CHAPTER 5

ACTing for Society: The Promotion and Nurturance of Prosocial Behavior at Scale

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Abstract Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) has traditionally been employed at the individual level as a therapeutic model to change the way the individual relates to their thoughts and feelings, helping to connect to meaningful values, and promoting psychological flexibility. More recently, it also has been applied at the societal level to promote prosocial behavior, facilitating shared values within organizations, and promoting a less coercive and more prosocial and equitable society. This has been done by applying evolutionary principles which can guide the selection of individual or group values that are adaptive and promote some advantage to the individual or group (e.g., promoting prosocial connection, compassion, and collective values), providing opportunities for multilevel impacts At an operational level, this work involves applying Nobel prize winner's

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Elinor Ostrom's core design principles (CDPs) of organizational psychology, which involves operationalizing at a societal level: (1) group values; (2) equitable solutions; (3) fairness; (4) agreed-upon behaviors; (5) reward; (6) conflict resolution; (7) decentralized; and (8) polycentric governance. This chapter will explain how ACT and Ostrom's CDPs can be applied in practice, whereby they encourage the enabling and the promotion of a more nurturing and prosocial society world which can develop beyond overly individualistic and competitive extrinsic values brought about by neoliberalism, expected utility within a competitive environment, and current Western orientated happiness economics.

Keywords Acceptance and commitment therapy • Multilevel selection • Polyvagal theory • Evolution theory • Prosocial

A major barrier to promoting a nurturing, socially cohesive, and prosocial society is the dominant, hegemonic, economic ideology that 'neoliberalism' places on the development of an individual's values in Western society (i.e., we are more likely to learn neoliberal values from our culture) (Cowden & Singh, 2017; Jaffe & Quark, 2006). Neoliberal policies and values refer to the promotion of individualistic, market-orientated polices such as the deregulation of capital markets, removal of trade barriers, privatization, and the reduction of government regulation over economic activity (Larner, 2003; Thorsen & Lie, 2006; Venugopal, 2015).

Neoliberalism has become embedded in Western culture and is underpinned by a set of social philosophies and worldviews that promote individual self-interest (Thorsen & Lie, 2006). At the same time, neoliberal values deviate away from classical liberalism that emphasizes individual rights (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), equality and civic obligation (Adams et al., 2019). By contrast, neoliberalism redefines the citizen as a consumer (Payne, 2012), whose choices are exercised by buying and selling through a process that rewards selfish immediate gain, promoting competition as the defining characteristic of human relations in a zero-sum game (i.e., the gain for one individual, can mean loss for another) (Clarke, 2005).

In the documentary *HyperNormalization*, Adam Curtis (2016) refers to a society where the population are aware that governments, technological utopians, and philanthropic financiers have given up on the idea of a complex 'real world', which requires complex solutions to deal with

complex problems, and instead have accepted a simpler 'fake world' run by neoliberal ideology in the form of corporations and kept stable by politicians. He suggests that the general population know this, yet apathy leads to inaction. He explains that people feel trapped in this world, which lacks any real societal alternative. Such conclusions are indeed supported by the evidence, which shows that our hypercapitalist, neoliberal consumerist society reinforces a model of material influence as the only path to happiness and a meaningful life (Binkley, 2014; Kasser & Sheldon, 2009; Montes, 2020). The result of such hypercapitalist extrinsic values leads to 'time poverty' (not having enough time due to working long hours) (De Graaf, 2003). A consequence of this materialist and consumer-driven society is that people are working long hours, leading to a reduction in positive affect, more negative affect, and lower life satisfaction (Kasser & Brown, 2003; Kasser & Sheldon, 2009).

A neoliberal hegemonic culture promotes a perception of various social issues and phenomena which are predominately conceptualized through an individualistic lens (Dickie et al., 2006; Madsen et al., 2016). This ideology may be the root of many of our problems including commodification of mental health problems (Esposito & Perez, 2014), income inequality, disempowerment of workers, inadequate social services, ineffective healthcare systems (Zeira, 2022) and even the climate catastrophe (Weintrobe, 2021).

Linked to neoliberalism is the obsession within Western society to chase and capture individual happiness (Burnett, 2011; Gruber et al., 2011; Joshanloo, 2014; McMahon, 2006). Happiness has become the new moral compass in neoliberal societies which defines what is right and wrong and is framed as a model of selfhood which is aligned to individualism and consumerism (Cabanas, 2016). Neoliberal exploitation of the individual whose value within society is only that of a consumer, has led to excessive consumer behavior which only leads to immediate short term fleeting forms of happiness (Giroux, 2011; Lyons, 2015; Tremblay, 2015). Buying a new iPhone, a new car, keeping up with the Jones', are examples of modern obsessions, despite only leading to fleeting experience of happiness. Studies of happiness economics which employ temporal discounting tasks have shown that people tend to prefer immediate and smaller gains than larger ones over the longer term (Green et al., 2005; Van den Bos & McClure, 2013).

