

Promoting Prosocial Actions: The Importance of Culture and Values

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The goal of this paper is to provide a general theoretical discussion of how culture and values might affect an individual's motivation to engage in prosocial actions. Its basic premise is that certain prosocial behaviors can play a significant role in changing economic and social conditions in developing countries, but increasing the incidence of such behaviors requires an understanding of cultural value orientations and the personal motives that derive from these value orientations. The development of the argument draws primarily on the research literatures in the disciplines of evolutionary, social, industrial/organizational, and cross-cultural psychology.

In the discussion that follows I use the terms "prosocial actions" and "prosocial behavior" to describe the phenomena of interest. I do so because describing a behavior simply as "prosocial" focuses on the consequences of the behavior (i.e., helping or benefiting another person or group) but avoids any implicit or explicit assumptions about whether the behavior is motivated by altruistic or egoistic concerns. The question of what motivation underlies prosocial actions is an important one, but answering it is simply beyond the scope of this paper. There are a large number of actions that fall under the rubric "prosocial behaviors." However, I will focus exclusively on two specific kinds.

The first type of prosocial behavior I wish to discuss is volunteerism; this is the donation of time and effort to some charitable or service organization. Volunteerism typically occurs within the context of membership in an organization, and the target of the volunteer's energies is usually not a specific individual but rather a category or group of individuals, such as people with AIDS or the families of people with this disease. Thus, the ultimate recipient of the benefits of volunteerism is typically a stranger and may even be unknown to the volunteer. Because of this, often the volunteer's sense of obligation is not to the recipients but rather to the volunteer's service organization or to the volunteer's role in that organization.¹ Finally, volunteerism is typically a planned, thoughtful action, sometimes lasting for years.

In Western, industrialized countries, such as the United States, volunteerism is a major part of the country's economy. According to Weisbrod, a nation's economy is divided into three segments or sectors that provide goods and services to individuals.² The first is the *private* or *market* sector; it supplies private goods—things that people buy for their personal use, such as household products or kinds of food that cannot be produced by individuals; the motivation that drives the private sector is profit. The

second, or *public*, sector is usually the government; it provides public goods such as education and roads. The third, or *independent*, sector comprises people and organizations engaging in voluntary actions without substantial support from either the private or public sectors of the economy. It supplies important products and services that are too large or costly to be provided by the private sector and that the public sector is unwilling or unable to provide.³ In the United States, there are several different components to the independent sector, but in this paper I am primarily interested in charities or service organizations and the volunteers who work for them without compensation.

In 1998 about 56 percent of the population of the United States volunteered some of their time to these organizations; they worked over 109 million hours. The estimated dollar value of these services was \$225 billion dollars.⁴ Thus, a significant portion of the goods and services received by Americans comes from the efforts of the volunteers who work for charities.

Within large organizations in the private sector there is a second kind of prosocial behavior that I wish to discuss that significantly, but indirectly, also contributes to a nation's economy. It is variously called "organizational citizenship behavior," "contextual performance," or "citizenship performance." Citizenship performance consists of job-related behaviors that are nontechnical and not required of the job holder but serve to maintain and foster a positive organizational, social, and psychological environment that, in turn, makes an organization more effective and efficient.⁵ Studies conducted in the United States and western Europe find that organizational citizenship includes such things as helping coworkers perform their jobs, going far beyond the minimum behaviors needed to carry out one's own job, fostering good relations among coworkers, being well-informed about the organization for which one works, and avoiding excessive complaining about working conditions. There is accumulating evidence that employees who are judged to be good citizens are also productive employees; and more significantly, organizational units with a high level of citizenship performance are typically more productive and proficient than those with a low level of citizenship performance.⁶ Thus, citizenship performance contributes to economic growth and development by increasing the productivity and efficiency of individual employees and the organizations for which they work. But why would people be inclined to engage in these or any other prosocial behaviors? With regard to the distal causes, there is considerable evidence that the cultural and biological "histories" of contemporary humans probably endow all of them with the following attributes: (1) the ability to recognize distress in others; (2) the inclination to experience emotional discomfort when such distress is observed (i.e., empathy); (3) the tendency to value aiding others over ignoring them; and (4) in the absence of strong counterforces, a predisposition to act prosocially.⁷ Whether these attributes are actually translated into actual prosocial actions, however, is mediated by the proximal causes of these behaviors. Thus, one must attempt to identify and understand these proximal causes.

