

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

CONTAGION OF KINDNESS: OBSERVABILITY, RECOGNITION AND SHARED
EXPERIENCE AS MOTIVATION FOR ONLINE PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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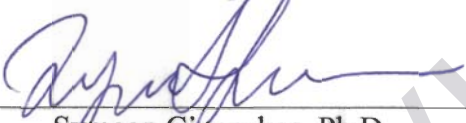
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GRADUATE STUDIES

This dissertation of Kelly Alverson entitled "Contagion of Kindness: Observability, Recognition and Shared Experience as Motivation for Online Prosocial Behavior," submitted to the Ph.D. Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the following individuals:

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Dedication

To my husband, Kevin, with love, without your unwavering support and encouragement this project would not have been possible. Thank you for being my sounding board, editor, audience and think tank. Thank you for your readiness to talk through ideas; those discussions are what helped me move forward when I was afraid I was stuck. Thank you for helping me to push myself that one step further when hurdles threatened my progress. Most of all, thank you for believing in me and helping me to believe in myself.

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PREVIEW

Abstract

This dissertation employs a theoretical approach to examine the online milieu as an enabling space that allows individuals to act prosocially by providing opportunities for: observability of prosocial participation; receipt of explicit recognition toward the development of implicit recognition; and shared experience with the other, toward an end of increased empathic concern.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, illustrates the capacity that the individual possesses to help a stranger in need. With the parable as backdrop, individual motivations for participation in prosocial action are examined, in the setting of the online milieu. The willingness to assist a stranger or “the other,” that the Good Samaritan exemplifies, translates into the online milieu through the connective technology of the Internet, by virtue of its permitting a digitally enabled linking that would otherwise, largely be restricted by geospatial separation. The motivation of the individual, to help another in need, by means of online prosocial action, is examined through an interdisciplinary analysis utilizing the lenses of: religious studies, practical ethics, moral philosophy, social psychology, Internet studies, economics, political philosophy, media studies and contemporary literature.

This dissertation investigates the impact of observability; explicit and implicit recognition; and shared experience in terms of motivations at four levels of individual participation in online prosocial behavior: the Inert Actor, the Random Actor, the Individual Actor and the Altruous Actor. These levels of motivation are inspired by C.D. Batson’s “Paths of Motivation Matrix.” The goal of examining motivations at varying levels of individual

participation is to develop a deeper understanding of the interplay between other-interested and self-interested motivations in encouraging participation in online prosocial behavior.

This dissertation uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine the construction of prosocial behavior. Motivations for prosocial behavior are examined through a comparative analysis of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and similar teachings that are presented in the wisdom traditions of Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, to investigate the role that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations may play in other-interested action. The theories of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Plato, Aristotle, Auguste Comte, and Adam Smith are discussed to provide an overview of the philosophical debate surrounding altruistic and egoistic motivations. The social sciences provide a contemporary lens through which to analyze the impact of the online milieu on prosocial behavior. Batson's "empathy altruism hypothesis" is analyzed to illuminate the role of empathy in online prosocial behavior. The Internet as enabling technology is studied through perspectives in media studies and Internet studies including the works of Marshall McLuhan, which are placed in conversation with Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. Civic engagement is examined through the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville in dialog with contemporary scholarship discussing the implications of a digitally enabled "feeling-with." The concept of revelatory participation is analyzed building on the works of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Immanuel Kant. The role of empathy as motivation for prosocial action is surveyed through multiple perspectives from the fields of virtue ethics, care ethics and practical ethics including Peter Singer's theory of "effective altruism."

This dissertation focuses on motivation for online prosocial behavior at the individual level to understand further the potential that the online milieu holds for a digitally mediated empathic concern for the other.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation will examine motivation for online prosocial action, in terms of the impact of building an altruous character. This dissertation contends that individuals are inclined to act toward other-interest when provided the opportunity. The online milieu provides opportunities abound for varying levels of participation in prosocial action. Recognizing the individual as able to act at varying degrees is important for cultivating a motivation to participate prosocially online.

