



INSTITUTE OF LEARNING AND PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR SCIENCES
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THE PARADOX OF “PRO-SOCIALITY”



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1. A COPERNICAN REVOLUTION IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

The most common taxonomy of interpersonal styles in scientific literature devoted to Social Psychology offers three main categories:

1. **Aggressivity:** the behavior of someone who pursues his/her own objectives while (intentionally) damaging their counterpart.
2. **Passivity:** the behavior of those who do not have a goal or reluctantly give up the pursuit of their own goals, passively letting others dominate them.
3. **Assertiveness:** it is the style of those who have a goal and, unlike the passive style, pursue it while respecting others. In this regard, they are also different from the aggressive style.

Assertiveness has become the alternative to the philosophy that, in a black and white logic, suggests that, “*in life, you either are a victim or an aggressor.*”

As a consequence, psychologists found that *assertiveness training* is the instrument of choice to strengthen a “weak ego” of many passive individuals or to create an alternative to aggression. Assertiveness has been introduced in companies and new dynamics have originated within these organizations. Each individual is encouraged to compete in pursuing a goal that, in competition, is always one and indivisible. Aside from any ethical concerns, individuals and companies have learned to compete more and better rather than giving the best of who they are. At school, teachers who established assertiveness as the foundation of the educational process teach children, adolescents, and young adults how to achieve their goals, how to give or receive critique, how to transform conflicts into dialogue, and how to relate to others in a way that is advantageous for themselves. Therefore, assertiveness has increasingly penetrated the innermost part of our contemporary culture, shaping people’s conscience.

However, a society that is made up of six billion assertive individuals, each pursuing his/her own goals – though respecting others – is a social model that can hardly be sustained.

In competition, there is only one winner, while everyone else loses. Therefore, the others are all competitors who need to be defeated. Even behaviors that are normally considered socially desirable, such as selflessness and co-operation, once contaminated by assertivity, shift to a direction that is irreparably egocentric. Co-operation, for example, becomes “strategic co-operation” within which we care about the other person’s goal but only because it is instrumental to achieve our own goal. Selflessness, when influenced by an assertive perspective, becomes irreparably entangled in an uni-directional perspective that does not expect mutuality by the interlocutor.

In other words, assertiveness appears not simply to have solved the issue of sociality in an acceptable way and leaves the dramatic and ancient dilemma of humanity open: if I seek my self-affirmation, I could find myself with such an hypertrophic “ego” that there could be no room for the others. However, if I pursue the good of others and the development of the community, where does my right to self-fulfillment as a person wind up? The response that Humanity has given through the centuries has vacillated – like in a pendulum – going from the perspective that, in order to emphasize the communitarian dimension – ended up sacrificing the individual on the altar of collectivity, to those approaches which emphasized the individual with his/her rights, to the point of excluding any form of “otherness.”

Today, on the one hand, the unstoppable technological development produces an exponential growth of media communications and of a tendency toward a global collectivity/community through a globalization process which runs the risk of smoothening individual differences and cultural diversity (De Stefano, Minelli and Salfk, 2003). On the other hand, assertive and competitive individualism is the philosophy that underlies many individual choices and behaviors, relationships in society, the organization of economy and work, political sphere within communities and even relationships within families and with friends.

In order to solve the dichotomy of “one versus many” and emerge from this conflict, we feel the need today to have a model based on “a balance between the respect of the uniqueness of the individual and the reciprocity of interpersonal relationships” (Borg, 2002). We look for a paradigm which joins the need for community development with the legitimate aspiration of the individual to seek self-fulfillment.

This is the significant contribution given by Chiara Lubich, who “translated into practice and method of research the heart of Christian message” (Borg, 2002, p. 103) defining a “new inter-disciplinary paradigm of unity.” This has already been hailed by a well known scholar as the model which “can become a Copernican revolution for social sciences” (Biela, 2002, p. 9). This model is based on the gospel call to mutual love and therefore is inspired by religious rationales but ensures “extraordinary psychological effects: each individual, being in a loving relationship with others, is self-fulfilled as a true person” (Lubich, 2002, p.116).

