Solidarity and Prosocial Behavior

An Integration of Sociological and Psychological Perspectives
CRITICAL ISSUES IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Preface

This book is the product of an intensive cooperation between psychologists and sociologists who study solidarity and prosocial behavior, and its fruits are briefly summarized in Chapter 1. The topics of solidarity and prosocial behavior are at the core of both disciplines and thus one might expect that an intensive cooperation like the one that produced this book is not uncommon. Surprisingly however, it is extremely rare that sociologists and psychologists get together to combine their knowledge in these fields. Instead, researchers from both disciplines tend to ignore each other’s work quite generally, and the work on prosocial and antisocial behavior is no exception.

The conviction that sociology and psychology can benefit from each other’s work led us—a group of sociologists and psychologists at the University of Groningen (The Netherlands)—in 1999 to launch a joint research project on solidarity and prosociality. The aim was to find a common ground on which insights from each discipline could contribute to a broader understanding of solidarity and prosocial behavior. This interdisciplinary research project was called Prosocial Dispositions and Solidary Behavior and it was financed by the University of Groningen as a so-called breedtestrategie program (i.e., a program for broadening disciplinary approaches).

The research group that incorporated most of the contributors to this book started with great enthusiasm, but we soon learned that the cooperation between the disciplines was more difficult than initially expected. One major problem was language. We realized only gradually that sometimes one thing had different names in the other discipline (e.g., prosocial behavior vs. solidarity), but the same term may also have different meanings (e.g., “framing”). At times, linguistic conventions of one discipline appeared awkward to scholars of the other. For example, one of the editors of this volume refused to accept the terms Ego and Alter to be used throughout the book, although these terms are widely accepted in sociology.

One consequence of the terminological differences between sociology and psychology was our attempt to avoid any kind of jargon in this
book unless it was necessary to explain the respective terms. We hope that the reader will profit from the terminological clarity and simplicity that we aimed to reach throughout the different chapters.

After we learned to speak (or at least to understand) each other's language, the experiences of our research team can be seen as a good illustration of what Van der Vegt and Flache (Chapter 8 of this volume) found: diversity in knowledge and background can foster productivity and solidarity in work teams if its members realize the profits that may issue from such diversity.

Although this book (and the underlying project) was initiated by researchers affiliated at the University of Groningen, we succeeded in getting input, ideas, and collaboration from prominent researchers in the field outside our university. In March 2001 and in October 2002 we invited a number of internationally highly recognized scholars from both psychology and sociology to spend some time with us at the Dutch island of Schiermonnikoog. At these symposia we profited from their perspectives and comments on our common project and felt much encouraged to pursue the common path. We are very thankful for their enthusiasm and their willingness to travel sometimes thousands of miles to participate in a 3-day meeting.

Attendants of the first meeting were Hans-Werner Bierhoff (University of Bochum, Germany), Chris Barveldt (University of Utrecht), David Dunning (Cornell University), Douglas Heckathorn (Cornell University), Marco Perugini (University of Essex), and Rolf Ziegler (University of Munich, Germany).

Attendants of our second symposium were Richard Fabes (Arizona State University), Carol Martin (Arizona State University), Michael Macy (Cornell University), Randy Hodson (Ohio State University), and Chris Snijders (University of Eindhoven, The Netherlands).

Our guests not only gave us precious ideas and comments, but through discussions many of them actually got involved in the projects underlying this book and became co-authors of a chapter in our volume.

The close cooperation between sociologists and psychologists within this book is also highlighted by the fact that many chapters were written jointly by scholars from both disciplines. We hope that the reader may find it difficult to identify which parts of the various chapters were written by a sociologist and which by a psychologist. This would be a sign that we were successful in integrating the perspectives on solidarity and prosocial behavior.

This book summarizes the outcomes of our interdisciplinary cooperation during the past years, but it does not mark its end. To the contrary, in the meantime a second research project linking sociologists and psychologists has started at the University of Groningen. Thus, our common exploration of the riches and difficulties of combining sociology and psychology has only just begun. The different perspectives
and insights summarized in this book will hopefully also help the reader to come to a better understanding of prosocial behavior and solidarity and encourage cross-disciplinary research.

Finally, we would like to thank the University of Groningen for a generous grant for the entire project.