An irreconcilable difference exists between proponents of altruism and egoism as motivations for prosocial action. This has been a point of contention for centuries and still finds its way into contemporary debates regarding motivation for action. This dichotomous way of debating the motivation for individuals to act is defeatist. Individuals may be motivated by a combination of egoism or self-interest and altruism or other-interest. In terms of motivation for participating in prosocial behavior, in particular, individuals have been shown to be motivated ultimately by other-interest with a consequential motivation of self-interest.¹ The continued use of these divergent and seemingly mutually exclusive terms confuses the analysis of motivation for online prosocial behavior. This dissertation will use the term altruous to describe the other-interested motivation which reinforces the implicit reputation of the self as prosocial, thus motivating future participation in online prosocial action.

The term altruous is to be used to describe a character trait that is based on an individual's demonstrated ability and penchant for participation in prosocial action. Prosocial action is by its very definition other-interested in that the action is directed

¹ (Batson and Shaw 1991, Vol 2. No. 2, 107)

toward the well-being of another individual. This is an important definition to keep in mind throughout this dissertation as in order to provide a lens through which to understand motivations for online participation, participation in online prosocial behavior specifically, will be discussed.

A demonstrated value has been placed on acting prosocially, as individuals exist in a state of interdependence with their fellow human beings. This interdependence both promotes and depends upon the individual acting prosocially. Observability and share-ability of prosocial behavior is important in order to motivate other individuals to act prosocially. Observability and share-ability can take the form of narratives of prosocial action which are used to motivate others to act prosocially; this dissertation will look to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to analyze how the share-ability and observability of the parable are necessary for motivating future prosocial action. Throughout the subsequent chapters touch points are made back to the parable to connect it to the observability and share-ability enabled in the contemporary online milieu.

Specific Research Value

As the online environment is developing, research on the potential that the online milieu holds for motivating prosocial action is developing alongside it. The Internet provides an observability of online prosocial behavior that can provide motivation for others to participate. Internet users today have an unprecedented access to information and tools of production. This unprecedented access to information can be overwhelming and this dissertation will discuss the inertia that the sheer amount of information can result in. The access to the tools of production in the online milieu is important, as the individual who was formerly a consumer may now become a producer at any time he

chooses. The tools are available, the spaces are available—the tools are observable and the spaces are observable. It is this observability that provides the individual the ability to watch and learn and eventually contribute.

The Internet must be discussed in terms of its ability to connect people. The technology of the Internet enables humans to connect across geospatial borders that would have otherwise required significant effort. David D. Clark, a computer scientist from MIT who worked on the development of the Internet in the 1970s noted, “[i]t is not proper to think of networks as connecting computers. Rather they connect people using computers to mediate.”² In this dissertation, the discussion of motivation for online prosocial behavior is an examination of *human* behavior in a technologically mediated context.

This dissertation approaches the analysis of motivation for online prosocial behavior from the perspective of the individual. The Internet is often described in terms of its broad reach; as of February 2015, the latest statistics report over three billion Internet users worldwide.³ There are still regions that the Internet has not penetrated and the goal of universal access is being promoted and examined. At this moment in time, however, the potential for connection with over 3 billion other individuals worldwide is overwhelming in itself. This sort of explanation of scale is important in thinking about the untapped potential for prosocial action (if all of those individuals were in some way directed toward contributing prosocially online) but to begin, it makes sense to look at participation from the individual’s perspective. This dissertation focuses on the barriers

² (Hauben and Hauben 1996)

³ (World Wide Web Consortium 2015)

and stepping stones that the individual faces and finds while foraying into participation in online prosocial behavior.

