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The Influence of Suffering, Social Class, and Social Power on Prosociality: An Empirical Review

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Abstract

An emerging body of research has shed light on the effects of social-environmental factors, such as exposure to suffering, social class, and social power on prosocial orientation (i.e., empathy and compassion). This chapter aims to provide an overview of these areas of research that examined how the aforementioned social-environmental factors may accentuate or attenuate one's tendency to be prosocial. In addition, this chapter explores the theoretical implications across these areas and its potential for future research.

Keywords: empathy, compassion, adversity, status, power, suffering, prosociality

1. Introduction

Some may argue that we live in the least violent and turbulent of times in history [1] but that does not overshadow the fact that suffering is still widespread across the globe [2, 3]. Much of human history has been marred by events of immense hardship and suffering but that has never held back our species from thriving and flourishing. The selfish gene hypothesis suggests that the capacity for prosociality is inherently adaptive for a social species (i.e., humans and other primates) and is a stable strategy for increasing evolutionary fitness [4]. This hypothesis may explain how prosocial traits like empathy have survived the rigorous trials of natural selection as it is through our ability to exercise empathy that we are able to form tribes and societies that are resilient.

In this chapter, we discuss the effects of social-environmental factors, such as adversity and suffering, on empathy and the relevant outcomes. On the other hand, we also examine how being in a position of privilege (i.e., having social power and status) could affect one's

capacity of empathy and its implications. Apart from exploring these topics by examining existing peer-reviewed research, we also discuss the implication of these findings on future research questions.

2. Suffering and prosocial orientation

Given the negative effects of adversity on many psychological phenomena, one might debate if the pain and hardship associated with adversity reduces individuals' capacity for empathy, thereby inhibiting behaviors meant to alleviate the distress of suffering others. Intuitively, one is likely to reason that suffering and hardship are likely to bring about negative downstream consequences such as the impairment of psychological and social functioning. As such, it is no surprise that there is a large body of research examining adversity's lasting effects, linking it to psychopathology and other maladaptive tendencies, including major depression, post-traumatic stress, and related affective disorders [5–7]. Beyond direct associations with psychopathology, it was posited that some individuals who had a brush with adversity develop negative perceptions of people and the environment around them. While those who are free from past trauma tend to hold beliefs that the world is just, meaningful, and benevolent, those who were exposed to adverse life events often exhibit a diminished belief in a benevolent or meaningful world characterized by virtue [8]. In one instance, Poulin [9] found that exposure to violence-related events predicted subsequent decrease in benevolence beliefs. That is, those who had traumatic experiences of being victimized are less likely to harbor humanistic beliefs that the world around them and the people at large are benevolent. In support of this notion, Blum et al. [10] published a study that demonstrated an association between frequent exposure to different types of negative life events (e.g., illness, violence, victimization, and disasters) and altered risk perception. They found that individuals were more likely to perceive an increased likelihood of hazards occurring for oneself, to a close other, or to their community within a 2-year period after the onset of negative life events. They suggested that these altered perceptions of increased risk can be attributed to a reduction in benevolent beliefs.

Along the same lines of investigation [9], it was found that injury- and illness-related adversity predicted decreases in meaningful beliefs. That is, those who have suffered much, by way of physical and mental ailments, tend to perceive that life has no meaning or purpose. Other researchers found that children who have experienced parental divorce were pessimistic about their future relationship outcomes with their partners and that these pessimistic views were tied to their assumptions about people and their lack of benevolence. In addition to the aforementioned finding, the same researchers found that trust beliefs of these children were diminished when they experienced continuous conflicts within their families [8].

