

# **Term paper: Culture and prosocial behaviour**

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## **Introduction**

Throughout evolutionary history, prosocial behaviors have prevailed as a mediator to human interaction and social harmony. Pro-social behaviors encompass actions that are intended to benefit someone other than oneself (Eisenberg, 1982). Past research has demonstrated that early human development starts the onset of learning the ability to automatically identify other's mental states and then use these evaluations to understand and predict other's behavior (Frith, 2012). Prosocial behavior may be attributed to this tendency to share mental states with those that we interact with as this tendency to relate has been postulated to play an integral role in social interaction, and so much so that it has been argued that a primary function of explicit metacognition is to enhance social relations and support fruitful group interaction (Tomasello, 2009). From an evolutionary point of view, such claims make sense as the propagation of one's gene requires a healthy interaction mechanism with others that share the same resources and environment. Hamilton's explanation for inclusive fitness postulates that altruism (a form of prosocial behaviour) occurs when the benefits to the recipients of an altruistic act, weighted by the relatedness between the social partners, exceed the costs to the altruists. This drives altruistic genotypes spreading against non-altruistic ones and causes for selection of genes responsible for cognition that promotes pro-sociality and cooperation (Hamilton, 1964). This process has occurred throughout different human societies and is mediated by individual experiences which are largely shaped by people's cultures.

Cultures can therefore be understood as complex amalgamation of practices, norms, and institutions developed to ensure pro-sociality, and the pre-globalized geographical isolation of different societies makes it such that they differ in the kind, degree, and organization of such practices. However, there are identifiable patterns in culture because the environments that we

grow up in function on pivotal values that vary culturally. These distinctive values can be seen even in the folk tales from different cultures that are designed to enforce moral values, which again are mostly promoting prosocial behaviors. Hofstede identified nine cultural dimensions that can scale out differences in culture. The cultural dimension I-C (Individualism vs Collectivism) is regarded as the most distinctive with regard to western and non-western cultures.

The current paper will review the existing literature on prosocial behaviors (in particular helping as a form of altruistic behavior) across different cultures, citing evidence from past experimental studies that test social dilemmas, and discuss large scale cross-cultural studies that have assessed the frequencies of helping behavior as well as possible mediators. One important mediator discussed is perceived in-groups and out-groups. It ends with a discussion of models proposed by researchers to identify if the balance between individual rights and the need to maintain a coordination of social, economic, and resource-related practices on a global scale can be achieved in a modern-day society where every nation on the globe, every culture, every society is intertwined into one network of human exchange.

### **Prosocial development and culture**

In his book *Cultures of Infancy*, Heidi Keller proposed an eco-social model of culturally informed development (Keller, 2007), where he defined the concept of culture as shared practices and shared meaning systems that are based on socio demographically defined environments. In the eighth chapter, he discussed longitudinal analysis of three cultural environments, focusing on the developmental tasks of self-recognition and self-regulation. The researchers identified two prototypical developmental pathways towards prosocial behavior. In relational contexts, for example the rural areas of non-Western countries, social interactions, and the concept of

prosociality is guided by interpersonal responsibilities. In autonomous contexts like urban middle-class settings in Western countries, social interactions, and the concept of prosociality is guided by an emphasis on personal choice. These disparities in motivations allude to a cultural difference in the level of cognition to the different developmental frameworks that rely on the environment and personal history.

Researchers studying pro social behavior often use social dilemmas to obtain an empirical understanding of the cross-cultural differences in pro-sociality. Social dilemmas are situations that pose tension or conflict between individual and collective interests (Balliet and Ferris, 2003). In any social dilemma, there are cooperative solutions, those that benefit the group the best and non-cooperative solutions wherein an individual would choose what is best for self, thus pursuing self-interest over a collective interest. Situations that compel an individual to choose between maximizing utility for oneself versus for the whole group are considered dilemmas because when viewed in a light of self-maximization, pursuing self-interest is rewarding in the short term. However, if this pursuit of self-interest is widespread, then everyone chooses what is best for themselves and in this way the social order is threatened. This can lead to tension in the society which in turn threatens the individual self-interest. For the better functioning of the species in general, people act prosocially to attain collective goals. Studying social dilemmas allows researchers to obtain a quantitative understanding of differences in expression of prosociality as well as obtain reports on the underlying motivations behind such behaviors.

