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The 'anti-social' nature of prosocial research; a psychosocial critique.

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Introduction

Prosocial behaviour is broadly defined as behaviour that generally benefits other people (Penner *et al.*, 2005, Dovidio and Penner, 2004) and covers a range of behaviours such as helping, cooperating and donating to charity. Authors tend to consider *altruism* and *helping* as subcategories of prosocial behaviour. Studies on helping focus on intentional acts that have the outcome of benefiting another person, while research on *altruism* studies the motivation underlying the behaviour (Dovidio and Penner, 2004). The literature on prosocial behaviour is vast (see Stürmer and Snyder, 2010; Penner *et al.*, 2005 and Schoereder *et al.*, 1995 for recent reviews). I will be focusing on one particular aspect of prosocial behaviour: giving to charity. Although this is a very recent and new direction in prosocial research, the findings are potentially of great value to society's well-being in general and humanitarian agencies' appeals and campaigns. This potential applicability to real life situations is one of the reasons for my choice of topic. The other is of a strategic nature. Donating to charity presents a real challenge to current directions in prosocial research as many of its key theories cannot be applied to this form of prosocial behaviour. For example, evolutionary theories of prosocial behaviour – arguably one of the strongest trends in the field – carry no explanatory power when applied to charity donations. Neo-Darwinian models of evolution, which define evolutionary success as the survival of one's genes in subsequent generations, believe that three evolutionary processes best explain why prosocial acts lead to evolutionary success and therefore motivate helping behaviour: kin selection, reciprocity and group selection (Penner *et al.* 2005). The principle of kin selection as motivator for prosocial behaviour, based on the premise that what matters in evolution is inclusive fitness – e.g. the successful transmission of one's genes to the next generation – is regularly contradicted by people willingly donating to total strangers. Similar reasons make the second explanation, reciprocity, equally inapplicable as it is highly unlikely that

victims of an earthquake in Iran will ever be in a position to reciprocate the kindness from anonymous donations, or that donors are motivated by such expectation. Finally, the principle of group selection – e.g. in a situation of competition between two groups, the one with more altruistic members willing to sacrifice themselves for the group, stands a better chance of survival – is hardly relevant to helping distant strangers and charitable giving, by definition benefiting ‘the other’ to one’s genetic group.

Similarly inadequate is the cost-reward analysis of helping (Piliavin *et al.*, 1981). This theory takes an economic view of human behaviour. It assumes that people, primarily motivated by self-interest, tend to maximise their rewards and minimize their costs. Whilst this theory is a good predictor in emergency situations – e.g. returning a stranded pet carries potential more reward and less danger than intervening in a fight, thus making the former a more likely choice – it is not informative when it comes to deciding to sign up, or not, for a standing order to Oxfam, even if we were to consider this as a type of emergency helping. For similar reasons, the arguably most famous strand of experiments, that on bystander passivity, also cannot be applied to donations to charity. Even though there have been attempts to apply the Latane’ and Darley’s (Latane’ & Darley, 1970; Latane’ and Nida, 1981) five step model of bystander intervention to non-emergency situations (e.g. Borgida *et al.* 1992; Rabow *et al.*, 1990), overall this theory is fundamentally concerned with understanding how people respond in emergencies that require immediate assistance.

Several other theories of prosocial behaviour, however, have been applied to explain audiences’ responses to news of genocide or mass atrocities, or to charity and humanitarian appeals. These studies seem to have been motivated by the widespread concern about audiences’ moral apathy and unresponsiveness (e.g. Geras, 1999 Singer, 2009 etc). Different explanations have been given for the moral apathy that seems to characterise audiences’ responses. Some have suggested that differences in responses are due to donors’ decision making styles (Supphellen & Nelson, 2001), whilst others have argued that humanitarian appeals provoke ‘psychophysical numbing’

where the human ability to appreciate loss of life reduces as the loss becomes greater (Slovic 2007).

Others have focused on 'identifiable victim effect' theory. This is where there is a higher likelihood of response when the appeal identifies an individual victim (Kogut and Ritov, 2005a) or specific family (Small & Loewenstein, 2003; Warren and Walker 1991) and whether this could be attributed to smaller numbers evoking more compassion (Kogut and Ritov, 2005a) or because it enabled the respondents to feel more competent (Warren & Walker, 1991).

