

## **Exploring Prosociality in Osage Culture**

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### **Introduction**

I am going to start this off with a personal story. I do this in order to contextualize this research and my place in it. I am Osage, but I was raised apart from my tribe both physically and culturally. Physically apart in that I grew up multiple states away from where the Osage now reside in Oklahoma. Culturally apart in that I was raised in the dominant U.S. culture and learned little about Osage values. I grew up watching my parents help others when they could, and helping others became a part of my identity without much thought as to why. Reflecting on my own motives for helping and my desire to better understand my cultural heritage fostered my interest in researching Osage helping motives.

In doing initial research for this project I learned that scholarly research on Indigenous people has almost entirely focused on the negative aspects of Indigenous life. The Osage Nation's website contains a list of research done in their community and although it is not exhaustive, research topics favor special ceremonies, rites, and art whilst leaving out helping. Many disciplines, such as Economics and American Indian Studies have researched helping, but Psychology has dominated the topic. Some of the most commonly used terms in the field are 'helping,' 'empathy,' and 'prosocial behavior' and searching for them in the PyscINFO database yields a combined total of 54,536 results of peer reviewed research. However, simply adding 'Indigenous' to each of those search terms returned 177 peer reviewed results. Surprisingly (given the prevalence in colloquial usage) searching 'Native American' instead of 'Indigenous'

yields only 99 peer reviewed results. Note that these totals excluded non-peer reviewed results and included potentially less relevant peer reviewed research. This will certainly change the total number of results but is not likely to change the pattern of them. To gain the most complete understanding of how and why people help others, more work needs to be done to include non-dominant perspectives. To that end, my primary goal for this research was to learn about the Osage perspective on helping, perhaps painting a more positive picture of Indigenous people

In summation: the purpose of this research was to help fill the gap in knowledge on helping by examining how Osage people define helping and what motivates Osage helping behaviors. I speak to how this was done in the Research Methods section but an understanding of the definition of helping is necessary to begin. Following that, motives for helping will be discussed. Since how and why people help others varies based on culture, a review of ethnic group differences will be presented followed by a look at non-Osage, Indigenous perspectives on helping. Because “help” is a vague term encompassing myriad behaviors we should look more closely at what help can mean.

### **Defining Help**

In scholarly research helping is often referred to as prosocial behavior. As a more formal term, prosocial behavior is more descriptive of help’s function. Prosocial behavior functions as a method to make it easier for one to do something. It need not come from a human. For example, properly trained dogs can make it easier for the visually impaired to move safely. A person can help themselves or others, either intentionally or accidentally. In addition, help can be dependency-oriented or autonomy-oriented. Although they did not coin these terms, Arie Nadler and Samer Halabi (2006) gave a good definition of them in writing that dependency-oriented

help provides a full solution to the problem whereas autonomy-oriented help provides a partial solution.

Think of one mother (Susan) baking cookies *for* her daughter and another mother (Donell) baking cookies *with* her daughter. Considering the definitions above we see that Susan is providing dependency-oriented help whereas Donell is providing autonomy-oriented help. This example introduces the concept that some motives can influence *how* we help. I elaborate on this in the Intergroup Helping section, but prudence dictates that we first examine motives for *why* we help.

### **Interpersonal Motives**

As mentioned previously, helping has been researched by many, covering disciplines from Business to Psychology. With many theories on the motives that drive helping behaviors, it can be hard to discern which are ultimately important; however, two concepts based on theories of moral development stand out. Sociologist Mark Ottoni-Wilhelm and Economist René Bekkers (2010) identify these concepts as dispositional empathic concern (DEC) and a principle of care (PoC). Under DEC people help because they tend to feel some reactive attitude, such as sympathy or concern, as a response to others' needs. This is contrasted with the PoC in which people help because they possess an internalized value to help those in need.