Motives and Prosocial Actions

There are obviously a large number of different proximal causes of prosocial actions. However, I will consider only one that I believe is of most relevance to an understanding of volunteerism and organizational citizenship: the motives that underlie these prosocial actions. This approach to understanding the causes of prosocial behavior is based on the premise that if we want to understand why people act as they do, we must ask questions such as: What function does the behavior serve? What is its purpose? or, What motivates it? This is known as the functional approach to social behavior, and it has its contemporary origins in the writings of early twentieth-century philosopher/psychologists, such as John Dewey and William James.⁸ More recently, Mark Snyder and his colleagues and Penner and colleagues have used the functional approach to better understand prosocial behaviors that occur in an organizational context, such as volunteerism and organizational citizenship behavior.⁹

Why do people volunteer? As just noted, Snyder and his associates have taken a functional approach to this question. Their theoretical premise is that people may consciously choose to engage in prosocial behaviors because such behaviors meet certain needs or satisfy certain motives. According to these researchers, among people from Western, industrialized cultures, there are six primary needs or motives that may be served by volunteering:¹⁰ (1) value-expressive (expressing values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns), (2) understanding (gaining knowledge or exercising existing knowledge, skills, and abilities), (3) social (being among friends and engaging in activities that might win their approval), (4) career (pursuing activities that might directly or indirectly benefit one's career), (5) protective (protecting one's ego from negative features of the self and helping to address personal problems), and (6) enhancement (enhancing positive feelings about oneself and furthering personal growth and development).

Consistent with a functional analysis, surveys of volunteers suggest that different people have different reasons for engaging in volunteer activity.¹¹ For example, national surveys in the United States find that by far the most common reason for volunteering seems to be value-expressive—volunteers are concerned about the welfare of other people—but respondents also report other, more apparently self-centered motives as well. For example, in one survey, 33 percent of those who reported making charitable contributions said that keeping their taxes down was one of the reasons for doing so, and 14 percent of the volunteers said that they did this for career-related reasons.¹²

Omoto and Snyder conducted longitudinal studies of the motives of volunteers at organizations that serve people with the HIV infection or AIDS.¹³ They found that three self-serving motives—understanding, personal development, and esteem enhancement—were all positively associated with tenure as a volunteer, but the value-expressive motive was not. Other studies have also found that personal motives play a significant role in volunteerism, but sometimes these are not the same motives as Omoto

and Snyder identified. For example, Penner and Finkelstein also studied AIDS volunteers but did not find any significant relationships involving the self-serving or selfish motives.¹⁴ They did, however, find significant positive correlations between the value-expressive motive and willingness to directly help a person with HIV and/or AIDS. Similar results have been found by others.¹⁵ Thus although the primary motives for helping may vary across situations and circumstances, there is consistent evidence that people volunteer at least in part because this satisfies certain of their motives or needs. However, these motives certainly differ among people and, as will be suggested shortly, may be influenced by the dominant values of an individual's culture.

Now, I turn to citizenship behavior or performance. The basic premise of a functional approach to citizenship performance is essentially the same as it is for volunteerism. That is, employees engage in this behavior, at least in part, because it meets some need for them or serves some purpose. Different people may engage in the same citizenship behavior for different reasons. Consider, for example, two experienced supervisors at a large data processing company, each of whom volunteers to stay after work and teach a new subordinate how to use a particular piece of complex software. This seems to be a clear example of citizenship performance, but why has this behavior occurred? The functionalist would argue that we cannot completely answer this question without knowing the motives that underlie this behavior. One supervisor may have felt he or she had a personal responsibility to help new workers succeed in their jobs. In this instance, the behavior has a value-expressive motive: it serves to express the supervisor's values about helping others. The second supervisor, however, might engage in the same behavior because of his/her positive feelings toward the organization and the belief that helping the new worker will benefit the organization.

Rioux and Penner have identified three motives for engaging in citizenship performance: prosocial values (a concern for others, a need to be helpful, and a desire to build relationships with others), organizational commitment (a desire to be a well-informed employee, as well as a feeling of pride in and commitment to the organization), and impression management (avoiding a poor appearance and gaining rewards).¹⁶ They found the prosocial values motive was positively related to citizenship behaviors directed at individual coworkers (this is called the "altruism" dimension of citizenship) and that the organizational commitment motive was positively related to citizenship behaviors that benefited the organization (this is called the "conscientiousness" dimension of citizenship).