Mixed results have come from the application of the 'theory of planned behaviour' (Smith & Sweeney, 2007) or the 'dual processing theory' (Epstein 1994) to audience apathy. Slovic (2007) and Epstein (1994) have blamed the failure of System 2 (rational, normative analysis) to inform and direct System 1 processing of information (experiential, intuitive and affect-based response).¹ Loewenstein and Small (2007) have focused on the interaction between 'sympathy' and 'deliberation' and how the two are affected by proximity, similarity, vividness and one's past and vicarious experiences.

Several things are made clear from this brief review. The first is that existing research rarely differentiates between charitable giving to an ongoing needy cause (e.g. sponsoring a child in India) and giving in response to a request for help in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster (e.g. a Tsunami or earthquake). Yet these two types of giving are quite different in terms of ongoing commitment required, the role of emotional reaction as opposed to rational deliberation, the immediacy of response to media pressure versus normative motivations and so on. The second is that the field lacks a comprehensive theory able to draw the various findings together into a more holistic and inclusive picture. . This doesn't just pertain to helping and giving but extends to debates around altruism, as has already been picked up by some researchers. For

¹ S1 is experiential or intuitive, affect-based and a much quicker, easier and more efficient way to navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world than S2, which is based on more rational analyses.

example, Bartolini (2005) has criticised attempts to isolate individual or similar sets of emotions empirically or theoretically, and argued that audiences' multiple emotional reactions to altruistic requests should be studied more holistically. The need for expansion, integration and synthesis has also been expressed by others (Penner *et al.* 2005, Levine and Thompson, 2004). Alongside this, we begin to see more complex and less linear views of prosocial motivation. Shaw *et al.*, (1994), for example, studied how people might be motivated to actively avoid feelings of empathy for those in need, lest they be motivated to help them.² A further reaching critique has been moved by authors interested in a dialogue between science, philosophy and religion in prosocial behaviour (Post *et al.* 2002, offer an inspiring collection of these debates). For example, Sober (2002) re-positions psychology as an ideologically and socially embedded discipline by wondering whether the popularity of a purely egoistic image of the human self is determined by a culture of individualism and competition, rather than it being due to the compelling force of the findings. Wyschogrod (2002), on the other hand, criticises mainstream social psychology for portraying altruism as a content of one's consciousness because this does not allow for a moral understanding of prosocial behaviour. Influenced by Levinas, she argues instead that altruism is contingent on relating to others as a moral demand on the self to engage in other-regarding acts. To attribute either altruism or selfishness to genes is to see them as moral agents rather than transmitters of information (p. 30).

The third thing we learn from a review of existing research is that, with the exception of a few isolated and/or marginalised voices, the field is still dominated by a deductive mode of research and the vast majority of studies are theory driven. Hence, research findings are contradictory (or inconsistent). It is not the contradictions *per se* that I find problematic, but how they are addressed and resolved by mainstream social psychology. Like a dog chasing its own tail, mainstream psychology, by refusing to open up to different epistemological and methodological frameworks, is trapped by its own self-defined rigid boundaries, thus foreclosing the understanding of crucial and exciting facets of human prosocial behaviour.

² I shall come back to this study as it introduces the crucial concept of resistance

The elephant in the room: Society, ideology and moral reasoning

Studies exploring audiences' (un)responsiveness in terms of immediacy of, or identification with, the victim are a good illustration. For example, Kogut and Ritov (2005a) found that, in experimental situations, the group given details about a specific victim gave significantly more than the group that had received only general information. These results were replicated in a similar study by the same researchers (2005b). It has thus been claimed (Singer 2009) that 'the identifiable victim effect' leads to the 'rule of rescue' (p.47). Similarly, the recognition of similarity or common fate which gives rise to a sense of 'we-ness' – a sense of belonging to the same group – increases the likelihood of helping the in-group (Penner *et al.*, 2005). This process has been explained in terms of a favouritism bias towards members of one's own group as opposed to members of other groups (Hewstone *et al.*, 2002, Mullen *et al.* 1992) On similar lines, Levine and Thompson (2004) found that social category relations rather than geographical proximity or emotional reactions, were the most important factors in increasing responsiveness to humanitarian appeals. One of the strongest examples of this is the behaviour of the Swiss population in response to similar appeals from different parts of the world. The first appeal followed a landslide in the Swiss canton of Wallis in 2000; the second an earthquake in the Iranian city of Bam in 2003. Large amounts of money were donated by individuals in Switzerland to aid the victims of both natural disasters. But the difference in amount is remarkable: the Iranian victims received 9 million Swiss Francs, whilst the Swiss received 74 million Swiss Francs (Meier, 2006). This difference is made even more significant by the disparity in wealth of the victim groups. Even taking into consideration factors such as the increased potential for reciprocity from the receivers of the higher donations due to geographical proximity, it is apparent that social categorisation played a crucial role.

