

Prosocial Reasoning

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Prosocial behavior is best described as a general range of actions that are intended to benefit individuals other than one's self. Some of these prosocial actions include helping, comforting, and sharing with others (Batson & Powell, 2003). More specifically, prosocial behavior is better understood as one's voluntary action that is solely meant to benefit others. Prosocial reasoning is the motivating influences for an individual to engage in a prosocial behavior. Some research suggests that reasoning behind prosocial behavior is a motivation toward altruism, a principle in which one individual is selfless and engages in behaviors that help others, despite personal gain. Therefore, a potential reason for someone to engage in prosocial behavior may be to become more altruistic.

Prosocial reasoning has been linked to various theoretical concepts including social learning, tension reduction, attribution, esteem-enhancement, and moral reasoning theories. Of these frameworks, social learning theory is the most popular and researched. Regarding prosocial reasoning, social learning theory is the idea that individuals learn how to engage in prosocial behavior by observing and modeling others behaviors. Therefore, simply observing others engage in prosocial behavior may be another reason for an individual to follow suit. Paciello and colleagues further expounded upon these theories and suggested that prosocial reasoning is a determinant of emotional tendencies and moral-cognitive processes. Based on these domains, prosocial reasoning is heavily influenced by three factors: empathy, mortality salience, and personal distress.

Empathy is the ability for one to care and share a connection with another's feelings. High levels of empathy have been positively correlated with prosocial behavior. This suggests that the more an individual is empathic towards others, the more likely they are to act prosocial. The relationship between the degree in which someone cares for another and is in tune with their emotions moderates their engagement in prosocial behavior. In addition to being a cognitive decision, empathy is also believed to have evolutionary roots. This may suggest that reasons for engaging in prosocial behavior could be a protective factor for developing social relationships. These connections and relationships are therefore a motivating reason for one to engage in prosocial behavior. This perspective on empathy is further verified by the opposite being true. The less empathic an individual is, the less likely they are to engage in prosocial behavior. All in all, the component of emotional connection is one of the driving factors for prosocial reasoning.

Another reason for prosocial behavior is mortality salience. Zaleskiewicz and Gasiorowska, and Kesebir (2015) examined how the salience of one's own death could impact their degree of prosocial behavior. The authors called this the "Scrooge Effect," and based it on terror management theory. This theory transmits feelings of anxiety related to death to sources of value in one's life. One of these values is prosocial behavior. The act of engaging in prosocial behavior offers value to one's life by giving them a sense of "goodness" and feelings of generosity. The authors concluded that acting prosocially when being faced with mortality decreased individual's levels of anxiety. This study shows that reasons to engage in prosocial behavior may be influenced by one's own mortality; the more one acts in a prosocial way, the less they will fear their own mortality.

Personal distress refers to the degree in which one is dealing with stress in their own life. The more distress one is experiencing, the less likely they are to engage in prosocial behavior.

Reasoning for this is because the individual is more focused on themselves and less focused on others. By inadvertently dealing with one's own stress, the individual tends to neglect the needs of others and are less likely to sacrifice their well-being for another. In contrast, the less personal distress one is experiencing, the more likely they are to engage in prosocial behavior. The tradeoff here is that less time focused on personal distress, the more time one has to help others and alleviate their distress.

In conclusion, there are many reasons for one to engage in prosocial behavior. Whether it be altruism, empathy, mortality, or distress, there is always a preceding reason to prosocial behavior. The take away point is that we all have our own reasons that lead us to behave a certain way, and some of these reasons are presented here when discussing prosocial behavior.

References

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