Thus, it would appear that one of the proximal causes of both volunteerism and organizational citizenship behaviors is people's motives. People engage in these behaviors, at least in part, because they serve certain important needs or functions for them. But it is also reasonable to assume that within a geographic region people will vary with regard to the relative importance of these motives, and there will be even greater differences among people who inhabit different regions of the world. In the next section

I examine regional differences in culture and cultural values and how these differences might affect motives for prosocial actions.

Culture, Value, and Motives

Before I begin this section of the paper, a brief qualification and explanation is needed. In the analyses that follow little mention is made of the huge disparities between the economies of “developed” and “developing” nations. Clearly, some prosocial behaviors such as volunteerism are much more likely to be found in a wealthy than a poor country. Someone who is poor typically has many fewer means and resources to help others (especially strangers) than someone who is wealthy. Thus, although the discussion that follows will not explicitly consider economic factors as causes of cross-cultural differences in certain kinds of prosocial actions, it is implicitly recognized that economic conditions play a very significant role.

At the same time, there are also substantial differences in the culture and values among different countries, and the central premise of this paper is that culture and values will exert a direct and significant influence on the motives that underlie prosocial behaviors, especially volunteerism and citizenship behavior. Therefore, before we attempt to understand the motives that are important in a region, we need to understand the culture and values of the region. The discussion that follows focuses on the values found in sub-Saharan African cultures and northern European/North American cultures.

Cross-cultural psychologists define *culture* as the accumulation of values, rules of behavior, forms of expression, norms, values, religious beliefs, occupational choices, and other human-made elements for a group of people who share a common language and environment at approximately the same period of time.¹⁷ People who share a culture share a characteristic way of perceiving the human-made part of the environment. So, one way of looking at culture is that it is a shared subjective experience. Among the various elements of this shared subjective experience, the one that is of most interest here is values.

According to Schwartz, *values* are “conceptions of the desirable that guide the way social actors (e.g., organizational leaders, policymakers, individual persons) select actions, evaluate people and events, and explain their actions and evaluations.”¹⁸ Explicit in all psychological definitions of values is the notion of relative importance. That is, values, in essence, compete to influence the members of a culture.¹⁹

Although there are a number of researchers who have investigated cross-cultural differences in values, here I will rely primarily on the work of Schwartz and his associates. His approach has been to identify core values that exist in all cultures in the world and then examine cross-cultural differences in the importance placed on these values. What are these core values? Schwartz proposes that every society on earth confronts the same basic problems and that the values dominant in a culture represent the ways in which its members believe they can most effectively deal with these problems.

The first problem concerns the appropriate relationship between the individual and the group. In this regard a culture might value *embeddedness* or its polar opposite, *autonomy*. The former value places an emphasis on "the maintenance of the status quo, propriety, and restraint of actions . . . that might disrupt . . . the traditional order." In this value system people place great importance on the group in which they are embedded and "participate in its shared way of life."²⁰ On the other hand, *autonomy* places emphasis the expression of individual uniqueness and the expression of one's internal attributes: traits, feelings, motives. Thus in a society that values *embeddedness* the individual is largely subservient to the group; in a society that values *autonomy*, the individual is largely free to challenge the group.

The second universal problem posited by Schwartz is the need for responsible behavior that will preserve the social fabric; that is, in order to avoid continual social discord, a society must have rules to guide the interactions among its members. One value that might determine the nature of these interactions is the value of *hierarchy*: an emphasis on "the legitimacy of an unequal distribution of power, roles, and resources."²¹ Thus, social order is preserved by the roles that people assume, and role occupants are expected to comply with the responsibilities and rules attached to their roles. The opposite of *hierarchy* is the value of *egalitarianism*, which emphasizes the moral equality of all people and the need for people to contribute to the welfare of others. In a culture where *egalitarian* values predominate, individuals are encouraged to be cooperative and be concerned about everyone's welfare.

The third problem is the relation between people and the natural or social world. One response to this problem is found in the value of *mastery*, which emphasizes succeeding and improving oneself through being active and assertive. People must master or change the world so that their personal or group interests will be furthered.²² Standing in opposition to this value is *harmony*, which emphasizes fitting in harmoniously with the environment, accepting it rather trying to exploit or change it.