As suffering is part of the human condition, the examination of suffering and its deleterious downstream consequences on the individual is necessary. While it is extremely important to study the negative effects of suffering for the purpose of etiology and intervention, some researchers are building up interest in examining the opposite, that is, posttraumatic growth. In fact, studies on human resilience in the face of potentially traumatic events seem to warrant

this examination. For instance, some literature [2, 11] suggested that there is much variability in how individuals react and recover from potentially traumatic events: (1) some individuals (5–15%) exhibited chronic dysfunction, displaying elevated symptoms of dysfunction following the onset of potentially traumatic events; (2) a small minority (0–15%) had a delayed response to potentially traumatic events, showing a gradual elevation of dysfunction over time; (3) some, on the other hand (15–25%), demonstrated steady recovery over time; (4) an even smaller minority (5–10%) of the sampled population demonstrated improved adjustment to potentially traumatic events, showing rapid recovery from dysfunction within a few months of the onset of trauma; and (5) a large portion of the sampled population (35–65%) showed minimal-impact resilience, demonstrating little to no elevation in dysfunction following the exposure to potentially traumatic events. What is astounding about the study of resilience following traumatic experiences is the fact that a majority of individuals show rapid recovery or almost no dysfunction following the onset of adverse life experiences. In light of such illuminating evidence, it seems that we are more resilient than we suppose. Therefore, if dysfunction and distress is not the norm, could we instead expect growth from experiences of adversity?

Some researchers do allude to the notion that individuals can grow from trials and tribulations. For example, Seery and colleagues [12] found evidence to support the view that individuals who have experienced stressful events are likely to develop greater resilience in the follow-up. However, this growth in resilience is nonlinear. That is, individuals who have experienced low levels or high levels of stressful life events tend to not exhibit this growth in resilience. Only those who have experienced moderate levels of stressful life events have increased resilience toward future stressful events. Furthermore, qualitative studies have provided some preliminary evidence that other types of psychological growth are possible, which can be broadly classified into four categories: (1) changes in self-perception (the ability to feel, express, and process feelings within the self, recognizing one's own strengths and weaknesses), (2) gaining new perspectives on life (positive changes in worldviews, acceptance of the past and present), (3) changes in relationship (improvement in interpersonal relations), and (4) changes in philosophy of life [13]. When 39 empirical studies were reviewed, it was found that individuals can experience positive changes in the form of increased resiliency and coping toward subsequent stressors [14]. However, many studies of posttraumatic growth are qualitative in nature (i.e., case studies); as such, more scientifically rigorous studies that adopt quantitative approaches are needed to further solidify the links between adversity and personal growth.

2.1. Suffering and prosocial growth

Does society disintegrate into chaos and lawlessness in the face of disasters or do we come together in solidarity to overcome the odds? If the evolutionary explanations and arguments for the adaptiveness of empathy were to hold, it should be reasonable for us to posit that experiences with hardship and suffering could lead to increases in empathy and subsequent prosocial behavior as a response to adversity.

While the general media might focus on pillaging and looting in the aftermath of natural disasters, research on disaster-affected communities paints a different picture. In fact, it was observed that communities that were affected by disasters (e.g., hurricanes and superstorms)

were likely to form “altruistic communities” that band together to minimize the impact of the disaster [15]. Moreover, disaster exposure was a predictor of being a provider of help which could take the form of social (e.g., assurance, affection, and closeness), tangible (e.g., money, and shelter), and informational support (e.g., situational information, and aid-related information) which supports the notion that those who have suffered more tend to give more as well. Such prosocial tendencies may serve an important function for the survival of the community as the building of social capital between individuals can only serve to boost reciprocal altruism and cooperation in times of hardship. Additional studies of “altruistic communities” have lend credence to the adaptiveness of prosociality in the face of adversity. It was found that individuals who were involved in altruistic communities were more likely to report feelings of interpersonal connectedness, greater sense of community, and more trusting attitudes toward people. These individuals were also more likely to report better social well-being and were less likely to withdraw socially in the aftermath of disasters. Along the same lines of research as Kaniasty and Norris [15], Vezzali and colleagues [16] studied children who were affected by two major earthquakes. They found that symptoms of posttraumatic stress were positively associated with a tendency to help other survivors and to build social bonds, possibly as a coping mechanism. Their findings suggest that these children were likely to identify with others who were implicated in the earthquakes; therefore, including suffering others as part of the self or in-group.