This focus on the individual's motivation is important, as this dissertation argues that there are different levels of participation in online prosocial behavior and that the motivations for participation at each one of these levels varies. This dissertation proposes four levels of action to describe motivations for online prosocial behavior. These four levels describe the individual at each stage: Inert Actor, Random Actor, Intentional Actor and Altruous Actor. Inert Actor is the Internet user who does not participate in online prosocial behavior; this non-participation can be for a variety of reasons which will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. The Random Actor participates in random calls to action for online prosocial participation but does not seek these opportunities out on his own. The Intentional Actor intends to participate in online prosocial behavior and seeks out an opportunity to do so; the process of moving to Intentional Actor relies on a number of factors that will be discussed later. Finally, the Altruous Actor creates opportunities for prosocial online action; participation in such action reinforces his own implicit reputation for altruosity, as it is congruent with his sense of identity.

The importance of dividing participants of online prosocial behavior into these general categories is to recognize the unique motivations and barriers for participation that an individual meets, at varying levels of participation. The move from Inert Actor to Random Actor, through participation, in what some may see as trivial acts ,is important as not only does it make a small contribution it also helps the Inert Actor develop his sense of competence and altruosity. The move from Random Actor to Intentional Actor

requires a process of social norming and social learning, to overcome the fear of helplessness, through a demonstrated ability to contribute to the prosocial cause. The move from Intentional Actor to Altruous Actor requires a development of an implicit reputation for an altruous character that is reinforced by and compelled toward participation in online prosocial behavior.

Methodology

This dissertation takes an interpretative approach to the question regarding motivation for online prosocial behavior through an interdisciplinary analysis of the literature in the following areas of inquiry: theology, moral philosophy, social psychology, Internet studies, economics, political philosophy, media studies, contemporary literature, practical ethics, civic studies, care ethics and virtue ethics.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this dissertation is that developing understanding of the motivations for individuals to participate in varying levels of prosocial action online will help to determine ways that prosocial online entities can motivate individuals to participate. Additionally, developing further understanding of motivation, from an individual perspective, will help individuals to understand their own potential to participate in online prosocial action. Analyzing the motivation for participation in online prosocial action is significant in that the online milieu provides, yet to be understood opportunities for prosociality, enabled by the technology of the Internet.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two

Chapter Two of this dissertation begins with an etymological critique of the terms altruistic and egoistic and a discussion of their limitations for elucidating motivation for prosocial behavior. This chapter describes the debate between the philosophical perspectives supporting altruism and those supporting egoism, as motivations for human behavior. The theories of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Plato, Auguste Comte, and Adam Smith are discussed to provide an overview of the philosophical debate surrounding altruistic and egoistic motivations. As a remedy to the dichotomous relationship between altruist and egoist perspectives, the term altruous is introduced to incorporate both ultimate altruistic motivations and consequential egoistic motivations. Altruous is a character trait, and as such, an individual may continually develop his altruosity over time through participation in online prosocial behavior. This participation in prosocial behavior reinforces his own implicit recognition of his competence for acting toward other-interest.

The chapter continues with a discussion regarding the development of this implicit recognition of altruosity, which is examined through an interpretive analysis of theological teachings regarding prosocial action, beginning with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke which discuss other-interested behavior in terms of divine recognition. This divine recognition is examined in terms of its implications for implicit recognition of an altruous character. This section continues with a brief synthesis of prosocial behavior in terms of divine recognition in the religious teachings of Judaism and Islam, concluding

with an analysis of the individual as a social animal from the Buddhist perspective of His Holiness the Dali Lama.

Next, the individual's penchant for prosocial behavior is examined through the lens of moral philosophy. This section begins with an analysis of St. Thomas Aquinas's treatment of charity and the Christian ideal of loving one's neighbor as oneself. The ideal of loving one's neighbor is expanded to loving humanity through a description of Immanuel Kant's ontological approach to universal morality. The section continues with an analysis of the positivist views of Auguste Comte, who is the originator of the term altruism, and his views on the development of altruism as a process, through moral training. Comte's analysis lends itself to the new term, proposed in this dissertation: altruous, being considered a character trait that one develops through prosocial action. The motivation for an individual to act toward other-interest is examined through Charles Taylor's explanation of secular humanism as a code of conduct that re-orders society, in his work, *A Secular Age*.

