

PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

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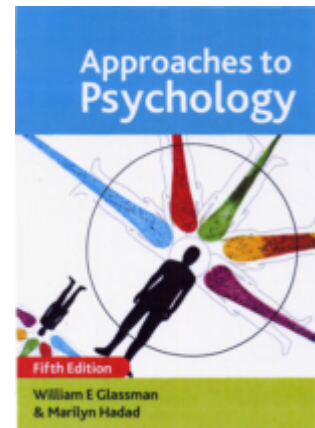
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Introduction to Social Behaviour

From the moment of birth, humans are social creatures. Indeed, without social interactions (the support of caregivers), no infant would survive. Even when we become capable of living independently, very few people seek to live in isolation. (The Unabomber, living in a cabin in the hills and mailing bombs to people he'd never met, was unusual – and his behaviour reflected this.) Instead, we generally welcome social interactions, and no study of behaviour would be complete without considering these interactions.

The study of social behaviour is often referred to as 'social psychology', but the reality is that studying social interactions is not solely the domain of psychologists – sociologists and anthropologists, among others, also study social interactions in various ways. What distinguishes social psychology from these other disciplines is the emphasis on the individual as the focus of study – that is, social psychologists tend to focus on how individuals act in social situations, and how they are influenced by social processes. Sometimes, the focus is on how the individual is affected by others – what is called **social influence**. Social influence can include direct influences, like group decision making, as well as indirect influences, like imagining how friends would react to a particular situation. In other cases, social psychologists study the cognitive processes that we use in understanding ourselves and others, called **social cognition**. Stereotyping and attitude change are examples of social cognitive processes. (Note that while one might imagine that social cognition is simply a sub-area of the Cognitive Approach, in fact, the behaviours related to social cognition can be explained from a variety of approaches – for example, stereotyping can be discussed by the Biological Approach in terms of evolutionary processes.)

Obviously, social behaviour is a broad topic, and there is a wealth of material available related to almost any aspect of the subject. Apart from the discussion in the text, you may find the following sources useful for further exploration.

Resources

Social Psychology

Extensive site covering a variety of aspects of social psychology and social behaviour; while developed by a sociologist (Michael Kears of Trinity University in Texas), it is also relevant to social psychology.

Social Psychology Network

A very extensive site, providing access to a wide range of material and links to other sites; maintained by Scott Plous of Wesleyan University.

Psybersite

Provides extensive material on selected topics, as well as links; created at Miami University, Ohio, by Richard Sherman and Steve Hinkle.

Perspectives on Aggression

You only have to pick up a newspaper or watch the nightly news to realize that aggressive behaviour is all too common. Murders and assaults by individuals, riots at political demonstrations or sporting events, and wars are never far from the headlines. Why is aggression so common? And is there anything that society can do about it?

For psychologists, trying to understand behaviour is always the primary goal, and this is equally true of aggression. Interestingly, psychologists from all five approaches have addressed the issue, and have often come to very different conclusions about the causes of aggressive behaviour. To many Psychodynamic and Biological theorists, aggression is an innate drive, which arose as a product of the competition which Darwin called natural selection (sometimes called 'survival of the fittest'). To psychologists from the other approaches, aggressive behaviour is learned, like all behaviour. Thus, the approaches fundamentally differ in terms of explaining how aggression occurs.

While one might be inclined to regard the dispute as largely theoretical, and therefore irrelevant to everyday life, the implications of the theories are significant in terms of deciding how society should deal with aggression. To those who believe aggression is an *innate drive*, and therefore unavoidable, the goal is to try to channel aggression into appropriate activities, like sports instead of war. Doing so, they argue, produces a release of drive energy called **catharsis**. By contrast, those who believe that aggression is *learned* argue that providing opportunities for 'catharsis' really simply teaches people to engage in more aggressive behaviour.

Nowhere is this disagreement clearer than in discussions about the impact of observing violence. Television, movies, and video/computer games are often full of violence, either simulated (in movies and games) or real (in the case of television news and 'docudramas'). What impact, if any, does this frequent exposure to aggressive behaviour

have on people? According to **social learning theory**, it will make aggression more likely; the concern is particularly significant when talking about the impact on children, who are presumably more impressionable. As the text discusses, there have been thousands of studies of the issue in the past forty years, and while the majority of the studies clearly favor the social learning interpretation over catharsis, individual studies always have limitations, and the debates about public policy continue. The issue is further muddied, because some would say that, regardless of the theoretical arguments, there is no practical impact of observing violence, because most people are capable of discriminating between fantasy and reality. Let's hope so, because the indications are that entertainment media are more saturated with graphic visual portrayals of violence today than ever.