Therefore: just as Copernicus moved the Earth away from the center of the Ptolemaic universe, in order to give the sun its proper role – the center of gravity around which the whole solar system rotates – so Chiara Lubich moved the focal point of the study and interpretation of the human being from the individual to the relationship between individuals, thus giving this relationship the status of constitutive factor, something that is intrinsically pertinent to human beings.

The effects of this revolution have been felt in different disciplines, among them the field of psychology of education. We would like to emphasize especially what happened in the field of pro-social education.

2. THE CHANGE

In the 1960s, psychologists shifted their attention from psychopathology to the study of human well-being. During those years, the study of pro-social development began to be developed. Twenty years later, Mussen e Eisenberg-Berg (1985), though having the merit of having defined for the first time the pro-social behavior, confined it to those “... actions aimed at helping or benefitting another person or group of individuals without expecting any external reward.” Ten more years went by before Roche (1995), a scholar evidently influenced by Chiara Lubich’s thought, proposed a definition of pro-social behavior which would finally set the attention of scholars free from the isolated individual as the subject of an action and shifted to the interrelationship between the individual and the recipient of his/her actions.

Therefore today we are able to conceive a pro-social paradigm that drew the line between interpersonal interactions – including positive ones, such as, for example, co-operation or selflessness. Such interactions are centered on sharing a common and extrinsic interest, around which interpersonal interaction take place and end and relationships which do not contribute to achieving goals that go beyond the relationship itself and do not exclude from this relationship any part of one’s personal life



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experience (Lubich, 1998). We talk about intrinsically motivated relationships because they stem from making decisions, and free and responsible choices. These choices are made without or outside of any external pressure, and with the awareness that their cost is deciding to be available to pay for the other. Pro-social relationships, in their wider meaning, allowed us to experience the fact that “seeking the other’s good is good for me and builds up the community” (Salfi, 2006).

3. ISACPro

Given this backdrop, it is easier now to understand the role of the now more than 20 years of work, the meaning of lived experience and the scientific and operational model of ISACPro – Institute of Sciences for Learning and Pro-social Behavior – Inter-professional association for research and formation which, in its 1984 By-laws, reads, “*the individual becomes self-fulfilled by being aware of his being for others.*” ISACPro, though aware of its size, dared present to the scientific world this conviction, considering it as a hypothesis that needs to be humbly suggested for further research.

These past years have been devoted to the following:

- Research, grounded on rigorous rules;
- Formation, carried out in all Regions of Italy;
- Planning and implementation of innumerable projects in schools and in communities;
- Presentations in the field of education, healthcare and society;
- Development of numerous inter-institutional and international opportunities for co-operation

All the above work has confirmed our initial hypothesis and prompted us to suggest the adoption of pro-social education at this time of crisis in the field of education.

4. TAP – TRAINING of PRO-SOCIAL ABILITIES

Research lead us to realize that:

1. Socially undesirable behavior is learned;
2. Pro-social behavior is also learned;
3. The learning process that uses a model plays a crucial role in the development of social behaviors;
4. Structured/well organized learning plans of pro-social skills carried out by experts that are not part of the school, during after school time and outside the regular pedagogical and educational planning, appear to be as efficacious as telling a story containing a moral teaching.
5. A greater effect of pro-social education programs can be achieved by exposing students to efficacious models and by implementing an educational program that is purposeful, systematic, planned out and carried out by individuals that are meaningful in the life of the student.

4.1. Objectives

The conclusions we have come to with our research, along with the already defined guidelines already proposed by Roche in the PAPEC structure, to which our model is deeply indebted, allowed us to identify and define the following objectives for an educational curriculum which is sustainable in Italian schools:

WITH THE STUDENTS:

- Increase the following:
 - Behaviors that are defined as assertive, that is, aim at achieving a goal while respecting the other party;
 - Behaviors which express social competence;
 - Behaviors we define as pro-social. Their features are the following:
 - They are directed toward finding the well-being of the others or to decrease their discomfort
 - They are carried out only after a clear process of taking on responsibility without any external pressure, such as the promise or expectations of a reward, or motivations related exclusively to the exercise of one’s role
 - They are carried out with the clear awareness that any pro-social act involves costs and risks
 - They are shared by their recipients
 - They lead to an increased probability of being reciprocated by the recipient or by others who may become involved
 - They promote the development of the following:
 - Self-determination
 - Empathy
 - Emphasis on positive
 - Quality communication
 - Self-giving, sharing, helping
 - Behaviors which shape the motivations and direction of learning;
 - Behaviors that pursue social goals;
 - Behaviors that shape a fraternal model of relationships
- Decrease behaviors that are classified as:
 - Passive, aggressive, competitive;
 - Under the umbrella label of bullying;
 - Disruptive, disfunctional, socially inadequate and openly anti-social, aggressive, violent;
- Improve the following:
 - The social atmosphere in the classroom;
 - The quality of interpersonal relationships;
 - Self-esteem, self-acceptance, communication, self-control;



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- Prevent the following:
 - Disruptive behaviors, dysfunctional, socially inadequate and openly anti-social, aggressive and violent;
 - Emotional discomfort;

WITH THE PARENTS:

- Increase the following:
 - Parental participation in school life
 - The degree of satisfaction expressed by the parents for the service provided by the school

WITH THE TEACHERS:

- Increase the following:
 - The markers of organizational well-being found among the school staff

IN THE CITY:

- Multiply the shared places and times devoted to relationships among the staff, with no other goal than to deepen the relationships themselves;
- Bring about the change of collective ways of
 - Thinking about interpersonal and social relationships;
 - Decline to act in education within the school, family and the whole community;
- Renew interpersonal and social relationships by directing them toward seeking the good of the other person, which is a step toward the self-fulfillment of the individual and allows the creation of a network with connections to the social reality of the city.

4.2. Contents

Our pro-social education curriculum includes several components:



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PRE-REQUISITES

Communication
Meta-communication
Assertivity
Empathy
Self-esteem
Creativity
Problem solving and decision making
Self-control

ELEMENTS

A positive assessment of the interlocutor
Collaboration
Help (verbally, meta-verbally, physical)
Giving
Sharing
Friendship
Solidarity
Stress relief
Empathic listening
Generate positive reciprocity

EDUCATIONAL STYLES

Acceptance and affection
Attributing positivity
Inductive discipline
Exhortation
Reinforcement
Modeling

ANTAGONISTS

Passivity
Competitiveness
Aggressivity

4.3. Methodology

The methodological foundation/structure/organization of TAP includes three introductory levels, among which there are the following:

- a. Cognitive sensibilization
- b. Structured learning of
 - i. Specific activity
 - ii. Related disciplinar activities
- c. Application to one own's environment

The first step of the TAP pro-social educational model consists in the formation of teachers or educators in general, including the parents.

The adults who are important in the development of the individual – including those that Milan (2007) called 'involuntary educators' – may decide to participate in an on-going formation program also using a self-monitoring method of pro-social behavior. At times, this self-monitoring activity can be performed by whole groups of adults, such as: Faculty Council, a group of parents, the educators of an educational center, town councilors of a town.

We realized that when we speak of model learning, we refer not only to a certain consistency in the individual behavior, but most of all to the model offered by interpersonal relationships that adults generate among them. For example, how can we ask students to co-operate with each other if the teachers in the Faculty Council tend to interact in a competitive way?

At this point it is obvious that pro-social education is not an added project, but should be considered as a dimension that shapes the regular curricular activities.

4.4. Monitoring

The evaluation of the results is carried out with various systems, methods, and instruments which are related to paradigmatic thinking, are based on descriptive language, and take into consideration both quantitative and qualitative phenomena. We are talking about the following:

1. Well thought-out behavioral tests at the end of the educational program
2. Direct and systematic observation of behaviors
3. Evaluation scales.



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In some cases, when the intention is to explore the emotional life of the students in response to a pro-social education process, narrative thought and related techniques can be used.

Finally, if the desire is to identify the behavior and biases modification, 'implicit' techniques can be used.