Researchers in the past have obtained quantitative data on how people across different cultures act during social dilemmas. Similar to the concept of cooperative versus non-cooperative solutions discussed above, there are two types of economic games adopted by this research. The first involves testing the interests of an individual against another (which tests singularity) and the

second are public good games that test the interests of one against many others. Previous research shows a pattern of choices among people from individualistic cultures and collectivist cultures in such games. In a game of prisoner's dilemma, decision makers from China (collectivist culture) tend to reach more cooperative choices than decision makers from the United States (individualist culture) (Hemesath, 1998). Another example is how Vietnamese decision makers (collectivist culture) display more cooperative tendencies in a public goods dilemma than decision makers from the U.S (Parks & Vu, 1994). Drawing from such research in the past, it is clear that cultural differences result in a variability when it comes to pro social behaviour. Findings of such experimental studies imply that people from collectivist cultures would be more accommodating in social decisions and find cooperative solutions than those from individualist cultures. However, these experiments have been done mostly in the 1990s when the understanding of cultural influence on individuals was thought to be more linear than it is today. Although experimental studies can give insight into the measurable differences in behaviour, it cannot exactly figure out the motivation behind such differences or the cultural conditioning that it may be a result of.

Today, pro social behaviour is understood as a more complex mechanism and more recent research has aimed to dissect this and understand what it really is that causes the variability among cultures. One interesting way in which pro social behaviours may be understood is by looking into the phenomena of helping. Helping is a cooperative strategy and the biggest marker of altruism. Helping does not require a grandiose gesture; it can be examined by simple social experiments such as dropping wallets and observing how people respond in that situation. They could choose to act cooperatively (return the wallet to the owner) or choose to act non-cooperatively (simply keep the wallet). Anecdotal observation usually suggests that strangers in some cities are more likely to be helpful than those in others.

Levine et al examined patterns of spontaneous helping behaviour by conducting field experiments across big cities in 23 different countries. In contrast to previous studies done in this field that usually examine differences between two cultures, their study measured helping in a wide range of cultures. Their research had two main goals. 1) To examine if the helping of strangers is a cross-culturally meaningful characteristic of the place, and 2) To identify some community characteristics that are related to the helping of strangers across cultures. The 23 countries were rated on a ten-point scale for the dimension of individualism-collectivism. Researchers assessed the frequencies at which strangers were being helped in three different non-emergency spontaneous helping situations (dropped pen, hurt leg and helping a blind person across the street) that required very little effort. Their data captured a general tendency for a city to provide support to strangers. Their findings showed a large variation between the 23 cities, Rio de Janeiro had the highest helping frequency (93%) and Kuala Lumpur had the lowest (40%). However, it can be noted that both Brazil and Malaysia are highly collectivist cultures, so the cultural dimension in this study does not provide a clear insight on people's helping tendencies. Levine et al. examined other variables such as economic indicators and walking speed. Their analysis revealed that the strongest reliable correlate of cross-national differences in helping was economic productivity. Countries with the highest per capita purchasing power tended to be less helpful. The lack of strong economies is sometimes accompanied by a traditional value system. The authors noted that most of the traditional value systems often mandate ethical guidelines such as assisting strangers as a part of their social schema. All the countries on the top of the list for general helpfulness were relative third-world environments when this study was conducted (Rio de Janeiro, San Jose, Lilongwe, Calcutta). Apart from the general findings, the research proposed a unique role of culture in cities from Latin America (Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, El Salvador)

and Spain. All these cities were above the mean in overall helping, and on average were more helpful than the other international cities. Authors attributed this increased tendency to help to the cultural script of *simpatia*. Although the term *simpatia* has no direct English translation, it is an embedded value system whereby individuals are taught to ground themselves to a range of amiable social qualities so that they can be regarded as someone that is fun and pleasant to be around. Helping strangers is also part of this script. (Levine et al., 2001) This study had an amazing sample size and thus was extremely informative in establishing the complex nature of prosocial behaviour and has acted as an antecedent to further research done on pro social behaviour.

Another perspective from which the variance of helpfulness towards strangers may be understood is by evaluating the tendency to which individuals across cultures define themselves as a member of their groups. Research has found that the concept of self-varies across cultures. In some cultures, people seem to derive from the group to a larger extent in order to define and express themselves relative to others who may rely less on their groups for their identity. This profound display of interrelatedness is evaluated by one's measures of in-groups and out-groups. In-group is a special class of membership group characterized by a strong internal cohesiveness among its members for whom people feel concern and are willing to cooperate (Neuliep, 2014). Out group, in contrast, refers to a group of individuals that people see as separate and different from them who can be led to stereotyping and prejudice (Klyukanov, 2005). Research so far tells us that the difference in the perception of in group bias between individualist and collectivist cultures can be observed. While individualists show a tendency to be very skilled with relatively superficial and non-intimate relationships collectivists are observed to spend much time establishing relationships and functioning with a pivotal mutual dependence on interpersonal obligations (Triandis & Gelfand, 1988). It can be argued that the perception of in-groups and out-

groups is one of the major factors that differentiate people's behavioral patterns in different cultures.