One should note that neither concept is inherently better than the other; they interact with each other but typically have different aims. Help brought on by DEC is associated with spontaneous, short-term actions, and is typically aimed at people concretely known to the helper. For example, allowing a stranger with fewer groceries than you go ahead of you in the checkout line (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010). On the other hand, help brought on by a PoC is associated with

planned, long-term actions, and is typically aimed at people the helper abstractly knows. For example, donating money to a charity that helps people in need (Bekkers & Wilhelm, 2016).

Participants in these works were nationally representative samples of American (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010) and American and Dutch peoples (Bekkers & Wilhelm, 2016). Typically, nationally representative samples group all Indigenous nations together, making it impossible to differentiate between individual nations. This is significant insofar as the current research focuses on the Osage Nation so that specific differences between Indigenous nations may be understood. Moreover, Indigenous nations typically emphasize sustainability (whereas Western worldviews typically emphasize growth), and successfully maintaining a sustainable society requires more planned, long-term behaviors. I elaborate more on Indigenous worldviews in the Indigenous Perspectives section, but the relevance here suggests that because the Osage are Indigenous, they are likely to hold similar views on sustainability. Thus, Osage helping will likely be motivated by a PoC more than DEC. However, because there may be some overlap in these concepts (i.e. a person may help because they believe they should, and they feel sympathy for someone who needs help) Osage helping will likely contain both motives. To distinguish between DEC and a PoC motives in Osage helping behaviors, I follow Bekkers and Wilhelm in defining DEC as “the tendency to experience concerned, sympathetic, or compassionate reactive outcomes in response to the needs of others” (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010) and a PoC as “the moral position that one should help those in need” (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010). I believe DEC and PoC are motives for why people help but other factors may influence how and when people help.

### **Intergroup Motives**

If one reflects on times when they have decided to help (or not) they may find motivating factors are often more complex than the simple DEC/PoC dynamic. Constructs in Social Identity Theory (SIT), like status relations between groups, individual levels of identification with a group, and the type of help, can complicate care-helping and empathy-helping relationships. In their 2006 study, Psychologists Nadler and Halabi conducted four experiments to assist in explaining how each construct adds to the complex relationship between willingness to help and actual helping behavior.

The first experiment focused on perceptions of the stability of status relations. The results showed that, in experimentally created conditions, when status was perceived as stable, high-status outgroup help had no influence on the recipient. However, when status was perceived as unstable, receiving help from high-status outgroups made the recipients feel worse. The second and third experiments focused on the relationship between helping and group identification in real groups of Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. Group identification refers to the extent that one identifies as a member of a given group. The results from the second experiment replicated the findings of the first experiment in real groups of people. The results from the third experiment suggested that high identifiers in a low-status group (Israeli Arabs in this case) felt worse after receiving help from high-status outgroup members (i.e. Israeli Jews). Experiment four focused on low-status group members' willingness to seek autonomy- and dependency-oriented help from high-status outgroup members and continued to check status stability and group identification. Results showed that no high identifying participant sought dependency-oriented help from high-status outgroup members in unstable status conditions.

Taken together, these data clearly illustrate the complexity of motives behind prosocial behavior. As power dynamics, group identification, and type of help are likely to affect the

strength of one's empathy, change who needs help, and how the help occurs, separate from the development of empathy and a desire to help, it is my view that DEC and PoC are more foundational than the constructs of SIT. While power dynamics, group identification, and type of help are relevant motives and worth noting, a limitation of the current research will be that it will focus on DEC and a PoC. Neither interpersonal motives nor intergroup motives adequately addresses ethnic group differences but there is reason to believe that ethnicity matters when it comes to helping.