Victims of sexual assault were also likely to exhibit greater prosocial orientation toward other victims of a similar crime [17]. It was found that sexual assault victims reported more empathic responses to a rape victim whose account was presented on a video recording than did women who had not experience such assaults. It was proposed that this increase in empathy is mediated by perceived self-other similarity. This study is suggestive of a potential mechanism in which experienced adversity might lead to prosocial growth. In other words, people who have suffered severely may be more ready to engage in empathy in response to the suffering of others because they feel similar to the suffering target.

In a more controlled environment, Vollhardt and Staub [18] were able to test the notion of “altruism born of suffering” with college students in the laboratory. More specifically, they were interested in examining the relationship between experiences of past suffering and the tendency to be prosocial. They revealed that individuals who had experienced at least one traumatic life event in the past were more likely to participate in charitable activities (e.g., fund raising, and environmental or animal rights movements). Additionally, those who have suffered were also more likely to volunteer for multiple non-profit organizations that benefit disadvantaged and stigmatized groups. Results on a follow-up study suggested that those who have suffered past life adversity were more likely to engage in empathy and prosocial behavior toward disadvantage out-group members (i.e., victims of a tsunami event in Asia). They claimed that this effect was driven by a reduction of in-group bias along with an increased capacity for empathy.

After having reviewed some literature on adversity and prosociality, one might draw the conclusion that the normative response to suffering is not psychological or social dysfunction but prosocial growth. While each study reviewed so far has provided us with a glimpse of how

suffering could have growth implications for empathy and prosociality, almost all the studies have only examined the effects of specific adversities in specific prosocial contexts.

2.2. A general model of suffering and prosocial growth via empathy

In order to understand the normative effects of suffering on prosocial orientation, Lim and DeSteno [19] studied the links between suffering, empathy, compassion, and prosocial actions using survey methods and laboratory studies. To capture a wide range of adverse life events, they used a modified interview schedule on trauma based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition (DSM-III). This measure of trauma captured six different domains of adversity: (1) illness and injury (e.g., injury and illness to the self and close others), (2) victimization (e.g., physical and sexual assault), (3) bereavement (e.g., death of a family member or a friend), (4) relationships (e.g., divorce, forced separation), (5) social-environmental (e.g., financial hardship, discrimination), and (6) disasters (man-made and natural disasters). In addition, each of these adverse life events was examined on three levels: (1) frequency (i.e., how often an individual experienced the events), (2) recency (i.e., how recent they have last experienced an episode of potentially traumatic events), and (3) severity (i.e., to what extent the potentially traumatic events had affected their lives). For the purpose of maximizing external validity, the first of the two studies sampled an online population that was more diverse in age and socioeconomic status than a college-age convenience population. In addition, to measure prosocial behavior, participants of this online study were given an opportunity to donate part of their monetary compensation to a non-profit charity organization.

An initial analysis of results suggests that the frequency of adversity was not linked with self-report measures of trait empathy (i.e., perspective-taking or empathic concern). It also did not predict an increase in dispositional compassion (the tendency to alleviate the suffering of others) or charitable giving. This finding, however, does not preclude the possibility that the frequency of adversity might facilitate prosocial behavior. It is entirely plausible that people who have suffered frequently might choose to help in other ways. That is, those who suffered may often choose to provide social or informational support instead of tangible material support. Moreover, the driving force behind such preferences for prosociality may not be driven by empathy but instead by other mechanisms such as self-other similarity or communal orientation [16, 20].

On the other hand, recency of adverse life experiences negatively predicted empathic concern and perspective-taking. There was no statistical correlation between recency of adverse life experiences with charitable giving or dispositional compassion. This makes theoretical sense as individuals who have recently experienced adverse life events may be preoccupied with the resulting distress. Therefore, they might be more inclined to avoid empathy as vicarious emotional responding to suffering others might lead to even more distress within oneself. Even if these individuals decided to exercise empathy in their already distressed state, they are more likely to experience empathic overarousal which might lead individuals to focus on their own distress as opposed to the distress of others [21, 22].