To understand the results from Levine et al.'s (2001) study better, Noam et al analyzed the data from Levine et al. to establish the role of embeddedness on prosocial development. Embeddedness is a cultural value orientation that measures focus on the welfare of the in-group. In cultures that are highly embedded, cultural norms that foster supportive ties within one's own community is very strong. Their analysis showed that large cross-national differences in helping strangers related strongly and negatively to cultural embeddedness. Their findings, however, also suggest that these norms do not apply to those not of kin. These findings imply that although highly collectivist cultures may show more social cooperation and prosociality for their in-groups, this may not necessarily be the case towards perceived outgroups (Noam et al., 2009).

Over the course of a few research studies, Simon and Sturmer have investigated group membership and its contribution to pro social behaviour and how they differ across different cultures. Their 2000 study investigated the differential effects of individual versus collective identification on individual's willingness to volunteer for in-group versus out-group members. In their studies, they established that individual identification meant that the individuals understood themselves as unique individual beings whereas collective identification meant that they understood themselves as being a part of a bigger group. Their findings suggested that while in-group volunteering was facilitated by collective identification, out-group volunteering was facilitated through individual identification, but inhibited by collective identification (Stürmer and Simon, 2000). In their follow up study, they tested the effect of collective identification on volunteering by applying a longitudinal design with real life volunteering as a dependent variable. Results of this panel study confirmed that higher levels of collective identification facilitate



participation in movements that benefit in-group members (Stürmer and Simon, 2004). Their third study was two laboratory experiments testing a group-level perspective on the role of group identification in helping. The first experiment tested if group identification predicts pro-social behavior in an intercultural context of helping with empathy as the moderator. Confirming their Empathy x Group Membership moderation hypothesis, empathy showed a greater impact on helping intentions when the helper identified that the target belonged to the same cultural group (in-group) than when they belonged to different groups (out-group). The second experiment tested the replicability of their previous findings in a modified minimal group paradigm using laboratory-created groups. The authors noted that their analyses in the in-group condition confirmed that the strength of in-group helping relationships varied as a function of perceived similarities among ingroup members (Stürmer and Simon, 2004). This allowed them to provide evidence that there are psychological mechanisms underlying the ingroup helping relationship. In contrast, the researcher found that individual identification allows for people to have a more generalized propensity to act pro-socially, as their motivation is not nullified by a collective motivation. Other researchers have proposed similar development of mechanism for people that are stronger on individual identification. Other researchers have claimed that it is actually when individuals become more autonomous and liberated from social bonds that they become even more dependent on society as they are then free from the social obligations that may tie them to specific groups. (Allik & Realo, 2004)

### **Conclusion**

The level of cooperative practice required to sustain ourselves is advanced and complex. One major finding of this review was that although collectivist cultures have in-group prosociality, they

have low generalized prosociality (prosocial behavior towards strangers). This has been explained by the concept of perceived social in-groups and out-groups; the varying degrees of perception in this regard may shape motivation to be pro-social in the first place. These differences may be explained by considering the complex role that culture actually plays in the determination of outward behavior. There must be precursors of helping which develops throughout one's life that are shaped by contextual factors that largely differ across cultures.

Evolutionary psychologist and economist Joseph Henrich presents the idea of a collective brain which is the cumulative culture of the human species. He postulates that our individual abilities to solve problems depends heavily on a download of cultural information that we acquire in the environments we grow up. The cumulative cultural evolution then causes genetic evolution that enforces newer neural pathways, increasing our cognitive sophistication in order to become better cultural learners (Henrich, 2015). Understanding cooperative behavior is pivotal to the basis of political and economic frameworks that we base our societies on. As cultural integration becomes more pronounced, it is important that the understanding of human reception becomes more complex and accommodating. Large scale studies are needed in order to develop multi-dimensional models of understanding pro social behavior.

In a literature review on helping and volunteering across cultures, Aydenli et al. argued for more research that needs to be done in order to understand properly an individual's tendency to help and act pro socially. Most research done in this area has been through self-reports and although they give quantitative data, the predictors for helping are affected by response tendencies. The authors argued for a need to use implicit or projective measures as predictors (Aydenli et al.,2022). This paper supports this argument, especially considering that the literature review done here shows that a narrow view of assuming that collectivist cultures are in general more prosocial

may be wrong. There are factors such as in-group and out-group perception that play a huge role in determining the degrees of prosocial behavior. Newer and more nuanced research needs to be conducted to understand the tendency to be pro-social better. The current upsurge of online databases of personality types, for example the MBTI, can hold records of people across the globe and is now being used increasingly more often by employers. Although its validity is still being researched, it nonetheless makes people aware of the diversity of perception and provide them with a tool to correctly understand one another better. Similar tools could be used for cross cultural dimensions so that the ever-expanding global culture learns to build values on frameworks that incorporate understanding and dealing with differences.

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