What I want to question, however, is not that this factor plays an important role, but why and the kind of answers that mainstream psychology is able to provide to this question. There is a widespread implication that this is how humans operate; a matter of fact, self-evident, but often unspoken, idea that it is all down to human nature. When probed

further, the answer is almost invariably evolutionary. Singer (2009), in reviewing current prosocial research, calls it 'parochialism' and claims that "it is easy to understand why we are like this"; i.e. that "our concern for the welfare of others tends to be limited to our kin, and to those with whom we are in cooperative relationships, and perhaps to members of our own small tribal group" (p.51). This is because, for several millions of years, parents who did not care for their children were unlike to pass on their genes.

Can there really be no other explanation than the behaviour of our ancestors millions of years ago? Singer (2007) providing data to support this claim, cites three disasters: the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004 (220,000 were killed and donations reached \$1.54 billion from US citizens), Hurricane Katarina in 2005 (1,600 died and Americans gave \$6.5 billion) and the earthquake in Pakistan in October 2005 (73,000 were killed, but it elicited only \$150 million in US donations). He then, almost in passing, adds that the earthquake was the only one of these tragic events that was not caught on video and so did not result in dramatic and oft-repeated television coverage. And why not? Could it be then, that difference in media coverage is not accidental but reveals an active ideological operation? That humanitarian tragedies in distant parts of the world that do not involve westerners are presented from the start as less important, the victims as a faceless mass, rather than somebody we can identify with, is a well known and accepted fact (see Chouliaraki 2006 for a compelling and pertinent analysis of the politics of representation). In which case, the construction of the 'worthy victim' seems to have very little to do with hard-wired evolutionary processes, and a lot to do with specific geo-political and ideological practices.

The de-contextualisation of social phenomena and, in particular, the problematic neglect of ideological and socio-historical factors, leads to a very narrow focus and disregard of alternative, more complex understanding of prosocial behaviour. Not all experimental psychological work does that. For example, a recent strand of investigation into the role played by social identity in helping (Reicher *et al*, 2006; Levine *et al*, 2005) demonstrates that, indeed, it is possible to do experimental work and still engage with the political and ideological domains. But, alas, these studies are a rare minority. A

preference for insular, reductionist and deterministic answers is best exemplified by a series of recent studies (Slovic and Slovic, 2004; Slovic, 2007a; 2007b; Small *et al.*, 2007).

Slovic is concerned with the ongoing moral apathy that characterises audiences' responses to news of genocide or mass atrocities. Why – Slovic asks – do not these massive crimes against humanity spark us into action?. His answer is to blame what he terms 'psychophysical numbing'. In agreement with Epstein (1994), he says that the so-called 'dual-process theories of thinking' are in operation. According to this we have System 1 and System 2 modes of thinking. S1 is experiential or intuitive and is affect based and is a much quicker, easier and more efficient way to navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world than S2, which is based on more rational analyses. Although one of the functions of S2 is to monitor S1, this is often lax and allows S1 to be expressed in behaviour even when erroneous. This is crucial because emotional responses such as compassion, empathy, sympathy etc. – all part of S1 – have been found to be vital in motivating people to action. Importantly, it would also explain why people might simultaneously hold humanitarian values and not act accordingly.

This is why, even though according to S2 we highly value human life and as a rational calculation the loss of 100 lives is greater than the loss of 1, what matters is what we respond to emotionally. Slovic then goes on to describe several experiments demonstrating that the emotional reaction to a group is much less than to a single individual. He argues that this psychophysical numbing seems to follow the same sort of psychophysical function that characterises our diminished sensitivity to a wide range of perceptual and cognitive entities as their underlying magnitude increases. Constant increases in the magnitude of a stimulus typically evoke smaller and smaller changes in response. "Applying this principle to the valuing of human life suggests that a form of psychophysical numbing may result from our inability to appreciate losses of life as they become larger" (p.2)

So, Slovic argues, the problem is in our congenital difficulties with numbers which, all too often, represent dry statistics “human beings with the tears dried off”, that lack feeling and fail to motivate action (Slovic & Slovic 2004). When it comes to compassion, he claims, using an identified individual victim is the best way of eliciting it. Charities such as Save the Children have long recognised that it is better to present a donor with a single named child to support than to ask for contributions to the bigger cause; but why is this? Slovic rapidly shies away from the socio-cultural dimensions and turns instead to behavioural research according to which a single individual, unlike a group, is viewed as a psychologically coherent unit. This leads to more extensive processing of information and stronger impressions about individuals than about groups.

