Grounded Theory on Helping Behavior and Its Shaping Factors

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A Grounded Theory on Helping Behavior and Its Shaping Factors

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Abstract

In social psychology, the attribution model of helping behavior suggests that beliefs of the helping target's responsibility for the need for help evoke affective motivators such as feelings of pity, sympathy, or anger. The affective motivation leads to helping or not helping the target. The current emergent theory is an enhancement of this theory by incorporating other personal and situational variables.

Through the use of classic grounded theory, I interviewed 80 participants from different De La Salle Schools in the Philippines. This yielded over 1300 individual incidents that were compared and contrasted to form codes, categories and subcategories. A theory on the decision making process of helping emerged that incorporates the helper's personal conviction, and rational deliberations of the situation. The desire to help is based on the helper's rational-emotive beliefs (philosophical ideals and values that nurture helping and the knowledge of the nature of risk/problem) and relational-emotive ties (with the one who needs help and with a social group that nurtures helping). The desire to help undergoes a process of rational-pragmatic deliberations on the appropriateness of the recipients need of help, the cost of helping, the helper's capability of helping, and the logistics of helping before the actual helping occurs. The theory has implications for current social psychological theories of helping, and the use of classic grounded theory research.

Introduction

The Brothers of the Christian School is a congregation of religious men founded in the 1700's in France by Jean Baptiste De La Salle. The integral purpose of the

congregation is education of youth, particularly the marginalized. The group grew to become of one of the pillars of Catholic evangelization through school education in at least 80 countries around the world. De La Salle Brothers, as they are popularly known in the Philippines, reached Philippine soil in 1910 and presently has 12 schools offering basic and higher education. In the 1980s there was a strong impetus to rekindle the foundational philosophy of reaching more needy young people. The rallying cry popularized by the head of Brothers was "risking your lives to youth at risk". The past 10 years ushered movements towards translating this adage into specific programs and activities of the schools. However, the idea of "youth at risk" is at its best a conjuncture of notions with sociological and theological underpinnings. Most members of the Lasallian community are in a quandary on this and how it translates operationally into the leadership and management of schools.

This led to the present study of unraveling the various meanings attached to the concept of youth at risk by different members of De La Salle Schools in the Philippines (abbreviated Lasallian community in this study). I employed a qualitative epistemology, and started out with the simple inquiry on what youth at risk means to members of the Lasallian community.

Method

Participants

The 80 participants were religious members (La Salle Brothers), administrators, teachers and students of seven De La Salle Schools in the Philippines, representing the three major archipelagic clusters of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. These islands are likewise distinguished by socio-political and economic variances.

Data-Gathering Procedure

I used conversations with consent of respondents as opposed to formal interviews to harvest the raw and spontaneous sentiments of the respondents. The interaction climate of conversations are less formal or

structured, allowing the nuances of deviating from other topics, which later was found useful. I felt that conversations were more authentic and truer to the precepts of grounded theory than formal interviews.

I began my conversations with the religious sector, the La Salle Brothers. They are the main proponents of the idea of youth at risk and exert much influence among the schools, being essentially their owners. The conversations with the Brothers became a springboard to interviewing other Lasallian community members like administrators, teachers, staff and students. Each conversation pointed me to other potential respondents. After analyzing each conversation I got ideas on conducting conversations with other randomly selected teachers, students, and administrators representing other milieus within the Lasallian community. Eventually, I ended up with 80 conversations in all.

Data Analysis Procedure

Each incident from a conversation was immediately coded. Incidents are phrases or ideas within the conversations which directly allude to the substantive area. Each incident was assigned a reference code according to the sector and school of the participant. The codes were compared and contrasted and memos were generated from this constant comparative method. Memos are insights that are both logical and intuitive to the researcher, and emerge during the constant comparison method, which is another name for grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The memos aided in the conceptual description of the incidents, a conceptual categorization of the data, and an evolving emerging theory. When the conversations were no longer adding to the conceptual descriptions or to the emerging theory I declared saturation.

Sorting the memos by clustering, re-ordering and prioritizing the insights as part of the theoretical sensitizing process eventually led to the final emergent theory. Finally, the emergent theory was subjected to the litmus test of comparing it to the original incidents, to establish its

"goodness-of-it" as a way of validating its grounding from the data.

Core Category

The main concern of members of the Lasallian community seems to be to help and serve those who need help, and especially those in at risk groups. Helping was perceived as a means to respond to these groups so as to free them from debilitating circumstances, to improve their coping skills in handling debilitating situations, and to improve the quality of life of the one who needs help. The emergent core category of the research is the helping process by which the Lasallian members decide to help an at risk youth or not.

