

Towards a Compassionate Society: Understanding and Nurturing of Prosocial Behaviours in Early Childhood

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Abstract

Competition has become an indispensable part of our modern society which in turn has led to the importance of individual and individualism. In the modern world, education surely is equipping us with independence, critical thinking, awareness and creativeness to build up a technologically enhanced society. It does help us in becoming a globalised citizens but the major question that we all have to introspect on is that ‘is this connection with people just superficial? Why then does the world become a place filled with disharmony?’. Somewhere, the most quintessential element of cooperation and compassion is taking a defeat in this busy world. Given the prevalence of both violent and altruistic acts throughout history, questions do arise in our mind about the fundamental nature of human being. The present paper attempts to list out certain recent empirical studies which shed new light in understanding the fundamental nature of human being. The implications of these studies in the field of education and child rearing have also been discussed.

KEYWORDS: Compassion, Altruism, Prosocial behaviour, Kin selection, Reciprocal Altruism, Inductive parenting, Ontogeny, Phylogeny

Introduction

Compassion can be roughly defined as a state of mind that is nonviolent, non harming and non aggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for the others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility and respect for others (Dalai Lama and Cutler, 2009). His Holiness the Dalai Lama distinguishes compassion into two different kinds. One kind of compassion he says “is tinged with attachment- the feeling of controlling someone, or loving someone so that the person will love you back. This ordinary type of love or compassion is quite partial and biased and a relationship based on that alone is unstable... But there is a second type of compassion that is free from such attachment. That is genuine compassion and is based on the rationale that all human beings have an innate desire to be happy and to overcome suffering just like myself; they have the natural right to fulfil this fundamental aspiration. It is based on other’s fundamental rights rather than your own mental projection.”

At this particular point in the history of time all that the world talks about consist of globalization and development. The concept of being a globalized citizen is being injected in each and every individual including the learners at school. On the one hand, today the education is surely empowering us and is equipping us with independence, critical thinking, awareness and creativeness to build up a technologically enhanced world where connectivity with people sitting in the other side of the world is just one click away. On the other hand, the media today; be it the newspaper, the internet, the television or the radio is bombarded with news about human violence, cruelty and injustice. War, torture, genocide, racial

brutality, rape and crime are on prevalent. It appears as if a Frankenstein's monster is on the loose. Also in the news, although less prominent, are stories about people who help generously on hearing the plight of the people in need. Given the prevalence of both violent and altruistic acts throughout history, questions do arise in our mind about the fundamental nature of human being. The debate about the nature of human beings has been on the forefront since from the time of Rousseau and Locke.

The term altruism refers to the process wherein one individual sacrifices in some way for another (Tomasello, 2009). The self- sacrificing kind of altruism is prevalent in the animal kingdom. Honey bee workers attack other insects attempting to intrude into their hive, embedding their barbed stingers in their victims. When this occurs, the bee's venom gland is pulled out along with the internal organs, so that it soon dies. The female of some bird species protect their young from predators by pretending injury and acting as though they could be captured easily. When a mother bird spots a predator nearby, she acts as though her wing is broken and stands stumbling and fluttering at some distance from her nest to draw the predator's attention away from her young. In some cases, the predator may capture her but because of her actions; the young survive (Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989). The self sacrificing sort of animal altruism as explained by Wilson, 1975 may be under genetic control and can be explained by the concept of kin- selection which is termed as the selection of behaviour that lowers an individual's chance of reproduction but raises that of a relative (Stiling, 2002).

Prosocial behaviour is a less toned down version of altruism where the latter mainly includes sacrifice for another individual. According to Eisenberg, prosocial behaviour refers to voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit other individuals or group of individuals (Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989). Thus the acts of helping, sharing, comforting and informing all come under the broader umbrella of an act that can be described as prosocial. Recently several empirical researches are carried with chimpanzees and human children to understand about phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins of prosocial behaviour in human. In this paper an attempt has been made to summarise certain recent empirical studies which shed new light in understanding the fundamental nature of human being.

Major psychoanalytic theories like that of Freud and cognitive theories like that of Piaget portray young children as primarily being self centred and egocentric. Young children can often be seen accompanying the adult to clean the house, to hang the clothes, to set the dining table and so on. Most often, attributing terms like helping, sharing, comforting and so on to young children may appear unjustified to people who only reserve these terms to people who can verbalize their intention. Yet, it is not impossible to decipher intentions from the behaviours displayed by the children (Bruner, 1974). A number of recent studies suggest that from very early in ontogeny young children (14 to 18 months of age) have a biological predisposition to help others achieve their goals, to share resources with others and to inform others of things helpfully (Warneken and Tomasello, 2009).

Major Findings about Prosocial Behaviours

Helping can be any action performed to facilitate the acquisition of another person's goal (Dahl, 2015). Rheingold (1982) found that 18 to 30 month old children helped their parents by participating in common household chores and also helped an unfamiliar adult.