Resources

Biological

The Biological Basis of Aggression

Illustrated essay by Joanna Schaffhausen, on BrainConnection.com

Behaviourist

The frustration-aggression hypothesis

Classic 1941 article by Miller et al., proposing that aggression was a response to frustration, not an innate drive; from Christopher Green's York University website on classic readings in psychology.

Cognitive

Social cognition

Introductory discussion by Bill Huitt & John Hummel of Valdosta State University; includes links to other topics, including social learning theory.

Albert Bandura

Chapter on life and theory of one of the pioneers of research on imitation; from online personality text by George Bouree of Shippensburg University.

Transmission of Aggression through Imitation

Classic article by Bandura, Ross, & Ross (1961) which started the debates about the impact of children observing violence; from Christopher Green's York University website.

Psychodynamic

Catharsis, Aggression, and Persuasive Influence

1999 article (in PDF format) by Baumeister *et al.*, arguing that not only does catharsis not work, but that believing it does leads to even greater aggression after exposure to violence; from *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Children and Media Violence

Television Violence: A Review

Lengthy (70 pp.) 1995 review by psychologist Wendy Josephson for Dept. of Canadian Heritage.

Children and Television Violence

2002 statement by American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, partially reflecting a psychodynamic perspective on the issue.

Violence in the Media

2005 APA summary of research on how media violence affects children.

Video Games and Aggression

April 2000 article (in PDF format) by Anderson & Dill, arguing that playing violent video games increases both short-term and long-term aggressive behaviour; from *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions

2003 public policy brief by the APA, written by researcher Craig A. Anderson.

Perspectives on Prosocial Behaviour

While the debates about aggression in general and media violence in particular, continue, one must remember that not all social behaviour is negative. Indeed, there are many instances in which people help others, sometimes at great risk or cost to themselves. Helping a person in distress represents an example of **altruism**, a form of prosocial behaviour (empathy and making amends for wrongs are other examples). What motivates someone to help another person? And can society do anything to promote such behaviour?

Like aggression, the attempt to understand altruism has led to theoretical and even philosophical disagreements. At the most basic level, the debate focuses on whether true altruism even exists – that is, will anyone really help someone if there is truly nothing to gain? From a Biological point of view, such behaviour would seem contrary to the demands of natural selection; instead **kin altruism** suggests that one only helps others who are perceived as genetically related – one's family first, then one's tribe. A Cognitive variant, **social exchange theory**, suggests that altruism involves perceived

gains, but that the gains can be social rather than genetic – for example, if I help you, then you may later be able to help me in some other way. Unfortunately, **true altruism** is difficult to prove, because critics can always claim that some gain exists, but is not recognised. Whatever the ultimate truth is, it is nonetheless gratifying to recognize that in daily life, there are still many cases where people go out of their way to help strangers, as some of the examples below illustrate.

Resources

Prosocial Behaviour

Information and links by Tom Farsides, University of Sussex.

Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behaviour Institute

Site provides information about altruistic behaviour and links to related sites; created by Samuel and Pearl Oliner of Humboldt State University.

Biological

The Biological Basis of Morality

April, 1998 article in *Atlantic Monthly* by E.O. Wilson, one of the founders of sociobiology.

Quick Guide to Kin Selection

Brief article (in PDF format) discussing the evolutionary view of prosocial behaviour, from Rice University.

Behaviourist

Altruism and Selfishness

Article from *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* by Howard Rachlin, a behaviourist psychologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Cognitive

Emotions about Reciprocity

Lecture slides (in Adobe PDF format) critiquing evolutionary view of altruism, and discussing role of cognitive processes; by psychologist Stephen Pinker of MIT.

Psychodynamic

Social Evolution, Psychoanalysis, and Human Nature

Excellent 1988 article from *Social Policy* by Daniel Kriegman and Charles Knight, outlining basic Biological and Psychodynamic views of prosocial behaviour.

Children and Prosocial Behaviour

Developing Social Competence in Children

Article (in PDF format) by Wendy Schwartz of Columbia University, discussing relationship of social skills to both aggressive and prosocial behaviour.

What Makes Kids Care?

APA report for general public on what research tells us about fostering prosocial behaviour in children.