The helping process begins with a member's rational-emotive beliefs and relational-emotive ties creating a desire, and a personal conviction to help. When a member of the Lasallian community encounters a person who needs help this sparks a desire to help. This desire to help undergoes a series of rational-pragmatic deliberations, the appropriateness of the person who needs help (=target), the cost of helping, the capability to help, and the logistical planning of helping before the helping takes place.

Rational-Emotive Beliefs

A member has two main rational-emotive beliefs that influence the desire and conviction to help a target. These are the philosophical ideals and values that nurture helping and serving, and knowledge of the nature of the problem or risk the target is in. A member's personalizing of philosophical ideals and values that nurture helping serves as a rational logical reason for helping and serving. These ideals and values include religious persuasions, political leanings, and moral considerations. They also have an emotional-motivational component that energizes, focuses, and directs the helping behavior. Some members mentioned "I personally act with justice and integrity", "I ask myself what Christ would do", and "I try to be firm but kind".

A member's knowledge of the nature and the risks of the problem of the target is the other rational-emotive belief. It is rational in understanding the nature of the target's problem (poverty, academic, addiction, psychological, emotional, family, and sex related problems etc.), and the potential dangers of the target's problem (inability to sustain a decent living conditions, to function and contribute to society, to have happiness or joy in life, and being personally debilitated by circumstances). This knowledge of the nature of the problem is emotional-motivational since the member becomes sensitive to targets who display symptoms of the problem: "I see how they live", "I am able to detect those with problems". Also, emotional motivational feelings towards targets that have these problems are evoked: "I am moved with pity and sympathy for them", "I cry when I think of their situation", "I am frustrated that the school does not differentiate a drug user from a drug abuser and they just expel them". A member's knowledge of the nature of the problem energizes, gives focus and sustains a desire to help the target.

Relational-Emotive Ties

The relational-emotive ties seem to stem from a member's relationship with the target, and the members social group that nurtures helping ideals and values. Relational-emotive ties with the target affect the member's desire to help. It seems that the closer the relationship with the target, the greater awareness of the target's problem and the greater the desire to help: "I am only aware of the students under my care", "I can only tell you about the youth whom I am in contact with", and "I feel obliged to help when someone asks me for help". This closeness that increases awareness and a subsequent increased personal conviction to help is an emotive-motivational property of relational-emotive ties.

Lasallian community member's relational-emotive ties with social groups that nurture helping and serving others also affect the desire and conviction to help. These social groups serve as the member's social context and milieu. It

seems that the more the social context nurtures helping and serving others the greater the desire to help others. Those who belonged to offices, departments, and social groups that nurtured helping did often mention personal helping behaviors. It also seems that the more the social group's orientation toward a specific nature of the target's problems, the greater the sensitivity to targets with problems of that specific nature. Psychologists and staff members working in the guidance-counseling center tended to be sensitive to psychological and emotional problems. Members associated with education and academic groups tended to be sensitive to academic and educational problems of targets. Those who associated with cause oriented groups tended to be sensitive to poverty related problems, and members in business and commerce groups tended to perceive youth at risk as the inability to function and contribute to society.

A member's desire to help and serve seems to cause a personal conviction towards helping. However, this desire is not enough to explain helping behavior. It seems that the member passes through a series of rational-pragmatic deliberations before helping. These deliberations include the target's appropriateness to be helped (a dualistic perceptual typology), the cost-benefit ratio of helping and serving, the capability to help, and the logistics of helping. In a sense, the rational-pragmatic deliberations check the member's emotional convictions against a rational assessment of the situation. The strength of the desire and personal conviction to help juxtaposes against the strength of the rational-emotive deliberation resulting in helping a person or not.

Appropriateness of the Target

The first rational-pragmatic deliberation is the target's appropriateness to be helped and served. This appropriateness tends to be based on a dualistic perceptual typology of targets. Targets are either perceived as victims (=targets with debilitating circumstances not caused by themselves), or non-victims (=targets where debilitating circumstances are a result of their own actions and

decisions). Rationally, victims are appropriate to help and serve because they are perceived as innocent and not responsible for their circumstances. Non-victims are perceived as inappropriate to help because they are perceived to have caused their own circumstances of need. One member defined youth at risk as "those who through no fault of their own are in situations that causes serious disadvantage or disability" and another member claimed that "those who plan to be wayward are not at risk".

Thus, youth groups who were identified to be in more need than others by the nature of their problems, and who were perceived as not responsible for their own circumstances (=victims) were helped and served by the members and the schools in which they worked. Groups who were identified to be in more need than others by the nature of their problems but who where perceived as responsible for their own circumstances (=non-victims) were not helped by the members or the schools they worked in. The schools often gave punitive actions to youth groups who were responsible for their own circumstances (drug addicts, alcohol users, tardy and truant students, sexually active students, pregnant teenage students).