As part of a worldwide study of values, Munene and his associates have compared the relative rankings assigned to each of the core values by people in eight anglophone sub-Saharan countries to those obtained from people in six western and northern European countries.²³ Although the descriptions of "African" values provided by Munene and his colleagues are based on responses given by college students and teachers to a survey originally developed by Europeans, the conclusions from this study are quite consistent with those drawn by other African scholars using both quantitative and qualitative research strategies.²⁴ It should also be noted, however, that their analysis did not address individual differences in values within each of the countries studied, and the data from the individual countries are aggregated across individual respondents for the purpose of comparing the value systems that are dominant in sub-Saharan Africa with the value systems in western Europe. Although this was the appropriate analytical strategy for these studies, one should not assume that the values identified at the aggregate level were endorsed by every individual in a

geographic region or that the relative importance assigned to certain values was invariant across countries within a region. In fact, there were national differences within regions, but these differences were smaller than the differences between countries in the two continents.

Overall, countries in the African sample placed greater importance on embeddedness, hierarchy, and mastery than did countries in the European sample. Conversely, autonomy, egalitarianism, and harmony were more important in the European countries than in the African countries. The intercontinental differences in the mastery-harmony dichotomy were the weakest; there was more variability among the countries within each continent and some overlap between countries in the two continents.

What are the implications of these differences in cultural orientations and values for the motives that underlie prosocial behaviors? It seems reasonable to assume that these motives will be related to the dominant values in the culture. That is, there should be consistency between the values that are important to people and the motives that cause them to act in a certain way. Now, consider the motives that are believed to be responsible for volunteerism in the United States. As noted earlier, among Americans, the most widely reported reason for volunteering is the value-expressive motive. People volunteer, in part, because it enables them to express their prosocial and humanitarian concerns for people (strangers) less fortunate than they. Note that such a motive is quite consistent with the value identified by Schwartz as egalitarianism, this is an important value in northern European cultures and, to a lesser extent, in the United States.²⁵ Now consider the values that are important to people in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Munene et al., egalitarianism is a relatively unimportant value in the African countries they studied. Thus, this motive may play a relatively unimportant part in the social decisions made by Africans. This does not mean that Africans are less helpful than Europeans or Americans. Rather, the critical point is that differences in values and cultures will produce differences in the motives that underlie prosocial actions. An appeal for volunteers based on the value-expressive motive might be effective in North America or Europe but fail miserably in Africa, where the value of hierarchy is much more important than the value of egalitarianism.

But what motive-based appeals might work in sub-Saharan Africa? If we search the list of six volunteerism motives identified by Clary et al. (see above), one that might be consistent with the African value orientations identified by Munene and Schwartz is the social motive for volunteering: being among friends and engaging in activities that might win their approval. This motive would seem quite compatible with the value of embeddedness. Thus, attempts to increase volunteer activities in sub-Saharan Africa might need to be directed initially at existing and long-standing collectives, in the hope that if the leadership of the collective agrees to some prosocial action, the membership might be motivated also to engage in this action. The motivation, however, would probably primarily come from the members' connection with the group, not their concern for the people in need of their help.

Other motives for volunteering from Clary's list that might be compatible with the value orientations of sub-Saharan Africa are the career and understanding motives. That is, appeals to these apparently self-serving motives might be effective because of the importance the recipients might place on the values of mastery and advancement. However, the inducements related to these motives would have to be carefully constructed to take into account the strong bias in favor of in-group members among people from these cultures and the importance placed on the values of hierarchy and embeddedness.²⁶ For example, appeals to mastery might have to involve actions that would contribute to the achievements of a volunteer's in-group rather than to just the individual volunteer, as might be the case in more individualistic cultures.

We now apply the same sort of analysis to the motives that underlie organizational citizenship behavior. Which of these motives, if any, are compatible with the values found in sub-Saharan Africa? It seems unlikely that the prosocial value motive—a desire to increase the well-being of coworkers—would be a very powerful motivator of organizational citizenship. Helping unrelated coworkers who belong to groups other than one's in-group does not appear to be compatible with the value of embeddedness. However, if an organization has been able to create some sort of in-group identification among its workers, then this same value could lead to citizenship motivated by prosocial value.

It also does not seem likely that the motive of organizational concern would be important to workers in sub-Saharan Africa, for at least two reasons. First, this motive is usually associated with job satisfaction and feeling that the organization has treated one fairly. According to Munene, working conditions in many organizations in sub-Saharan Africa are extremely poor and very unlikely to engender job satisfaction or perceptions of fair treatment. Munene also suggests that for many African workers their commitment to their extended family is much greater than their commitment to the organization as an entity.²⁷ Thus, organizational concern is unlikely to be a salient motive among African workers.