Developing Empathy in Children and Youth

Lengthy article by Kathleen Cotton, exploring research on fostering empathy; part of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory website.

Altruism in Everyday Life

The Rescuer Self

Article by Eva Fogelman discussing altruism in the context of individuals who helped hide Jews from the Nazis in World War II.

Giraffe Project Heroes Program

Website for non-profit Giraffe Project ("honouring people who stick their neck out"), discussing program for fostering prosocial behaviour in children; includes interesting profiles of "giraffe" individuals.

Applying the Concepts: Are Aggression and Altruism on the Same Dimension?

When we hear the word 'altruism', we immediately think of prosocial behaviour, that is, a behaviour that looks after the well-being of others. When we hear the word 'aggression', we often think of antisocial behaviour, behaviour that disrupts the well-being of others. Just as prosocial behaviour and antisocial behaviour seem to be the opposites of each other, so too we often assume that altruism and aggression are the opposites of each other. It seems to us that they occupy two ends of the same continuum. If so, the implication is that an aggressive person would not show altruistic behaviour, and an altruistic person would not show aggressive behaviour. For example, we may say, "X could not have started that fight; he's a very caring and helpful person." Or, "Y is such a violent person, she would never agree to help someone else." But are we right? Are altruism and aggression really two sides of the same coin?

Krueger, Hicks & McGue (2001) decided to find the answer to this question. As well, they wanted to examine the roots of both altruism and antisocial behaviour: is the Biological Approach more accurate (i.e., do people inherit the tendency to be prosocial or antisocial?) or is the Behaviourist Approach more accurate (i.e., do people learn to be prosocial or antisocial?). To answer these questions, Krueger and his colleagues surveyed male twins born between 1961 and 1964 who were enrolled in the Minnesota Twin Registry. In the final analysis, data were obtained from 170 pairs of monozygotic twins (i.e., identical twins), 106 pairs of dizygotic twins (i.e., fraternal or non-identical twins) and 121 individuals whose twin did not participate. All 673 individuals filled out three questionnaires. The first was a large personality inventory called the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). The second was a self-report questionnaire concerning the individual's antisocial behaviour (e.g., "How often did you take part in fights in which a group of your friends was against another group?"), and the third was a self-report questionnaire concerning the individual's altruistic behaviour (e.g., "I have stopped to help a stranger who was having difficulty carrying their belongings.").

After amassing this very large amount of data, Krueger and his colleagues performed several sophisticated statistical tests in order to determine the answers to their questions. What the tests revealed was, first, that antisocial behaviour, including aggression, is independent of altruism. That means that an individual who is aggressive may, in other situations, act altruistically. Likewise, a person who is altruistic may, in other circumstances, act aggressively. Antisocial behaviour and prosocial behaviour, then, do not seem to be opposites of each other: they are distinct from each other and often co-exist as tendencies in the same person. It appears, then, that X may be a caring and helpful person, but still be responsible for the outbreak of violence; and Y may be a very violent person, but still demonstrate helping behaviours.

Using more statistical tests to tease apart nature and nurture factors in twins, Krueger et al. also found that the tendency to be antisocial seems to be a result of both genetic influences and environmental influences. Thus, both the Biological Approach and the Behaviourist Approach have support for their explanations of aggressive behaviour. But altruistic behaviour showed a different result: the only influence on altruistic behaviour was found to be environmental. In this case, it seems that the Behaviourist Approach receives support for its explanation that altruistic behaviour is learned.

Krueger and his colleagues acknowledge that their findings are limited to the males who responded to the survey (i.e., not a representative sample), and they rely on self-report data, which may show a bias in that the respondents may not wish to reveal all their antisocial behaviour, but may exaggerate their altruism. Consequently, they warn that it is difficult to generalise to other samples or populations. Still, their evidence is highly suggestive and reminds us to be careful about the assumptions we make regarding behaviour.

Reference

Krueger, R. F., Hicks, B. M., & McGue, M. (2001). Altruism and antisocial behaviour: Independent tendencies, unique personality correlates, distinct etiologies. *Psychological Science*, 12, 397-402.

Publications Related to Social Behaviour

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology

Primary APA journal for research on social behaviour; contains tables of contents for current and past issues, and a few selected full-text articles.

Journal of Social Issues

Published by Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues; takes an applied focus. Site contains tables of contents and some abstracts.

Aggressive Behaviour

Journal of the International Society for Research on Aggression; contains tables of contents, some organizational links.

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