4.5. Results

The application of TAP, constantly monitored and documented by our research, achieved the following results:

1. Decrease in aggressive, passive, and competitive behaviors.
2. Increase in pro-social and assertive behaviors.
3. High correlation between the development of pro-social behaviors and commitment to studies, learning, and academic success.
4. Prevention and decrease in dysfunctional behaviors that are usually grouped under the terms 'bullying,' 'oppositional defiant disorder' ", 'conduct disorders,' such as pricking the fingers of the younger classmates with the tip of a compass, burning the girls' hair by lighting the deodorant at gym, etc. Such behaviors are replaced by pro-social behaviors.
5. Prevention and decrease in post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.
6. Spread of pro-social behaviors during the intervention.

Some of the results that have surfaced during these past years are of great interest from an educational standpoint. It is also interesting to compare them with those coming from different realms.

A review of scientific literature on disruptive behavior pointed out that aggressive adolescents perceive others as a threat. Pro-social education, which teaches to care for others, changes such perception and consequently the behavior.

4.6. The paradox of the Pro-social Approach

This is the phenomenon we find when, given a specific social context, when pro-social behaviors increase, there is an increase in the probability that the recipients or another social party express pro-social actions aimed at reciprocating what was received from the person who started the action or even new recipients (Salfi and Barbara, 1991). This spreading phenomenon seems to be a specific feature of pro-social behavior. In order to explain the rationales behind such "ripple effect" of pro-social behavior, we use the complex systems theory. One of the characteristics of complex systems is a certain unpredictability. Rather, the deterministic laws are unable to predict how complex systems will behave. For example, if we introduce small variations in the "initial conditions," they could cause major variations in the long term behavior of the system. This is the so-called "butterfly effect", according to which even a small movement of a butterfly's wing in any points of the globe, through a long chain of events connected among them by interdependence, may cause a catastrophe somewhere else, even far away from the butterfly itself. Complex systems behavior cannot be understood by looking at the behavior of individuals who make up the system, let alone the linear laws that rule them. The *modus operandi* of a complex system is not the sum of the individual behaviors. **It is the relationship among the individuals that determines the overall behavior of the system. This relationship gives the system properties that can be completely different from each individual.** This property is called emerging behavior: from the relationship among the individuals who are part of the system *emerges* an 'overall behavior' which is unpredictable from the viewpoint of individual behavior.

This said, nobody would deny that when a person, in a specific context, acts in a pro-social way, his/her relationship changes the relationship between himself/herself and other elements within the context. This involves a change in the initial conditions of the complex system, so that, through a series of interconnected and interdependent events, the emerging behavior, determined by the new ruling principle introduced in the system by the pro-social action, may also change.

This dynamic is typical of community projects, which are based on pro-social educational agreements that the individual members of the community can personally decide to adhere to.

4.7. Perspectives: shared projects/itineraries

The last realm in which our research has been developed, is to identify shared factors and possible collaborations and affinities with other approaches, specifically the following:

- cooperative learning
- service learning
- pro-social methodology of sportmeet games
- informal education of Gen Rosso's 'Strength without violence' Project

5. AN EXAMPLE: 'I AND THE OTHER' EXPERIMENT (methodological-educational experiments in Pro-social Education carried out in some schools in the Umbria Region, Italy)

I and some colleagues/friends of mine came across the theoretical and methodological foundations illustrated above, about five years ago, during an on-going formation course in Perugia. The course was held by the "Mosaic" Association and AMU (United World Association).



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We were familiar with and had been striving to live out Chiara Lubich's Ideal for a while. What we were seeking was the opportunity to bring its principles into our workplace, in the classroom, as well as in the collegial environment of the scholastic community. We felt there was a major need in that setting for educating to the good (one own and the other's good): an attitude of listening, forgiveness, charity-love – which goes out to the others without expecting anything in return– hope – as well as the ability to trust the students– knowing how to correct them firmly without losing the dialogue with them; knowing how to witness first in our own lives what we ask them to do.

What Pro-social education puts forth seemed immediately catchy to us, because it responded to the needs we had. It seemed to be a method that could really help change things. Hence we felt compelled to educate ourselves and find out more about, and create unheard of ways of applying it in our teaching. We wound up getting teacher teams, Faculty Councils, boarding schools and entire schools involved. When we started, there were only four of us, in different schools. Our number increased because this proposal was interesting and compelling: in the Umbria Region there are currently more than twelve schools united in a network, which apply the methods and proposals put forth by pro-social education.