I find this type of reasoning problematic on two counts. First, I find Slovic’s rendering of prosocial reactions disturbingly mechanistic and reductionist. Surely there must be more to moral action than the ‘stimulus – emotional arousal – action’ chain he describes. Audiences are not inert, nor are they as unsophisticated as Slovic would make us believe. Second, why resort to evolution when there is so much history and ideology to understand in these phenomena? The problem with ‘scientific neutrality’ is that it blinds us to crucial differences. Slovic’s outrage at the West’s indifference and apathy to the plight of distant others is passionate and commendable. Many of his conclusions are valid and interesting, but his insights are crippled by the epistemology and methodology he uses. It is because of that that he can seamlessly move from applying results using a victim of famine in Malawi to the genocide in Darfur or to natural disasters in South Asia or the victims of 9/11 and so on. I can imagine that from a scientific point of view these are simply ‘neutral’ stimuli to study what ostensibly might appear to be the same phenomenon of prosocial behaviour. To anybody outside the insularity of psychology it would be obvious that these humanitarian disasters are historically, socially and politically profoundly different from one another. Equally, their meaning will impact in a specific way on each participant according to their beliefs, and relative positioning in regard to each specific phenomenon. It is this meaningful intersection that could throw important light on audiences’ reactions to appeals. It is ironic that having just concluded that humans do not deal well with numbers when it comes to humanitarian

emergencies, all we get from research is numbers rather than participants telling us what they felt and thought. It seems that the insularity of mainstream psychology and its allegiance to natural rather than social science, means that the more credible, obvious and interesting explanations for prosocial behaviour, or its absence, are neglected.

Stürmer and Snyder (2010), in their recent collection on prosocial research, have pointed out that “the traditional focus of social psychological research has been on the *interpersonal* context of helping [...]. Thus, in this tradition, explanations of why people help one another and why they fail to help one another typically have revolved around the role of *individual* dispositions, *individual* decision-making processes, *individual* emotions, and the norms that govern the interpersonal relationship between *individual* helpers and *individual* recipients of help (p.4) The authors problematise the individualistic focus and argue for the necessity of research that can explain how “social, structural, political or epidemiological factors translate into concrete experiences, motives and action at the individual level” and how “structural factors derive their subjective meaning through social and political framing processes in the context of the groups or communities to which individuals belong” (ppg: 5-6).

Yet, hardly any attention is paid to meaning and the psychosocial processes individuals engage in in making sense of and responding to charities’ appeals about the suffering of distant strangers. I will discuss more at length how the strictures of laboratory-based methods borrowed from the natural sciences preclude this and other crucial investigations. Here I would like to reflect a bit longer on the model of ‘human subject’ underlying current research.

Locked up in the attic? Irrationality, troubled emotions and conflict

In the majority of the experiments in prosocial behaviour the participants often appear one-dimensional and flat. Even when we get demographic information about them, it is hard to get a sense of their subjectivity, of who they are. There is rarely attribution of agency, moral or otherwise, to the participants in the experiment. Their responses appear predetermined; the outcome predictable as, however responsive and caring

participants might be to begin with, the scope of their possible moral response is foreclosed by their cognitive malfunctioning or calculations.