According to recent studies conducted by Warneken and Tomasello, most infants at 14 months of age were seen to retrieve an out of reach object for the researcher (Warneken and Tomasello, 2007) and infants at 18 months of age were seen to perform tasks like open a cabinet door for the adult (as his hands were full), picking up a clothespin as it dropped on the floor and so on (Warneken and Tomasello, 2006). Through these experiments, the researchers were able to conclude that infants were able to understand other's intention and offered help at a very early age of 14 months. Warneken and Tomasello (2008) through studies with 20 month old children argued that extrinsic rewards diminish the prosocial behavioural motivations in children when compared to only praise and no reward conditions. Studies done by Vaish, Carpenter and Tomasello (2010) revealed that children at 3 years of age preferred to help the person who has previously helped than those who has previously harmed.

Warneken and Tomasello (2006) also tested three human-raised chimpanzees giving them the tasks similar to those given for human children. The chimpanzees helped reliably in various problems involving picking up an out-of-reach object for the human researcher. The early ontogenetic emergence of spontaneous helping in young children and its presence in our nearest primate relatives, suggest that helping others with their instrumental goals somehow comes naturally to humans, not exclusively through cultural transmission or explicit teaching.

The phenomenon of **sharing** a valuable resource with someone is very different from that of helping someone attain a goal. The situations where a person gives his/her belongings to another can be termed as sharing. Chimpanzee mothers unlike human mothers share food only in cases where the food is of low quality or if there are any left over's (Ueno and Matsuzawa, 2004- cited in Tomasello 2009). Hence some motherly instincts are present in our nearest primate relative. Human mothers unlike chimpanzees are known to actively share and attend to their infant. Hay (1979) studied with 12, 18 and 24 month old children in a play setting where they were interacting with their parents. Hay found children share objects with caregivers by showing as well as by giving and concluded that sharing develops over the second year of life. 3-year-old children were seen to share mostly equally with a peer after they have worked together actively to obtain rewards in collaboration task, even when those rewards could easily be monopolized (Warneken et al, 2010). Studies also provide evidence that children share more with friends or ingroup members than when compared to non friends or out group members (Moore, 2009).

Comforting can be defined as addressing the emotional need of the other. In order to comfort another individual, the child should be able to identify other's emotional needs. Children start recognizing others as separate physical entities by the time they are 1 year old. By about 2 to 3 years they have rudimentary awareness that others have inner states independent of theirs and by about 6 to 9 years the children are aware that others have their own identities outside the immediate situation (Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989). Hoffman (1981) suggests that developmentally at different stages children react differently on seeing the other in distress. Children who are less than a year old respond to other's distress as though they themselves were in pain. Children between the age group of 1 and 2 years try to console others by doing things which would please themselves. The 2 year olds react to another's distress with a worried anxious look. The 3 and 4 year olds engage in an overt

helpful act. Researches done by O'Connel (1995) shows that chimpanzees are also may be capable of showing empathy across a wide range of circumstances.

Informing is passing relevant information to someone who is in need. Tomasello (2009) describes that although chimpanzees and young human children help others in some situations, there is one special form of helping in which only children engage: providing needed information. Human infants start informing from as early as twelve months of age by using natural gestures like pointing (Tomasello, 2009). Liskowski et al., 2006 in a study provides evidences that children between the ages of 12 to 18 months pointed helpfully for an adult who was searching for an object that he had unintentionally dropped. Experiments such as these proves that infants in their second year of life itself start passing information by pointing- as a communicative gesture and also as a prosocial gesture.

General discussion and Implications in the field of Child Rearing and Early Childhood Education

The research findings discussed till now provide evidences that the prosocial tendencies in human children begin in the second year of their life. Presence of these prosocial behaviours in our nearest primate relative shows that such behaviours also have a phylogenetic root. These research findings have got wide scale implications for everyday child rearing as well as early childhood education.

Child rearing:-

Parents usually take a behaviouristic approach while rearing the children rather than analysing the inner prosocial qualities of the child and nurturing them. This usually happens because we believe in a pessimistic model of a man who is tamed by culture and parental practices. We invariably feel that punishing or rewarding the child will teach him/her a lesson and the child will then be demotivated or motivated in repeating the task whatever the case may be. Parents should always take into consideration the inherent prosocial nature of the child. Ample opportunities and encouragement should be given to the child in order to nurture child's innate cooperative behaviour. Children should never be discouraged while trying to give a helping hand.

Early Childhood Education

In the modern world, education surely is equipping us with independence, critical thinking, awareness, and creativeness and so on. The most quintessential element of cooperation and compassion is taking a defeat in this busy world. In the rush to creating a globalized citizen, our education is becoming more competition oriented and hence it needs massive transformation. It should be more of the humanistic nature building up a curriculum which exploits and nurtures the child's innate altruistic predispositions. The school teachers should create opportunities where it requires children to help each other and share their belongings with others. A child's attempt to behave prosocially should be encouraged not by giving material rewards but by making the child realise the goodness of the act so performed. This would help in nurturing the already present prosocial tendencies in children and in turn will help in the development of a compassionate individual.

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