One motive that may be important among the employees of organizations in sub-Saharan Africa is impression management. That is, one might be able to motivate citizenship behaviors that satisfy the workers' need for social approval and/or improve their relations with the relevant social groups. Such behaviors would appear to be consistent with the value of mastery. Additionally, if workers could be made to feel that their citizenship behavior reflected on their in-group or family, then impression management might also serve the value of embeddedness.

Before leaving this discussion of values and motives for organizational citizenship, we must consider whether the concept of organizational citizenship, as it has been defined and studied thus far, is culture-bound. That is, is it possible that organizational citizenship in African and other non-Western cultures may differ in both degree and kind from that which has been studied in Western cultures, such as Europe and the United States? Organ and Paine have suggested that this may be the case.²⁸ As an example of this, Fahr et al. found that in China one of the ways in which employees

displayed good citizenship was to work to increase interpersonal harmony and to protect the company's resources, but these organizational citizenship behaviors are not found among American workers.²⁹ In this same study, citizenship behaviors toward other employees were observed, but they were most often directed at relatives, sometimes even at the expense of the company. Munene³⁰ suggests that a similar phenomenon may occur in the African countries he has studied. Thus, if we wish to increase organizational citizenship in places outside the United States and Europe, we may need to understand better how it is displayed in different regions and cultures.

We must also entertain the distinct possibility that the lists of motives that have been presented in this paper do not represent an exhaustive or even comprehensive listing of the motives that underlie prosocial actions in cultures outside the United States and Europe. Thus, before any interventions are attempted, there is a need to empirically determine whether the motives that have been identified also exist and are important in non-Western cultures, such as those found in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusions and Cautions

It has been argued here that certain forms of prosocial behaviors, volunteerism and organizational citizenship, can produce economic and social benefits in both "developed" and "developing" regions of the world. Further, although one cannot ignore the influence of economic factors on these behaviors, it is assumed that cultural values play an important role in the degree and kind of prosocial actions that are found in a region. In other words, it is posited that even if the economic and social conditions of the two regions were more comparable, helping strangers and organizations might still be less common in sub-Saharan African cultures than in North American/European cultures. But this does not mean that volunteerism and organizational citizenship are impossible in these more economically deprived regions.

How might such behaviors be elicited and maintained? The answer put forth here is that these prosocial behaviors serve certain motives; they satisfy certain purposes or needs. If one can identify the relevant motives and effectively appeal to them, the behaviors will follow. As noted, however, the importance of motives that underlie prosocial actions is not invariant across cultures, nor are the motives identified here universal. Rather they will vary as a function of the dominant values in a culture. Because of values, some motives may be more important in a particular culture than others, and motives that exist in one culture may be absent in another. Thus, before one attempts to intervene to change the level of prosocial actions in a region one must understand the values that are part of the dominant culture. Interventions that succeed in one culture may fail in another because in the first instance they are consistent with the dominant cultural values and in the second they are inconsistent.

At the same time, anyone who attempts such interventions must be aware of the danger of unintended consequences. The term "unintended consequences" refers to those instances where a plan or policy intended to

produce one desirable outcome simultaneously produces another highly undesirable one. Examples would include the introduction of some new crop or animal into a region to increase food production, with the unintended consequence of introducing a new disease into the area, or the establishment of some new industry intended to increase the standard of living in a region, with the unintended consequence of destroying the livelihood of an indigenous culture.

In a similar vein, one must be cautious about attempts to change social behaviors in an established culture. The values that are dominant in sub-Saharan Africa were, at least at some point in time, adaptive. That is, if they had not been useful in earlier times, either they would not have been passed on or the cultures that emphasized them would not have survived. But they were passed on and the cultures did survive, so any intervention that might have an impact on these values and the existing social order in these cultures must proceed with extreme caution. Attempts to increase the incidence of prosocial actions could produce substantial economic and social benefits for the residents of regions where these attempts occurred. But without careful consideration of possible unintended consequences, such interventions might, in the long run, do more harm than good. That is, if one is interested in strategies to improve economic development, one must consider the interactions between the policies designed to produce such change and the dominant values in the area that is the target of these policies. To fail to do this may ultimately be less ethical than turning one's back on the needs of developing countries.

Notes

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