Frequency and recency of adverse life events were not likely predictors of prosocial growth. However, there is evidence to suggest that the severity of adversity is the most likely predictor

instead [19]. It was found that individuals who have suffered severely in the past were more concerned with the welfare of others and were more ready to take the perspective of suffering others. In other words, those who have experienced major events of adversity in the past seem to be more empathic at a trait level. This increased empathy, in turn, predicted greater dispositional compassion, that is, the tendency to alleviate the suffering of others. To take this finding a step further, Lim and DeSteno [19] replicated these results in a controlled experiment in the laboratory using a confederate-based paradigm of measuring prosocial behavior. Participants of this study were basically brought into the laboratory to complete a series of tasks with a confederate pretending to be another participant. The confederate was assigned a laborious and time-consuming task during this study while pretending to be ill. The participants, who had prior knowledge that the confederate was not feeling well, were then given the opportunity to share the workload of this confederate. The amount of time the participant spent helping the confederate was recorded and operationalized as a measurement of prosocial behavior. By way of structural equation modeling, results from this study suggest that those who had suffered severely in the past were higher in trait empathy (empathic concern and perspective-taking) and dispositional compassion. Moreover, the elevated dispositional compassion that resulted from increased empathy predicted more compassion in the moment when faced with a confederate in need. This heightened state of compassion was positively linked to more time spent helping the ill-feeling confederate (see **Figure 1** for a conceptualization of the proposed model).

In summary, the general model of empathic prosocial growth, as proposed by Lim and DeSteno [19], suggests that as people accumulate severe adverse life experiences, they become more empathic. As such, they might be more in-tuned to the suffering of others which may increase their motivation to alleviate their suffering.

2.3. Discussion

There is increasing evidence suggesting that the normative outcome of suffering is not necessarily dysfunction or psychopathology but growth. While empathy and prosocial tendencies might be impeded during the initial stages of trauma recovery, most individuals do seem to demonstrate empathic growth in the aftermath of adverse life experiences. However, this pattern of growth is by no means homogeneous. Studies on posttraumatic growth and resilience [12] suggest that growth is not always linear. Instead, the relationship between adversity and

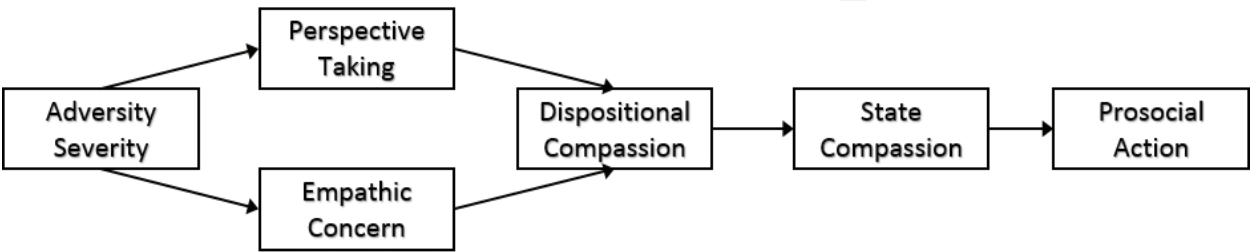


Figure 1. A conceptual model demonstrates how experiences of adversity could lead to prosocial growth. Adopted from Lim and DeSteno [19].

prosocial growth may be curve-linear. In other words, people who have suffered moderately may actually demonstrate the most growth, while individuals who have suffered little might exhibit little growth, and those who have suffered the most may have their growth impeded by social-psychological dysfunction. Future research should examine potential moderators. For instance, individual differences such as resilience, self-compassion, and emotion regulation dysfunction could lead to differential prosocial outcomes in the aftermath of adverse life experiences.