There are some exceptions. For example, Laura Shaw and her colleagues (Shaw *et al.* 1994) carried out a very interesting experiment. They started from dissatisfaction with the naivety of Heider's (1958) belief that feelings of sympathy, compassion and empathy for those in need evoke motivation to help them and that this is a well known fact. The authors, totally correct in my view, then became interested in what this knowledge might do to subjects whose sympathy and empathy are evoked, and set out to explore whether being aware of an expectation to help might affect their responses. They wondered whether, given this knowledge, people might actively circumvent feeling empathy to avoid having to help. This is particularly the case when the helping appears costly. Their findings support this hypothesis. What interests me in these findings is not so much what they say about decision-making processes – as I said previously, the cost-reward model is not much help in explaining the relatively low cost of helping involved in a donation. It is that it presents audiences as complex, reflective and sophisticated in their awareness of what is expected of them and of having their emotions to some extent manipulated. Crucial, unspoken but implicit in this construction of subjectivity, is the notion of resistance or 'defended subject'. This is so obvious and banal it hardly merits writing about it – who has not experienced those moments of conflict and uncertainty when faced with an outstretched hand, or an appeal for money,. As yet, mainstream social psychological research has paid little attention to those battles between social responsibility and self-interest – at least not in their complex interplay and constant changeability- and the everyday internal moral squabbles. The interest is obviously there as testified by many studies. For example, Batson *et al.* 1995, or Lowenstein and Small, 2007, just to cite two, both look at moral and reason/emotion conflict in decision making. However, what seems to dominate the experiment is the deductive imperative - whether the findings do or do not confirm the model - and/or a very dualistic and rigid understanding of the relationship between emotions and reasons, whereby "'sympathy' is caring but immature and irrational [...] and 'deliberation' is rational but uncaring" (2007:113). These are evaluative statements deriving from

specific societal values. The depiction of these two systems, their separateness and how they interact is also highly dubious. In short, the epistemological scientific underpinnings of mainstream psychology preclude the full exploration of a more complex operation of these factors and of how they might impact on prosocial behaviour.

Contrary to mainstream social psychology, a psychosocial analysis (Frosh, 2003) assumes that audiences have emotional investments and psychodynamic inclinations that intersect with what is culturally available to them (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009); it recognises the power of unconscious dynamics and the significance of psychic conflict (Roseneil, 2006). It posits that “the real events of the external, social world are defensively, as well as discursively, appropriated (Hollway, 2004:7). In line with this approach I assume that there are emotional and intra-psychic aspects to audiences’ reactions to appeals that are crucial in determining responses (Seu, 2003a). There might be emotional stumbling blocks to higher responsiveness which might relate to personal sensitivities and specific personal and biographical experiences. Denial, both in the strictest sense of intrapsychic defence mechanisms and in Cohen’s (2002) more psychosocial rendition might be at play in audiences’ responses. Specifically, appeals are bound to provoke emotions and emotional conflicts, memories, past traumas; and personal experience of being cared for, or not, in times of need might be evoked and/or denied in response to information about humanitarian emergencies and charity appeals.

To add complexity to this picture, there seems to be an intriguing difference in responses to refugees viewed through the safe distance of the media and the possibly threatening closeness when they appear in the form of beggars on our streets (Seu, 2003b). So conflict is not just ubiquitous, it is also socially determined and contextual (Seu, forthcoming). It is not that social psychologists are unaware of this. For example, Lowenstein and Small (2007:115) say: “The specific situations and target-objects that evoke sympathy are certainly mediated by culture and personal experience, but many responses seem to be programmed at a more fundamental level, as suggested by the fact that they can be discerned in “lower” animals such as nonhuman primates and even

rats.” This statement sums up nicely and clearly how social psychologists studying prosocial behaviour often opt for a reductionist view of humanity. Even though this is not always the end result, the choice of words in defining hard-wired, genetic factors in behaviour as “more fundamental” than societal factors reveals the hegemonic position of evolutionary explanations and the ideological underpinning of such studies. Kegan (2002) addresses head-on the emotional and ideological investments of positions such as described above. He astutely points out that anyone with a modest knowledge of animal behaviour could find examples to support almost any ethical message desired. Those who wish to sanctify the institution of marriage can point to the pair bonding of gibbons; those who think infidelity is more natural can point to chimpanzees. If one believes that people are naturally sociable, point to baboons; if one thinks they are solitary, point to orangutans, and so on. “Humans are selfish and generous, aloof and empathic, hateful and loving, dishonest and honest, disloyal and loyal, cruel and kind, arrogant and humble; but many feel a little guilty over an excessive display of the first member of those pairs. [...] I suspect that some people feel better when they learn that their less social urges are natural consequences of their phylogenetic history (Kegan 2002: 49).

Kegan moves the debate from the scientific to the ideological content of psychological theories. He argues that in a society in which a large number of strangers must compete for a small number of positions of dignity, status and economic security, it is adaptive to be self-interested and disadvantageous to be too cooperative, too loyal, too altruistic, or too reluctant to protest unjust advantage taken by another “but rather than acknowledge that the structure of our society has forced each of us to adopt self-interest as the first rule, many Americans find it more attractive to believe that this mood is an inevitable remnant of our animal heritage and, therefore, one must learn to accept it.” (Kegan, 2002: 48-49).

