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Origins of Human Behaviour

The psychology of good and evil

This paper contrasts the beneficence and malevolence often seen in human behaviour. A review of psychology literature, as well as historical accounts of good and evil behaviour, was conducted to explore factors that influence altruistic and malicious behaviour in humans, and to examine ways in which societies can promote pro-social behaviour. The review revealed the importance of both personality and situational factors in both pro- and anti-social decision making. The review revealed that situational variables are better predictors of behaviour in familiar situations, while personality variables are better predictors in novel ones. Studies also consistently demonstrated that seemingly negative traits like low interpersonal trust, high judgement, and low conventionalism can all promote socially beneficial behaviour in some situations. Other factors such as birth order, developmental environment, stress, proximity, and authority were all revealed to be important moderating factors for socially determined actions. A review of social engineering projects aimed at the promotion of pro-social behaviour on large scales was also conducted. This revealed that while pre-existing factors could influence human behaviour, psychoeducation and shifting social norms could help facilitate pro-social behaviour.

Keywords: psychology, behaviour, altruism, selfishness, personality, social engineering

The once only-philosophical debate over altruism and malice in human nature has, over the past forty years, moved into the realm of social psychology and empirical experimentation. Scholars have established that no single factor causes pro- or anti-social behaviour. Instead, a combination of both nature and nurture—personality and situation—determines whether we choose to help or hurt others. This paper presents examples of such differences in human nature, a short gloss on foundational psychological studies into human behaviour, and then shows how new organizations are influencing human behaviour for good. Effectively, these new organizations

marry the past research done by social psychologists with a goal of improving the way we behave in social settings.

History shows us startlingly different kinds of human behaviours even in similar situations. For example, on the morning of March 13, 1964, Kitty Genovese—she was a 28-year-old barmaid working in Queens—arrived back at her New York apartment before being robbed, raped, and murdered by an unfamiliar man (Krajicek, 2011). It was alleged that 38 witnesses saw or heard some part of the assault and none offered help or called the police. In contrast, between 1941 and 1944 residents of the French village of Le Chambon actively resisted Nazi occupation and elected to hide and protect Jews and other political refugees at grave risk to themselves, acting out of pure compassion to save over 5,000 lives (Rochat & Modigliani, 1995, pp. 198-201).

Psychologists have determined that what governs human behaviour in these cases is the nature of the actor and the situational circumstances (Wilson, 1976, p. 1084). While situational variables better predict behaviour in familiar situations such as waiting in line at the store, personality traits better predict behaviour in atypical situations such as when someone attempts to rob the cashier at the store (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009, p. 16).

Psychologist Stanley Milgram ran a controversial yet classic study that tested people's behaviour in situations of harm to others. Milgram wondered what caused Nazi war criminals like Adolf Eichmann to commit their atrocities; he sought to answer whether people like Eichmann were regular people thrust into bad situations or true monsters that relished their evildoing (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009, p. 12). Milgram's initial experiment—there have been many subsequent variations of Milgram's work since—recruited volunteers for a study on, he said, learning (Milgram, 1965). In the experiment, participants had the power to control a machine that shocked learners if learners answered questions incorrectly. All of this was a ruse, however, and Milgrim asked learners to answer incorrectly on purpose and scream in pain, demand release, and eventually fall silent.

The results showed interesting human behaviour. In fact, a meta-analysis of 21 unique iterations of the experiment (n = 740) showed that over 43% of participants gave the full range of shocks (Haslam, Loughnan, & Perry, 1991). What, then, is responsible for making us feel so secure in our own beneficence while simultaneously driving us to hurt others at the command of a man in a lab coat?

It turns out that the lab coat—and the rest of the situational setting—played a significant role in participants' behaviour (Blass, 1991, pp. 402-403); that is, the perceived authority of the institution and of the experimenter played a major role in determining how many people obeyed until the end. Other mitigating factors included the physical proximity of the experimenter and the distance of the learner (pp. 400-401). But personality factors of the participants came into play as well—after all, each variation of the experiment saw a minority of individuals disobey

orders (pp. 402-403). Analysis of this dissenting group's personality characteristics revealed that traits such as low authoritarianism, low conventionalism, low interpersonal trust, high moral judgement, and high social responsibility produced subversive results.