3. Social class, power, and prosocial orientation

There are similarities and differences between the challenges that we face in comparison to our ancestors. While many forms of adversities are part of the human condition (e.g., natural disasters, illness, and bereavement), some have only become relevant with the formation of modern societies. Experiences of urban poverty, class/racial discrimination, and disempowerment are frequently associated with individuals in the lower classes of society. As empathy is a vital contributor to our evolutionary success for our ancestors, empathy may also be adaptive for people facing the challenges of contemporary society.

Some researchers have shown that being in a lower social class is associated with less financial resources which may promote greater tendencies to experience anxiety [23]. In addition, these individuals have less opportunities to grow and achieve class mobility as they have less access to top educational institutions at all levels. Individuals of lower social class also have greater exposure to threats and violence [24]. With all things considered, could we expect individuals in lower social class to be less empathic and engage in selfish self-serving behavior (e.g., hoarding of resource, being non-communal)? Or could the opposite be true, whereby members of lower social class are more empathic to facilitate adaptive social behaviors (e.g., sharing and cooperation)?

3.1. Social class and prosocial orientation

Emerging research has suggested that lower class individuals may, in fact, be more other-oriented than those of higher classes. Research by Piff and colleagues [25] suggests that people who have less tend to give more. They proposed that individuals who are of a lower social class are more likely to be dependent on each other for resources. As such, it would be more adaptive to be other-oriented for the purpose of building relationships and gathering social capital. In their series of studies, they demonstrated that people of lower class were more prosocial than their upper-class counterparts and were more likely to help a partner in distress. Part of this effect was also explained by the fact that lower-class individuals seem to harbor more egalitarian social values in service of prosocial tendencies. In a similar study [26], it was found that individuals who were lower in social class would tend to perceive negative emotions strongly, more so than higher-class individuals which included the perception of distress. Therefore, lower-class individuals were more likely to pick up the distress of others which then enhanced their abilities to experience empathy and compassion toward the

suffering of others [27]. This is evolutionary sound as empathy and compassion facilitate the building of relationships, support networks, and social capital which can be valuable when dealing with potential threats in the environment.

On the other hand, individuals from a high social class may have access to more resources and may not have to exercise empathy to build relationships and accumulate social capital to thrive. That is not to say these high-class individuals have lower levels of empathy when compared to low-class individuals. In fact, it was found that these individuals were capable of similar levels of compassion when they were put in a compassion-inducing situation; the only difference when compared to low-class individuals was that high-class individuals have a lower baseline of compassion states. This suggests that people in the position of privilege might be less ready to engage in prosocial orientation than their lower class counterparts [26].

Social class and exposure to adversity go hand-in-hand [28]. Therefore, it is expected that the links between social class and prosocial orientation are in line with the notion that experiencing adversity fosters prosociality [19, 20].

3.2. Social power and empathy

Social power can be understood as one's relative ability to influence and modify the outcomes of other individuals by providing or withholding resources [29, 30]. It was posited that individuals who have social power are more likely to have more independence, resources, and ability to pursue their agendas which may include prosocial-oriented goals [31]. While this is theoretically sound, the research in this field yielded mixed results. Some found evidence to support the notion that high-power individuals are more empathic, while others found the opposite pattern of results.

In one such study [31], it was found that power moderated the relationship between prosocial orientation and empathic accuracy (i.e., the ability to accurately decode facial expressions). When examined further, it was revealed that there was an interaction between feelings of compassion and empathic accuracy. Individuals with high power, when induced with feelings of compassion, generally scored higher in tests of empathic accuracy when compared to high-power individuals in a neutral mood condition. Low-power individuals, on the other hand, exhibited similar levels of empathic accuracy with high-powered individuals in the neutral mood condition regardless of whether they were made to feel compassionate or not. Additional evidence suggested that social power-moderated empathic accuracy was also predictive of job satisfaction which is indicative of its functionality.