After Taylor's discussion of the re-ordering of society it is valuable to return to Kant's philosophy through an explanation of his categorical morality which this dissertation contends requires both altruism and self-love. This dissertation argues that recognition of moral duty and implicit recognition of the value of acting morally, is essential for Kant's "kingdom of ends" to be realized.⁴ This section concludes with an analysis of Aristotle's action-oriented goodwill relating to developing a virtuous character and in terms of this dissertation, developing the altruous character.

The next section of Chapter Two, introduces the role of empathic motivation for participation in prosocial action through an analysis of the related literature in the

⁴ (Kant 1981, 39)

discipline of social psychology. Social psychologist Stephen Post and his co-contributors analyze the impact of empathy on the motivation to act altruistically.⁵ They argue that although egoist rewards can be an unintended consequence they “are not the ultimate goal of empathy-induced helping.”⁶ They discuss self-awareness in terms of the cultivation of empathy, requiring the ability for the individual to place himself into the shoes of the “other” and feel for and *with* him.

A discussion follows on the views of social psychologist C.D. Batson, who proposes an “empathy-altruism hypothesis” to analyze motivations for prosocial behavior. Batson and his co-contributor Laura L. Shaw, analyze motivation for “other-interested” action in terms of their “Paths of Motivation matrix” that takes into consideration, egoistic, altruistic and empathic motivations.⁷ The matrix, developed by Batson and Shaw, provides a framework from which the Paths of Motivation for Online Prosocial Behavior matrix was developed for this dissertation. This section concludes Chapter Two with the Paths of Motivation for Online Prosocial Behavior matrix that this dissertation proposes can be used to analyze motivation for participation in varying levels of online prosocial behavior. The proposed matrix introduces the four levels of online actor: Inert Actor, Random Actor, Intentional Actor and Altruous Actor. Recognizing that different motivations may govern participation in varying levels of prosocial online behavior, should help to elucidate ways in which to motivate participation in future online prosocial behavior.

Chapter Three

⁵ (Post, et al. 2002)

⁶ (Post, et al. 2002, 92)

⁷ (Batson, Empathy-Induced Altruistic Motivation 2008)

Chapter Three provides an analysis of online prosocial behavior. The online milieu provides a variety of opportunities for participation in prosocial behavior, which enables the individual to participate to varying degrees. The observability of online activity provides the individual with a lens through which to view how certain prosocial behaviors are completed online before deciding to participate. This ability to observe others acting prosocially in the online milieu, assists the Inert and Random Actors in learning how to participate. Learning how to participate and further, how one's participation may be received, is important for overcoming barriers to participation.

The chapter begins with a discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations through the research of psychology professors and researchers Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci. Ryan and Deci developed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which analyzes intrinsic motivation in terms of meeting the "innate [psychological] needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness."⁸ The need for competence is particularly valuable for this dissertation as it is being argued that reinforcing one's implicit recognition of altruosity through online prosocial action, provides motivation for *future* participation in prosocial action online. By realizing and demonstrating one's competence, through action, the individual is further motivated to participate in actions that reinforce his competence.

Ryan's application of SDT to prosocial behavior, in subsequent research with clinical psychology professor and researcher Netta Weinstein, is particularly useful for this dissertation. They found that individuals who helped another "autonomously" benefitted from the action more so than those who felt they were being compelled to do so and that the same benefit extended to the recipient of the help when the helper was

⁸ (Ryan and Deci 2000, 57)

acting autonomously. The online milieu provides a space where individuals *must* act autonomously in order to participate. Their findings on autonomous helpers corroborates the argument made in this dissertation that participating in online prosocial behavior reinforces implicit altruosity as they find that “actions that are experienced as emanating from or congruent with one’s self... have an internal perceived locus of causality.”⁹

This chapter moves on to describe the nature of the online milieu through Michael Hauben’s retelling of the origins of the Internet. In his 1996 work *Netizenry: An Anthology*, he describes the early adopters of the Internet as “netizens.”¹⁰ The role of the netizen in the early days was to develop and share information through the channels made available with the networking of computers. These early netizens were largely researchers from a variety of research institutions, but most importantly, they were human beings, who were being connected by the technology of the Internet. The technology enabled the prosocial behaviors of collaboration and sharing of information then, much as it does now, just on a smaller scale. The sharing of information between users is what motivated the creation of the Internet and is what makes it the participatory place that it is today. In the contemporary milieu the users of the Internet can participate in the same content production and sharing of information that the early netizens participated in just on a much larger scale. This technology facilitated connection enables opportunities for prosocial action as prosociality was an innate quality of the Internet from its inception.