Yet, chasing fleeting forms of happiness has been shown to have a paradoxical effect such as increased risk of depression (Ford & Mauss, 2014;

Ford et al., 2014), lower wellbeing, decreased happiness, and compromised social outcomes (Gruber et al., 2011; Mauss et al., 2011; Schooler et al., 2003). The problem with centering one's life and goals around something as elusive as happiness is that this may distract the individual away from meaningful intrinsically value-oriented behaviors.

Further consolidating the problem, and causing confusion, happiness economics attempts to broadly measure wellbeing from both objective and subjective measures, for example, life expectancy, age, education, income, marital status, institutional quality, GDP statistics, and various other arbitrary life satisfaction indices, which can be placed into dimensions of affective, evaluative, and eudaimonic scales (Gielen & Van Ours, 2014; Nikolova & Graham, 2021; O'Connor, 2020). These measures are based on assumptions that do not always align with outcomes of wellbeing nor are a direct measure of it. For example, it assumes that neoliberal growth, e.g., GDP of a nation is equivalent to growth in a nations wellbeing. However, it has long been established that increases in gross domestic product (GDP) beyond a threshold of basic needs do not lead to further increases in wellbeing (Pretty et al., 2016).

The selfish pursuit of individual happiness, narrowly defined may lead to problems at a societal level, represented by neoliberal societies, hypercompetitiveness (e.g., GDP growth, income), and a disregard for connecting to the natural environment, personal connection to others and greater prosocial behaviors. There is a significant difference between internal intrinsic values (values which are deeply personal such as connection, friendship, etc.) and external values driven by societally accepted norms shaped by neoliberalism (such as material gain, possessions, status etc.). Hari (2020) in his book *Lost Connections* makes this point clear, and suggests it is intrinsic values which are vital for achieving wellbeing. Evidence from dozens of studies has converged on the conclusion that people who prioritize extrinsic values of money, image, and status have lower personal wellbeing and higher distress (Jackson, 2005; Kasser, 2003). These extrinsic values, according to Hari (2020) are those which are imposed on us, and are influenced by externally accepted materialistic and neoliberal values. He also suggests that internal intrinsic values are those which really matter to us irrespective of external pressures. This could be something as simple as learning to play the piano, painting some art, connecting with nature, etc. Hari suggests that it is these intrinsic values which are likely to make the individual more fulfilled, increasing their wellbeing.

A Solution Based on Intrinsic Values Identification and Prosocial Behavior

There is hope that people can rise beyond Curtis' (2016) HyperNormalization to build prosocial and cooperative values, connect to other people and foster a deeper concern for the environment, and the Earth we live on. Yuval Noah Harari (2014) suggests in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, that humans can imagine through language, a new world, and new alternatives. Humans have a remarkable capacity to think of new ideas and this can include a new society, and a new way of living. This can be done in two ways, either through a radical shift in society, or from the ground up, engaging with individual's personal values, promoting prosocial behavior, and fostering growth towards more cooperative behavior and less competitive, coercive, and divisive behavior.

One psychological therapeutic approach which may help the individual identify and engage with such intrinsic values, which Hari (2020) discusses, is called acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes et al., 2009, 2011). This model promotes psychological flexibility through the engagement of personally meaningful intrinsic values. Psychological flexibility can be defined as a process of engaging with openness to pain, acceptance, awareness of thoughts and feelings which unfold in the present moment, as well as changing or persisting in behavior which is aligned to the individuals' central goals and values (Bond et al., 2006; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). ACT has been found to promote wellbeing (Fox, 2021; Gloster et al., 2020; Katajavuori et al., 2021), and has recently been applied to evolutionary principles in order to realized collective wellbeing. This distinguishes the individual-level values, and behavioral selection to that of the group level. As such, it has been recognized that at the group level; we, as individuals, also need to fulfill complex and prosocial needs and not just individual ones, by selecting values and behaviors at this group level which promote co-operation within groups and communities, such as basic human yearnings and need for connection, love, and friendship (Atkins et al., 2019; Wilson & Sober, 1994). This is distinct from the neo-liberal worldview of selfish individual gain and competitiveness. There should be greater variability in choices for those who are psychologically flexible, whilst those who are less psychologically flexible display a more rigid set of behaviors.

Values, goals, emotions, and cognition all have a dimension of variability and have been accounted for within the extended evolutionary meta

model (EEMM) (Hayes, Hofmann, & Ciarrochi, 2020). In this model, a process of change is a contextually situated, modifiable behavior or sequence of behaviors that orients the individual towards an adaptive outcome. Evolutionary principles in this regard revolve around selection, i.e., identifying the success of those values in maintaining the values of the individual or the group (e.g., compassion, prosocial efforts over profit, or community connection over individual selfish pursuit—at the sociocultural level), much in the same way as biological evolution selects biological features that lead to a survival advantage of the organism. This, therefore, frames selection of values whether individual or group as a fitness function for the promotion of wellbeing, such as the section of prosociality, social cohesion, compassion, and nature connectedness, all of which are intrinsic, non-coercive, and extend to the group and community level.

Biologically, evolution has facilitated the separation of humans from other mammals, enabling key aspects relating to socialization such as complex language to be developed. Socialization is also supported by the autonomic nervous system function functioning, as described in polyvagal theory (PVT) (Porges, 1995, 2018), such that the most evolutionary recent ventral myelinated aspect of the vagus nerve supports affiliative behaviour (Porges, 2007). The vagus nerve innervates a number of organs which have a role to play in communication and emotion (Porges, 1995, 2022).