My direct experience involved carrying out a methodological-educational series of experiments "I and the others" (Donato Salfi and Fiorella Monteduro, 2007) in the secondary school classes of Buri School, where I was teaching. At the same time, these experiments were carried out also in the primary school classes of my colleague Daniela Alessandrini of the Marsciano School District. This proposal had the intention, stemming from previous research, to put together all the activities in the curriculum as well as the extra-curricular activities.

5.1. Pro-social Education and Education styles in the Teachers' Council and in the family

Something that we found compelling was the need to reflect thoroughly on the ways of teaching and on the **relationship-based style** that we teachers bring to the classroom and that the parents also take on in the families. This was essential: we had to start 'from ourselves' and from the teacher teams and the parents to educate in a way that allowed the recovery and sharing of **positive** ways of relating to others and an **educational style** based upon the following:

- **REINFORCEMENT:** this ensures that a pro-social action is immediately followed by a positive event for the student;
- **MODELING** (teaching by being a role-model): the adult is aware that the student will tend to behave in a way that is similar to that of the adults. Being aware that any act – both positive and negative – may generate learning in those who observe us, even when we are unaware of it, is a further motivation for us to be consistent, compelling and credible models.
- **EXHORTATION:** exhorting is not the main way to achieve educational goals and needs to be used sparingly. Exhortation may be useful to teach the students ideas that allow him to recognize and name specific behaviors.
- **INDUCTIVE DISCIPLINE:** it shows the students the consequences of his own behaviors on others. This is one of the keys of social behavior: *being aware that one's behavior is never neutral but always has an impact on the recipients.*
- **ACCEPTANCE:** showing **acceptance and affection** is something that leads young people to express appropriate behaviors.
- **POSITIVE FEEDBACK:** is the *feedback* that the educator gives the student, appreciating what she did.

5.2. Goals of the experiments

The experimental hypothesis we started from was a correlation. We expected to find – and we did in fact find – that, as the educational styles used by adults were changed and a structured pro-social education was employed, related daily behaviors of the students in school and at home would also change. These changes were obviously curricular goals:

Increase in the following behaviors:

- functional interpersonal communication
- assertiveness
- pro-social behavior
- academic competence

Decrease in the following behaviors:

- dysfunctional interpersonal communication
- aggressive and passive behaviors
- negative competition

Improvement of the following:

- social atmosphere in the classroom
- academic results
- parental participation
- signs of organizational well-being

5.3. The Contents of a structured project

We proposed to the students a didactic-educational project which included 7 elements taken from the TAP curriculum. This was because of our awareness to not intentionally increase the general "goodness" among the students (which is often an expression of passivity) but intended to stimulate their **skills and competence** that, all together, form the complex competence of pro-social behavior. They are the following:

- Appreciation for the positive
- Empathy
- Communication



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- Assertiveness and resolution of aggression
- Self-control
- Conflict resolution
- Help, co-operation, sharing

For each of these components, we worked through various activities, following a protocol made of different and consecutive steps. We started from **simulated situations**, then proceeded to **reflection and analysis** of the messages, **interactive activities** and pro-social play, and ended with **feedback** and **generalization** to create new awareness in the students.

Example: “Scrooge Operation”-1°SD Marciano-

The evolution of the activities and the progress in behaviors were **monitored and recorded** in two ways:

- first, through direct observation, by an external observer, according to an observation protocol
- second, through the expression of the “narrative thoughts” of the children involved

5.4. The world of images

Now, with an unlikely time-machine, I would like to invite you to enter in my class during the time devoted to pro-social education. Due to time constraints, it is impossible to present in scientific language the way the experiment was carried out and the results achieved. Therefore, we will use the narrative thought which, by giving up isolating relationships of cause and effect of paradigmatic thinking, affords us the great opportunity of finding the deep meaning of pro-social education.

5.5. The vertical curriculum of ‘Citizenship and constitution’

The most encouraging result of this experiments was the work simultaneously carried out in Marsciano and Città di Castello, within the Pro-social Umbrian Network. This allowed the elaboration of a vertical curriculum, of “Citizenship and Constitution” with respect to the European and Ministerial Guidelines and based on the Contents and Methods of Pro-social Education.