The following section of Chapter Three discusses the online milieu as it provides an opportunity for sharing information that does not require a sacrifice from the sharer. A

⁹ (Weinsten and Ryan 2010, 223)

¹⁰ (Hauben and Hauben 1996)

person may share programming code or music for instance but he does not give the information away, he shares it while also keeping it for himself. This low level of self-sacrifice in the online milieu is a reason why the term altruistic does not work to describe online prosocial behavior. Someone can be other-interested and not be self-sacrificing in a disinterested way. This is why altruous is a better fit for describing online prosocial behavior. The Altruous Actor provides opportunities for others to participate in online prosocial behavior and although he might sacrifice hours of his time volunteering, he does not give away his knowledge so that he may no longer enjoy it rather he shares this knowledge with other current (Random, Intentional and Altruous) and potential (Inert) prosocial actors.

Coye Cheshire and Judd Antin apply this idea of information sharing to a study of online “information pools” of which Wikipedia would be an example.¹¹ Their findings demonstrate that the observability of contributions (prosocial behavior), for example through the contribution of content to Wikipedia or the answering of questions in an online help forum, influence the individual to think that the *norm* is contribution.¹² The observability of the contributors, as opposed to those individuals who do not contribute, termed “lurkers,” can influence the individual to participate based on social identity. This prosocial norming is an important part of the motivation to participate in prosocial online action. Cheshire and Antin also found a varying impact on explicit versus implicit reward, which was dependent on how involved the individual is in contributing. They found that extrinsic feedback motivated those participating for the first few times, these would be Random and Intentional Actors, but became less important and actually acted

¹¹ (Cheshire and Antin 2008, 705)

¹² (Cheshire and Antin 2008, 31)

as a deterrent, to participation for the Altruous Actors, who felt implicit reward for participating and found explicit reward to be unnecessary. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

In this chapter, the article by Lee Sproull, Caryn A. Conley and Jae Yun Moon, “The Kindness of Strangers: Prosocial Behavior on the Internet,” is analyzed alongside the Motivation for Online Prosocial Behavior Matrix, that this dissertation proposes be used to analyze motivations at varying levels of participation in online prosocial behavior. Sproull et al. discuss the value of social learning theory and social identity theory for analyzing online prosocial behavior. This discussion leads the way for a return to Batson’s empathy-altruism hypothesis which leads the discussion to the potential implications of the online milieu as an enabling technology to help overcome the barrier of Martin et al.’s “social stress.”

“Social stress” as defined by Martin et al., can be reduced through a shared experience, resulting in increased empathy. Martin et al. found that participating in a “shared gaming experience” increased the individual’s empathic concern for the stranger with whom he played the game.¹³ This finding is particularly important in terms of the enabling nature of the online milieu in terms of promoting participation in prosocial action. The social stress that individuals feel toward those outside of one’s social circle, impedes the ability to have empathic concern for such “strangers.” The shared experience is something that can be facilitated through the online milieu to enable a reduction in stranger stress and an increase in empathic concern.

The chapter goes on to discuss the research of Tony W. Buchanan and Stephanie D. Preston in which they discuss a dichotomous reaction to a call for help based on the

¹³ (Martin, et al. January 2015)

individual's analysis of the request as a threat or a challenge. They found that when individuals can view the request for help as a challenge, as in something that can be undertaken successfully, they are more willing to offer help. This finding is important in terms of developing altruosity through online prosocial action. When the Actor views himself as *capable* of offering help he is more likely to help. The Inert Actor, for instance does not view himself as capable of participating in a meaningful way through online prosocial action because he does not think he knows how. He is therefore fearful of the opportunity to participate, rather than viewing it as a challenge. This is why action from Inert to Random Actor is vitally important, as the individual must prove to himself his ability to be effective in acting prosocially online. Once he participates, he can begin to accumulate evidence that he is effective and competent, which reinforces his implicit recognition toward realizing himself as the Altruous Actor.