Costs and Capabilities of Helping

The second rational-pragmatic deliberation involves costs of helping and serving as well as capabilities and capacities to help and serve. This deliberation starts with rational-pragmatic assessments of the cost of helping versus the benefit that accompanies helping the target. This gives a cost-benefit ratio of helping.

Financial costs, time loss, amount of effort, and deviation from priorities that would result in helping the target are measured and related to the benefits and personal gain that comes from helping and serving the target. Some members mentioned "I feel better about myself when I help others". Members also mentioned that "finances should be considered", "I do not have enough time to help all of them so I refer some to the guidance center", "I try to help some of them but sometimes it is too difficult". If the cost-benefit ratio is favorable (low cost and

high benefit) then there is a greater probability of helping and serving the target.

Member's capabilities and capacities to help such as knowledge, expertise and know-how are also assessed. Members mention inabilities to help as some problems need expertise beyond their capability: "When the problem is emotional or psychological, I refer them to the guidance office". If the problem is within the member's know-how to help there is a greater probability of helping. If the nature of the need is beyond the member's capability then either helping is not done, or the target is referred to a person that can help.

## Logistics of Helping and Serving

The logistics of helping incorporates the plan of who, when, where, and how the target will be helped. This plan assumes that the target is appropriate to help, that the cost-benefit ratio of helping is good, and that the help need is within the capability of the helper.

The who of helping tends to be "who can assist me in helping the target" or "who can better help the target". "When will I help the target", "where will I help the target", and "how shall I help the target". Once the who, when, where and how are decided, then the actual helping and serving begins.

The emergent theory is presented in the following chart.

Chart 1: The Helping (Service) Decision Making Process
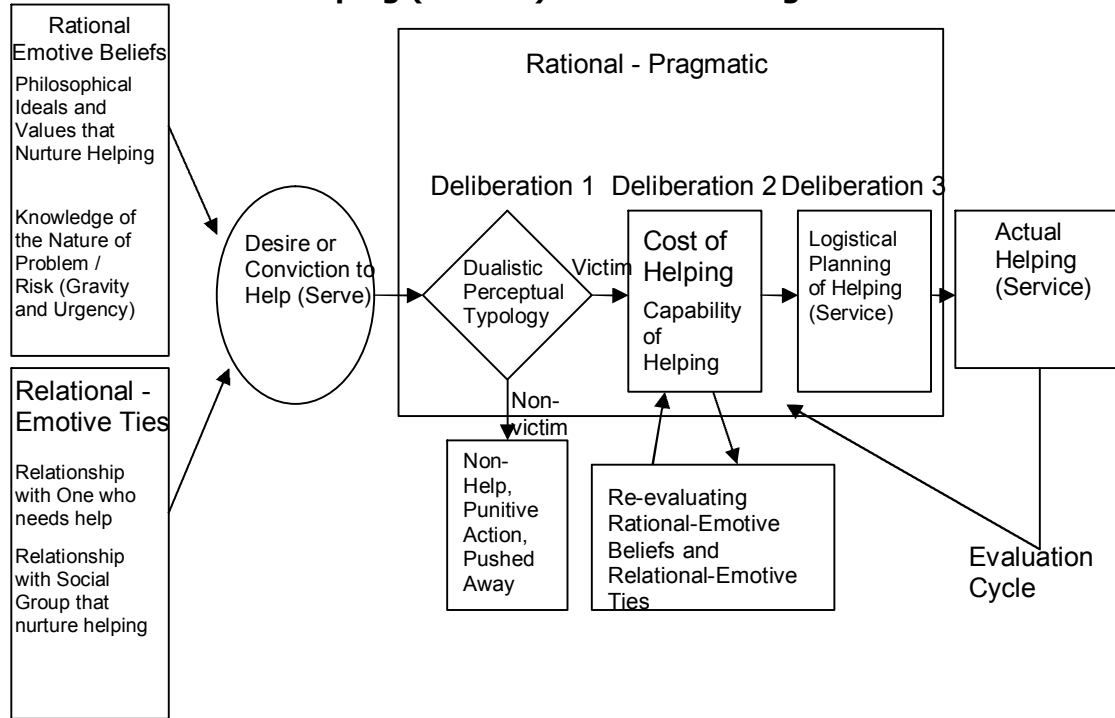
The schematic diagram describes the decision making process a member goes through before actually helping a target. It begins with the rational-emotive beliefs and relational-emotive ties. These beliefs and ties create desires or convictions to help, which undergo a set of rational-pragmatic deliberations. The first is the appropriateness to be helped. Victims are seen as appropriate and move to the next set of rational-pragmatic deliberations. Non-victims are perceived as not appropriate to be helped and are punished, pushed away and not helped. The second rational-pragmatic deliberation deals with the cost of helping and the member's capability to help. If the cost of helping is too high and the benefit too low then the member re-evaluates the desire and conviction to help. If the desire is high then a new cost-benefit analysis may be done, but if the desire is low, then the desire to help may be shelved. Last comes the logistical planning of helping and serving. Once the last rational-pragmatic deliberation is made, then the actual helping is done. The helping behavior is then evaluated from time to time by rational-pragmatic deliberations.