In a similar study, it was found that individuals who were primed to feel high levels of power, as opposed to low levels, were more empathically accurate. It was revealed that positive emotions such as pride and the need to be respected were sources of motivation which enabled high-power individuals to achieve greater empathic accuracy and interpersonal sensitivity. However, they posit that this effect might be relevant to individuals who adopt an empathic style of leadership (i.e., a style of leadership that revolves around the understanding of the needs of subordinates to achieve leadership goals). This suggests that greater empathic accuracy might only be adaptive when leaders choose to adopt a prosocial stance while being in

a position of power. Moreover, power may facilitate individuals to contribute to the greater good via prosocial actions. This could be driven by the perception of one's ability to illicit positive social changes, especially in leaders who are more other-oriented [25, 32]. However, empathic accuracy may not be relevant to those who choose to adopt an egoistic leadership style (i.e., a style that is characterized by self-interest) as these individuals are less likely to be other-oriented [32].

On the other hand, there is a body of research that supports the opposing view that social power reduces one's interpersonal sensitivity [29, 30, 33]. These researchers generally proposed that those in positions of power are less interested in their subordinate's states. They do so because they can afford to as they have more resources and would be less motivated to tend to the needs of people who are below them on the social hierarchy. Some posit that, instead, low-power individuals are more empathic and interpersonally sensitive because they have to be aware of verbal and non-verbal cues of their superiors; therefore, it would be adaptive for low-power individuals to develop abilities that better enable them to perspective-take, and infer thoughts and feelings of others. Another theory proposes that high-powered individuals are less empathic because they are likely to have more subordinates and, as such, have greater cognitive load than low-power individuals. This increase in cognitive load may, in turn, affect high-power individuals' ability to be empathically accurate which may impair interpersonal sensitivity. On a trait level, individuals with low-trait ratings of social power, a construct reflecting a person's capacity to influence the outcomes of others, reported greater investment in a relationship with a stranger and conveyed higher levels of compassion in response to that stranger's disclosure of suffering [34].

The differences in results that stem from two opposing views might be consolidated if researchers and scholars in this field of study were to take into account more contextual boundary conditions. For instance, individuals holding managerial positions might be required to have empathic accuracy to be able to perform well on the job (i.e., handling employee and customer needs), whereas in highly regimented organizations, such as uniformed organizations, interpersonal sensitivity may not be required for a leader to perform well on the job. In other words, the effect that social power has on empathy might very well be dependent on social contexts and expectations.

4. Conclusion and future directions

There seem to be an increasing level of understanding toward the social environmental factors that could affect empathy and other aspects of prosocial orientation. From a functionalistic perspective, it makes evolutionary sense for us to tend and befriend in times of hardship as opposed to acting out in self-serving ways. The chaotic self-serving tendencies that are portrayed in the news media in the aftermath of disasters only represent a small and unrepresentative aspect of our true nature. After all, it is our social-tribal predispositions since prehistoric times that forged us to be resilient, enabling us to flourish and thrive in spite of incredible hardship.

There are still some questions left unanswered when examining the nuances of social-environmental factors and its impact on suffering and prosociality. While the experience of adversity does lead to an increase in empathy, the underlying mechanisms are unclear at this point. At this juncture, and based on previous research, we can speculate about how experiences of hardship foster empathy. It might be the case that individuals who have suffered are more in-tuned to the suffering of others; therefore, these individuals have greater salience and awareness of suffering. That is, do these individuals have a greater awareness in the commonality of human suffering? And if suffering saliency is a factor, would they harbor beliefs in the commonality of humankind? Some studies might tangentially support this notion [18], but this research question has not been specifically addressed. Along the same veins of reasoning, could we expect individuals who have suffered to perceive suffering others to be more similar? If so, would this similarity accentuate empathic tendencies? Questions like these are worth answering, and doing so would not only deepen our understanding on the subject but also paint a clearer picture of our true nature.

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