When an individual feels unsafe and threatened by their environment, such as when experiencing hyper-competitiveness, lack of compassion and connection, associated with, for example, the extrinsic values a neoliberal culture brings about, then the vagal break is withdrawn, providing permission for the sympathetic nervous system to dominate a defensive reaction (Porges, 2009, 2022), giving rise to the fight-or-flight system and increased activity of the hypothalamic pituitary axis (HPA) (allowing increased cortisol and adrenaline). This leads to more rigid and less adaptive behavior, which is protectionist, and discourages social connection which then inhibits group-level prosocial values. However, when engaging in psychological flexibility, behavior is more adaptive (Gloster et al., 2017), promotes social connection and prosocial behavior (Gloster et al., 2020), inhibits the HPA-related stress and trauma (Richardson & Jost, 2019), thus highlighting the benefits of promoting adaptive vagal functioning (i.e., by activating the calming function of the vagal break), and improving positive health and wellbeing (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010)

supported by prosociality. This psychological flexibility, and supported by adaptive vagal functioning, may facilitate greater selection of prosocial values at a group level.

More broadly, ACT combined with evolutionary adaptation theory has recently developed within a framework called prosocial, which utilizes the ACT matrix within an evolutionary approach (Atkins et al., 2019; Wilson & Sober, 1994), which is readily applicable to theories of vagal functioning. Evolutionary principles of selection are traditionally focused on the individual (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000), but in the case of prosocial, ACT extends with evolutionary principles to allow it to practically work within a societal context, as it can focus on both individual- and group-level selection, thus promoting multilevel selection (Wilson & Sober, 1994). In this framework, selection is made on behavioral variation, including individual and group-based values, supporting prosocial behavior i.e., through concretely selecting values at the level needed to achieve greater prosociality.

Within this 'prosocial' framework, multilevel selection is guided by the application of Elinor Ostrom's core design principles (CPDs), for which she won a Nobel prize in economics. Ostrom and colleagues work (Ostrom, 1990, 2010, 2019; Ostrom & Cox, 2010) focused on how humans interact with ecosystems in order to maintain long-term sustainability. She explored how societies have developed diverse institutional arrangements for managing natural resources and avoiding economic collapse. As part of this work, she developed an evidence base for a more general theory of individual choice that recognized a central role of trust and cooperation which she described as common-pool resources (called the CDPs) for optimal self-organization.

Specifically, the CPDs applied to prosocial (Atkins et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020), relate to the selection of (1) group values, to help the group to identify their purpose; (2) equitable solutions within the group, to ensure equitable contribution and benefits between members, and ensuring there are variable and multiple perspectives from the group; (3) fairness, in ensuring decision-making is fair and inclusive; (4) agreed-upon behaviors which are monitored by group members; (5) reward, by ensuring helpful behaviors are rewarded, and unhelpful behaviors are put into extinction; (6) conflict resolution, where conflicts are resolved quickly and fairly; (7) decentralized governance, by allowing the authority of members and sub-groups to self-govern; and (8) polycentric governance, whereby the group utilize principles 1–7 to relate and collaborate with other groups. Application of the 'prosocial' framework to the CPDs have shown

they can improve further cooperation, minimize coercion, and increase equity across members of different groups (Atkins et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). Cooperation in small groups has been improved due to engaging with the 'prosocial' framework (Hayes et al., 2021), as well as accelerating leadership skills whilst reducing burnout, stress, and injuries (Moran et al., 2021). Though these developments are quite recent, they clearly have promising applications for promoting prosocial behavior at both the individual and societal level.

Conclusion

Within popular culture, an apparent desire to desperately escape the confinements of neoliberalism can easily be found. One example is through the blockbuster movie *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999), which has been cited as a postmodern allegory for the contemporary commercialized, media-driven, neoliberal, and postmodern society (Alen, 2012), which adapts the philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* by sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1994) about the relation between reality, symbols, and society, and an almost unconscious motivation to escape the neoliberal confinements of society. However, popular culture does not provide realistic solutions to reform society; instead, it offers a dream. We cannot consume a pill to escape the confinements of big tech and mass industrialization brought about by neoliberalism like in the movie *The Matrix*.

However, ACT applied through evolutionary principles and the prosocial framework of Ostrom's principles may have benefits for helping the individual connect to intrinsic values and, at the group level, supporting social cohesion and connectedness, which may help overcome entrenched external neoliberal societal values relating to immediate self-interest. Prosocial (Atkins et al., 2019) can encourage compassion for each other and social connection, supporting the identification of shared goals, values and community. This framework challenges the societal disconnection associated with individualism at an individual level and neoliberalism at the societal level. The focus for prosocial is on promoting more productive and cooperative behaviour, and less coercive manipulation, facilitated through the application of Elinor Ostrom's core design principles to the organization of groups (Atkins et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). The benefits may even extend to greater ecological sustainability such as environmental care and action to avoid climate change.

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