Not all psychological experiments focus on harmful behaviour. Though the original claims surrounding the number of witnesses and their inaction pertaining to Kitty Genovese's murder have since been dismissed (Manning, Levine, & Collins, 2007), the original controversy sparked interest that generated decades of psychological research into human helping behaviour. Darley and Latané (1968, pp. 378-379) staged a series of experiments to determine what influences our choice to help others in distress. Participants were led into separate rooms and told to anonymously discuss troubling aspects of their lives over intercoms. Soon after the conversations began, one of the speakers—an associate of the experimenters—demonstrated difficulty speaking, noting that he or she was prone to epilepsy. They would then plead for help and later go silent, with sounds of thrashing being audible over the intercom.

Experimenters found that when participants believed themselves to be the only listener, 85% actively sought help, whereas of those who thought that four others were also listening, only 31% did so (Darley & Latané, 1968, p. 380). This phenomenon has since been dubbed the Bystander Effect, which dictates that one of the most important situational influences on helping behaviour is the diffusion of responsibility within groups (Bereczkei et al., 2010, p. 238; Wilson, 1976, p. 1079).

Other situational variables that influence our chances of helping include how likeable and attractive we perceive the other to be, how physically similar we are to them, and whether we interpret the situation as an actual emergency (Batson et al., 1986, p. 216; Daley & Latané, 1968, p. 383). Researchers have also uncovered a number of personality characteristics, such as high empathy, high contentiousness, high agreeableness, and low masculinity, that all contribute to a greater probability of helping (Bereczkei et al., 2010, p. 240; Tice & Baumeister, 1985, p. 424). Other studies have since found that later-born individuals and people raised in urban environments are consistently more helpful than first-borns and rural-raised people (Batson et al., 1986, pp. 218-219; Weiner, 1976, p. 120).

These studies raise questions about how we can increase people's chances of helping others in need and reduce the likelihood of them falling prey to ways of thinking that can injure their fellow citizens. Already, numerous organizations have sprung up to take charge of reinstating humankind's humanity. Some charitable organizations, such as Amnesty International and the Red Cross, focus on providing relief to those in dire need through material aid obtained through donations.

Other organizations focus on changing attitudes and behaviours of those living comfortably in the first world. Improv Everywhere is an American group that stages comical situations all over the world, getting people to laugh and play with events

like pants-less subway rides and boardroom meetings held in Staples showrooms. In addition to the fun, it seems to recognize the ill effects of high conventionalism and authoritarianism, which they challenge by "break[ing] store policies or park regulations" (Improv Everywhere, 2016). People for Good is a Canadian organization that is using ads and social media to increase our emotionality and empathy:

> When was the last time you saw someone give up their seat, or hold a door open? When was the last time you looked up from your phone and had a conversation with a real person? We get so caught up in our own lives that we forget about each other. We're out to change that.

Improv Toronto is trying to establish interpersonal closeness and a norm of reciprocity by doing good deeds for Torontonians, such as providing umbrellas on rainy days and handing out snacks to hungry commuters.

The concept of group pressure is being used by Copwatch, an organization "intended to both promote public safety and to ensure that police officers remain accountable for their actions." They operate by asking the public to film or simply watch any arrests that they witness in order to deter police misconduct. Many other organizations are also promoting the concept of mindfulness—teaching people to enter into a state of "awareness that arises when paying attention to the present moment" (Mindfulness Everyday, 2016). This way of thinking helps people develop attitudes such as "acceptance, patience, non-judgement, and compassion" (Mindfulness Institute, 2015), augmenting altruistic and caring qualities and limiting negative thought patterns that may lead to harmful behaviour.

Though past research has shown that people often lack empathy and embody authoritarian attitudes, there have always been pockets of resistance. The difference today is that these new organizations, beyond the laboratory experiment, are working together to turn such resistance into the norm. In the past, researchers first discovered the "banality of evil" (Jones, 2009, p. 280), but soon developed the complementary concept of the "ordinariness of goodness" (Rochat & Modigliani, 1995, pp. 204-205). In the same way today, psychologists have revealed to us the dual influence of personality and the situation over both helpful and harmful behaviour, and it now falls to those who have listened to institute a union of science and action—to challenge our mindsets and replace vice with beneficence.

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