The discussion returns to an observation that Sproull et al. make regarding the phenomenon discussed in psychology as “the bystander effect.” In terrestrial terms, the bystander effect occurs when individuals see another person in need of help, and they are surrounded by others, they are less likely to offer help, imagining that someone else is bound to step in.¹⁴ Sproull et al. find that in the online milieu the bystander effect is turned inverted. They note that, “in the online world, potential helpers are invisible unless they actually offer help. The combination of visible helping contexts and physically invisible potential helpers may make the felt (perceived) need to offer help more prominent.”¹⁵ This is another reason why the online milieu can enable prosocial action. Because the norm is being set by the contributors, who are participating in

¹⁴ (Latane and Darley 1968)

¹⁵ (Sproull, Conley and Moon 2013, 144)

prosocial action, the individuals who are lurkers view the norm as participation since the other non-participant lurkers are invisible. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the research conducted by Hoda Baytiyeh and Jay Pfaffman on the volunteer administrators of Wikipedia and their research findings that implicit, other-interested motivations direct these Altruous Actors.

Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, the discussion begins with a description of the participatory nature of the online milieu. In the online milieu users generate content in a bottom-up model. Jay Rosen's 2006 blog post "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," captures the potentiality of this bottom-up empowerment of democratized content creators. Hauben discusses the potential the democratizing impacts of the Internet hold as a framework designed from the bottom up. This ability for the general public of Internet users to participate, enabled through the technology of the Internet, makes the online milieu a good place for the Inert Actor to move toward Random Actor, through the ability to participate at low cost to the self.

This participation at a low cost to the self is important in moving the Inert Actor to Random Actor and the activation of the Inert Actor is vital for realizing what Clay Shirky calls the "cognitive surplus."¹⁶ Shirky explains the value of the collective in activating the surplus "to donate their free time to collective efforts and produce cognitive surplus, instead of making just a bunch of tiny, disconnected individual efforts."¹⁷ This chapter goes on to discuss the activation of the surplus potential of

¹⁶ (Shirky 2010, 9)

¹⁷ (Shirky 2010, 23)

Random Actors as demonstrated through the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge (IBC) that became a viral social media phenomenon during the summer of 2014. Through the uploading of video content to social media, coupled with a \$10 donation, the ALS IBC resulted in an 83% increase in donations by 2.1 million *new* donors, in addition to existing donors. This is the activation of Shirky's cognitive surplus and represents the importance and value of the move from Inert Actor to Random Actor.

The conversation in this chapter moves to incorporate the political perspective of Adam Smith in terms of his "spectator" and the individual's desire to be associated with "what is honourable and noble."¹⁸ For Smith, the individual internalizes what he believes the spectator or "the other" would think about his actions. This internalization of the spectator is important in development of the altruous character, as the individual comes to understand what the reaction of the spectator will be, to his participation in prosocial action, based on the observability facilitated by the online milieu. Observability is discussed in terms of Michel Foucault's treatment of the panopticon as a technology enabling a "collective gaze" that is "interiorized" by the individual actor.¹⁹ The observability enabled by the online milieu provides an opportunity for the individual to receive feedback from the spectator's collective gaze and interiorize the feedback to motivate participation in future prosocial action.

Jürgen Habermas discusses a similar interiorization in his concept of dramaturgical action, which refers to the individual as acting on a stage on which he performs, and receives feedback from "the other" which in turn informs his future action. This feedback is enabled in the online milieu. Additionally, the online milieu provides the

¹⁸ (Smith 1869, 120)

¹⁹ (Gordon 1980, 155)