Discussion

In this paper I have presented a grounded theory of helping as a decision-making process. It involves convictions and deliberations explaining how people working within an organization devoted to helping others actually do the helping. In the following I will discuss the attribution helping model, and relate it to the grounded theory of helping.

The attribution helping model suggests that helping behavior is determined by cognitive emotive processes in exploring the cause and controllability of a person's need that lead to inferences to responsibility (Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, and Kubiak, 2003). This works as an attribution-effectuation motivation sequence in that the helper makes a cognitive attribution on the cause and controllability of the need. This then influences the helper's feelings, which in turn determines possible actions (Higgins and Shaw, 1999). The attribution helping model is based

on the cause of the target's need for help and the locus of control in that particular circumstance.

Higgins and Shaw (1999) tested the model in both laboratory and situational experiments. The attribution styles of undergraduate college students were categorized as supportive (the tendency to view other's misfortunes as uncontrollable by the target) or unsupportive (the tendency to view other's misfortunes as controllable by the target) by the Reason for Misfortune Questionnaire. Based on the questionnaire results the researchers used random matched-pair design to assign the students into two groups.

In the laboratory experiment each group was given two situations - a person falling in the bus, and an acquaintance borrowing money for rent. One group was given low controllability of the cause for need (health problems: visual impairment for the bus situation, and hospitalization for the rent situation). Another group was given high controllability of the cause for need (being drunk for the bus incident, and laziness for the rent situation).

Eight weeks after the laboratory experiment one researcher, blinded to the experimental hypothesis, contacted the students. The researcher was allegedly working for the "study skills office" of the university and requested to borrow some notes of the students for a fictional student who missed classes. One group was given hospitalization as reason for need, while the other group was given skiing vacation as reason for need. The students were given a phone number to call if they wanted to lend their notes. The other researcher acted as the needy student and recorded the calls of the students who volunteered help. The results showed that unsupportive students perceived the target as having less personal control in the uncontrollable need situations in comparison to those in the controllable need situations. Most students reported that they would help the target in the uncontrollable need situations more than targets in the controllable need situations. In the situational experiment the students helped more when the reason for need was

uncontrollable than controllable. In total, students with a more supportive attribution style helped more often than those with an unsupportive attribution style. However, students with an unsupportive attribution style helped more often when the need was uncontrollable than when it was controllable, while the students with a supportive attribution style helped uncontrolled and controlled need equally as often (Higgins and Shaw, 1999). Thus, supportive students helped targets whether they were responsible or not for the situation the target was in whereas unsupportive students helped targets if the target was not responsible for the situation. This led the researchers to conclude that the causal structure of the situation is influential in helping behavior (Higgins and Shaw, 1999).

Corrigan et al. (2003) tried the attribution helping model studying 518 college students reacting to hypothetical vignettes on mental illness. The students' knowledge and experience of the nature of the illness influenced their appraisal of the targets responsibility for their condition. The researchers conclude that familiarity with mental illness reduces discriminatory responses. Their results validate the study of Higgins and Shaw (1999). Their study also concludes that knowledge and experience of the nature of the situation affects helping response.

The present grounded theory of helping incorporates the conclusions of the related studies (Higgins and Shaw 1999, Corrigan et al. 2003), and expands the attribution model of helping by showing the importance of personal convictions and deliberations in the helping process. The attribution helping model is similar to the current grounded theory of helping, but the latter is more complex. In the attribution helping model the helper's beliefs influences feelings and these feelings affect behavior. In the grounded theory of helping rational-emotive beliefs and relational-emotive ties affect the desire to help. Then a series of rational-pragmatic deliberations are made before helping is done. The grounded theory of helping thus offers a comprehensive explanation to helping behavior since it

incorporates personal conviction and a deliberation of the situation.

Conclusion

The emergent grounded theory on helping and its decision-making process is an expansion of the attribution model of helping. It incorporates personal convictions as well as deliberations of the situational variables. The theory explores the influences of the helper's rational-emotive beliefs (philosophical ideals and values that nurture helping, and knowledge of the nature of the problem), relational-emotive ties (with the person who needs help, and with the helper's social groups), and the helper's rational-pragmatic deliberations of the situation (the dualistic perceptual typology of the person in need of help, the cost and capability of helping, and the logistics of helping). The emergent theory lends itself to theory verification studies, and future studies on variables relating to helping convictions and resultant helping behavior are encouraged. Lastly, the theory and its implications is a contribution to grounded theory research.

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