diffusion of responsibility is pervasive: It has been uncovered in countless situations as diverse as emergencies (Latane & Darley, 1968), restaurant tipping (Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latane, 1975), charitable donations (Wiesenthal, Austrom, & Silverman, 1983), and even responding to e-mails (Barron & Yechiam, 2002) over years upon years of research that firmly verifies its extensive impact. Additional studies are needed to explore the presence of events that controvert diffusion of responsibility in prosocial contexts.

In sum, a number of reasons have been put forth to explain why humans are less disposed to help strangers over family and friends: Hamilton's (1964) inclusive fitness theory, which attempts to explain helping relatives; Trivers' (1971) reciprocal altruism theory, which attempts to explain helping nonrelatives; and diffusion of responsibility, which explains helping that is contingent upon group size in the immediate situation, regardless of who the recipient is. This final claim arguably is the least problematic of the three, where humans are less motivated to help strangers over family and friends owing to the interplay between diffusion of responsibility and group size.

The implications of this argument are quite substantial. For instance, the findings have applications to individuals or organizations seeking donations. Rather than selecting busy city intersections, selecting a secluded location to collect the donations may be in their favour, as secluded locations reduce the number of passersby. And instead of approaching groups of passersby, it may be advantageous to approach individuals who are alone instead. And individuals such as panhandlers who depend on the help of others, yet have no family or friends, should not lose hope. It is not inevitable that strangers always receive less help than friends and family—with the right situation (being alone with the potential benefactor, for instance), strangers can receive just as much. Finally, in everyday life for the majority of us, we can capitalize on the present findings by asking for favours in opportune moments. If the favour involves asking family members to do chores, for example, ensuring that we are alone with one family member at the time of asking can maximize the efficacy of the request. Hence diffusion of responsibility has applicability to a wide array of benefits from prosocial behaviours.

There are various avenues of future research. For one, the link between diffusion of responsibility and prosocial behaviour needs to be further investigated, in particular as they relate to recipient identity, as studies that link these three variables together are rather scarce. Rather than merely grounding this link on pure logic, as the present paper has done, it would be constructive to examine the link empirically and substantiate it with experimental data. Additionally, whether humans are socialized to help friends and family over strangers is an issue that was unaddressed in the present paper, but would be interesting to pursue. Perhaps reinforcement experience contributes to the inclination to help friends and family over strangers, where such differential helping is implicitly encouraged and reinforced in society; similarly, observation experience may also contribute—since helping close others is more frequent, we observe more of it and internalize the societal norm of helping friends and family over strangers. Finally, it is noteworthy that humans are capable of prosocial acts even when no direct benefit in terms of gene propagation or reciprocity is in sight. The next logical question to address then is whether or not true altruism can or does exist. This is beyond the scope of the current paper, but a worthwhile and intriguing debate nevertheless.

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