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# Research proposal

Prepared for: Laidlaw Scholarship Application

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Inquiry into the utilisation of optimistic reflection on our better nature as a means of positive influence.

## **Research question**

Can prosocial behaviour, attitudes and aspirations be fostered by sustained exposure to the portrayal of human nature as innately altruistic?

## Introduction and summary

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Our view of human nature is distorted to align with the information we are persistently fed which arguably places unjustified emphasis on human immorality. Though acknowledgement of problems may be a necessary component in solving them, the sheer volume we are exposed to is overwhelming, leading to demotivation and defeatism.<sup>1</sup> I believe if we balanced the bad news with the good (or even tipped it in its favour), this would encourage us to infer and embrace a positive notion of human nature, thus encouraging a sense of self-efficacy.

I aim to test the hypothesis that presenting human nature in a positive light would change perspectives on human nature and in turn motivate prosocial behaviour, aspirations and values. I would do this by monitoring changes in a group of schoolchildren who are presented with such depictions.

## Interdisciplinary nature

This project draws from psychology, education and philosophy and would allow me to explore areas outside the scope of my degree. This project is concerned with ethics and values as it centres on exploring ways to better society by greater reflection on morality and the prioritisation of others over self. Increasing empathy could also have implications for practices of praise and blame as we would be inclined to reflect on people's circumstances. This ties into areas of metaphysics concerning the problem of free will where current ideas of personal responsibility are scrutinised.

## Result implications

Results could be utilised to rethink our practices of reporting on and receiving news and could be implemented in schools to help promote prosocial attitudes and encourage new generations to recognise the value of community and care. In the long term, if this information was implemented as a compulsory element of education, there is potential to reconstruct current mainstream values resulting in a positive impact on the goals and aims of individuals and society. For example, we could re-evaluate the current lack of value we place on caring roles.<sup>2</sup>

Findings could demonstrate that the presentation of altruism as an innate part of our nature has the potential to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy as it has been proven that expectation of behaviours in others leads us to behave as to bring about these behaviours in them.<sup>3</sup>

## Review of literature

[Belief in altruistic human nature and prosocial behaviour: a serial mediation analysis - Zhuojun Yao & Robert Enright \(2020\)](#)<sup>4</sup>

An investigation of the potential influencing mechanism of belief in altruistic human nature on prosocial behaviour showed that the former indirectly influences the latter through causally linked multiple mediators of prosocial attitudes and prosocial self-efficacy.

It suggested that mass media and education elaboration could be used to promote these beliefs to reduce prejudices and to spread a sense of connectedness. They asserted that more longitudinal and experimental studies are needed and my research project would take this mandate up directly, providing the first experimental study to look at this influencing mechanism and its real-life effect.

## Research design and methodology

I aim to conduct an experiment utilising these suggestions to investigate the impact of persistently promoting the idea that human nature is naturally altruistic. The investigation would entail observing and monitoring changes in attitudes, behaviour and aspirations.

As younger children are less likely to have been exposed to or conditioned to believe negative depictions of human nature, an age range of around 8-10 years would probably be most suitable. This experiment would take place over 4 weeks, allowing for a week on either side to make necessary preparation and to condense and organise results. A corresponding control group would also be monitored to help ensure the internal validity of the research.

Presentation of these ideas would be accomplished through various media, such as:

- film
- literature
- positive news stories
- homework projects

## Methods of collecting and monitoring results

- A questionnaire would be given pre and post-experiment to explore the child's general perception of human nature and their attitudes and behaviours. Alternating between Likert Scale questions and multiple-choice would ensure results were manageable and comparable. One question would ask for an explanatory answer about aspirations and the reasons for such aspirations.
- A pre-and post-experiment questionnaire for teachers and parents focused on children's behaviour to confirm whether there had been noticeable changes.
- A random selection of interviews would be conducted with children from the intervention class to ask for their thoughts on the previous weeks (eager or positive responses could suggest mental health benefits).

## Acknowledgements and ethical considerations

To conduct this research, I would need:

- permission from a school and from parents of children involved
- ethical approval (I have looked through the guidelines to establish that my project would be authorised)
- to talk to parents to ensure that children were discouraged from watching anything which conflicted with the information being presented in school
- to ensure diversity in all material to guarantee representation (prosocial self-efficacy would depend greatly on this)

Though I do not have a background in psychology or experimental design, with the support and advice of my supervisor I feel confident in my ability to conduct this research to a high standard and gather meaningful results.

## Recognition of limitations

Due to a limited timeframe, the purpose would be for this initial study to facilitate and inspire further long-term research in the same area allowing for more in-depth and qualitative findings which could in turn be generalised, potentially leading to practical applications.

Acknowledging the conclusions of the studies mentioned, I believe the results of this research could indicate that presenting human nature as essentially good leads to an adoption of this mindset which in turn gives rise to prosocial behaviour in accordance with what people would come to believe to be their nature.

## References:

- Paul Slovic and Daniel Västfjäll, 2015, 'The More Who Die, the Less We Care: Psychic Numbing and Genocide' in 'Imagining Human Rights' (pp.55-68) <sup>1</sup>
- Molly Kinder, 2020, 'Essential but undervalued: Millions of health care workers aren't getting the pay or respect they deserve in the COVID-19 pandemic' - <https://www.brookings.edu/research/essential-but-undervalued-millions-of-health-care-workers-arent-getting-the-pay-or-respect-they-deserve-in-the-covid-19-pandemic/> <sup>2</sup>
- 'Not all gaps are created equal: the true value of care work' - <https://www.oxfam.org/en/not-all-gaps-are-created-equal-true-value-care-work> <sup>2</sup>
- Eleanor K Johnson, 2021, 'Why care workers are feeling less valued and leaving the sector after the pandemic' - <https://theconversation.com/why-care-workers-are-feeling-less-valued-and-leaving-the-sector-after-the-pandemic-169961> <sup>2</sup>

References above outline the current lack of value placed on care work in society today.

- Rosenthal, R., Jacobson, L. Pygmalion in the classroom. *Urban Rev* 3, 16–20 (1968). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02322211> <sup>3</sup>
- Zhuojun Yao & Robert Enright, 2020, 'Belief in altruistic human nature and prosocial behavior: a serial mediation analysis', *Ethics & Behavior*, 30:2, 97-111, DOI: 10.1080/10508422.2019.1591963 - <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10508422.2019.1591963>