If there is truth in these claims, then it is hardly surprising that the integration of hard-wired factors with a more socially informed understanding of prosocial behaviour is avoided from the start and perpetuated through a very specific and narrow choice of methodologies.

The shackles of method: the limitations of positivism when studying prosocial behaviour.

Meier (2006:3) sums up nicely the tendency in current research in prosocial behaviour: “If it is possible to isolate the conditions that lead to prosocial behaviour, this will increase the understanding of the motivations to contribute money and time to public goods”. So, why is he surprised that whilst “for decades results in laboratory experiments have offered insight about motivations for prosocial behaviour, it is still unclear how these results can be applied outside the laboratory”? (2007:4)

There are several reasons why social psychological findings can rarely be applied to everyday situations. The previous sections of this review have looked at how the disregard for social and ideological factors, and for conflictual and more complicated emotions have made psychological studies true to a positivistic scientific epistemology but do not approximate the complexity and messiness of life.

This last section looks more closely at the methodological constraints. Criticism of laboratory experimentation in relation to prosocial behaviour follows from a well established, albeit marginalised, tradition of critique in the last 30-40 years in social psychology (e.g. Gergen (1973), Tajfel (1972)). I will only be able to address some of these criticisms. The first problem is that the overwhelming majority of social psychological experiments are carried out in laboratory situations where, as Meier describes above, individual factors are isolated and studied as variables. This produces many tidy experiments but is a far cry from the complexities of real life. Crucially, such isolating move is counterintuitive as prosocial behaviour is by definition based on interaction and, arguably, the ‘social’ activity par excellence.

When conducting survey studies the method of choice is questionnaires. Korobov and Bamberg, (2004) criticise this from a discursive perspective. They contend that the key problem is that expressing a forced choice or Likert-scale attitude is entirely different

from expressing an attitude in daily social interaction. First, questionnaire questions tend to reify the issue under scrutiny by stabilizing the item in the form of relatively stereotypical and arguably facile descriptions. Second, the forced-choice format systematically strips off the interactive subtleties and rhetorical finessing that are part of the daily expression of attitudes, evaluations and assessments (2004:473). As has been repeatedly argued (Parker 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell and Edley's, 1999, Billig *et al.* 1988, just to cite a few), and experienced daily, embracing contradiction and inconsistency is probably what we do best as humans as part of the fabric of everyday, moral and immoral, reasoning (Billig *et al.* 1988). Yet, inconsistencies are seen in mainstream psychological experiments as a sign that something has gone wrong with the design, in other words, is a problem.

We live in a global society, where moral boundaries shift continuously in line with the forever-changing identity of who is friend or foe. We experience the daily tensions in our social responsibility between ever stronger pulls towards rampant and greedy individualism and global compassion. With such unstable global, political and socially determined norms, the glaring inconsistencies in findings should be celebrated and embraced as the beginning of recognition that this is 'the nature of the beast'. They should be seen as crucial information, as 'openings'. Unfortunately, as I have illustrated earlier, there seems to be a consistent move away from complexity, a clinging to isolating in the futile hope of predicting behaviour. A psychosocial approach can begin to remedy these problems by looking at the inter-relatedness of factors, rather than studying them in isolation; by approaching reasons and emotions not as separate and differentially valued but as they interact in the conscious and unconscious negotiations and fluctuations of subjectivity; by valuing conflict as a crucial and unavoidable factor in everyday morality; by socially and biographically re-contextualising prosocial behaviour. Mainstream empirical psychologists might criticise psychosocial approaches for not providing a way to chart through the complexities by controlling individual factors. This is, indeed, a fair criticism. The contribution of a psychosocial approach to prosocial behaviour is not simply in offering a fine grained and nuanced picture of the

phenomenon. Crucially, a psychosocial approach has the potential to reconfigure our understanding of prosocial behaviour by providing a holistic and ultimately truer reflection of the complexities of everyday morality and prosocial behaviour, and the intricate, conflicted and ambivalent process of decision making leading to – or away from - it.

We struggle to make sense of an increasingly complex reality and our moral boundaries are drawn and re-drawn in line with shifting social and global realities. The ideological, cultural and inter-subjective ramifications constantly affect us and are always influential in our choices. There is no such thing as a 'neutral' stimulus when it portrays a dark-skinned child in Africa or a white business man in New York. Social psychology urgently needs to change and adapt to such complexities to be able to make a useful contribution to the understanding of prosocial behaviour.

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