### **Ethnic Group Differences**

A complete understanding of the motives behind helping others necessitates examining potential ethnic group differences. Business ethics research done by Singh and Winkel (2012) focused on antecedents of helping behavior in the workplace and how to predict interpersonal helping behaviors (IHBs) focusing on ethnic group differences. They rightly claimed, "it is important for researchers and practitioners to understand the impact of racial differences on workplace phenomena" (Singh & Winkel, 2012, p. 468). Although they gave participants six categories (Caucasian, African American, Native American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Asian American, and other) they stated that, "for the purpose of analyses, the racial affiliations were further categorized into two groups: majority versus minority" (Singh & Winkel, 2012, p. 472). Regardless of whether this was necessary to obtain appropriate statistical power, by collapsing minorities together the researchers appeared less sensitive to ethnic group differences than they claimed. Moreover, by dichotomizing their analyses they continued a tradition that otherizes non-White peoples. To me, their claim that "the results reiterate the fact that when dealing with diversity, 'one size does not fit all' (Mckay et al. 2007)" (Singh & Winkel, 2012, p. 475) becomes a poignant reminder of a limitation in their research design in addition to the advice for

researchers and practitioners they intended it to be. I take this limitation to inform how the current research is presented. For example, couching the relationship between interpersonal and intergroup motives as interconnected instead of adversarial.

As instructive as this limitation is, their results are also informative. The results suggested that mutual respect and psychological safety (a person's ability to be themselves without fear of negative consequences) are determinants of IHBs and that this relationship is stronger for ethnic minorities (Singh & Winkel, 2012). These data indicate that by respecting the Osage worldview, working and learning with the community, and encouraging openness and honesty without judgement Osage people may be more likely to give honest responses. I believe this will work towards counteracting the social desirability bias that is inherent in the self-report design of the current research. Singh and Winkel (2012) grouped all ethnic minorities in one group but as I mentioned previously, one goal of this research is to distinguish Indigenous nations. Thus, it is now appropriate to review non-Osage Indigenous perspectives.

### **Indigenous Perspectives**

Oren Lyons of the Onondaga nation said they were told that if all human beings got along with each other and supported the laws of the natural world "life is endless" (as cited in Nelson, 2008, p. 24). Cree activist Priscilla Settee indicated that Northern Athabaskan worldviews focus on, "good family relations...sharing, caring, [and] village cooperation" (as cited in Nelson, 2008, p. 46). Further, Jeannette Armstrong stated, "we can't call ourselves Okanagan if we can't provide for the weak and the sick and the hungry and the old and the people who do not have skills" (as cited in Nelson, 2008, p. 70). John Mohawk, a member of the Turtle Clan of Seneca Nation of New York, took a harder stance, "The Peacemaker said that the problem that humanity faces – and all humanity faces this problem – is that the absence of peace will lead to the end of

human life on this planet” (as cited in Nelson, 2008, p. 57). Anthropologist Megan Biesele has said that a lesson the Western world can take from the Ju/'hoan San people is that we all live together, and we have to depend on each other (as cited in Nelson, 2008, p.75).

I present these views together to illustrate that many Indigenous societies emphasize sustainability which demands we help each other. In helping the weak, sick, hungry, old, and unskilled, Armstrong seems to imply an internalized value to help those in need (i.e. a principle of care) is essential to being Okanagan. Some might argue that helping is not necessary for the peace John Mohawk mentions, and we could simply set up borders and leave each other alone, but for that reason I included the lesson from the Ju/'hoan San people. Because we live together on this planet, we will inevitably need help from others and so we should help others in return. The Indigenous views in this section come from American (Onandaga and Seneca), Canadian (Okanagan), and African (Ju/'hoan San) nations and are relatively similar but not entirely the same. For this reason, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Osage worldview and Osage helping motives will be similar to other Indigenous peoples.

### **Research Methods**

For the current research, data was gathered in-person via paper survey and focus groups. In addition to providing demographic data, the survey contained an open-ended question asking how the participant defined helping. The survey also included a 10-item list of behaviors that have been associated with helping in previous research (Bekkers & Wilhelm, 2010; 2016). Participants were instructed to mark all the behaviors they believed were helping behaviors. This list was included to provide additional data about Osage definitions of helping.

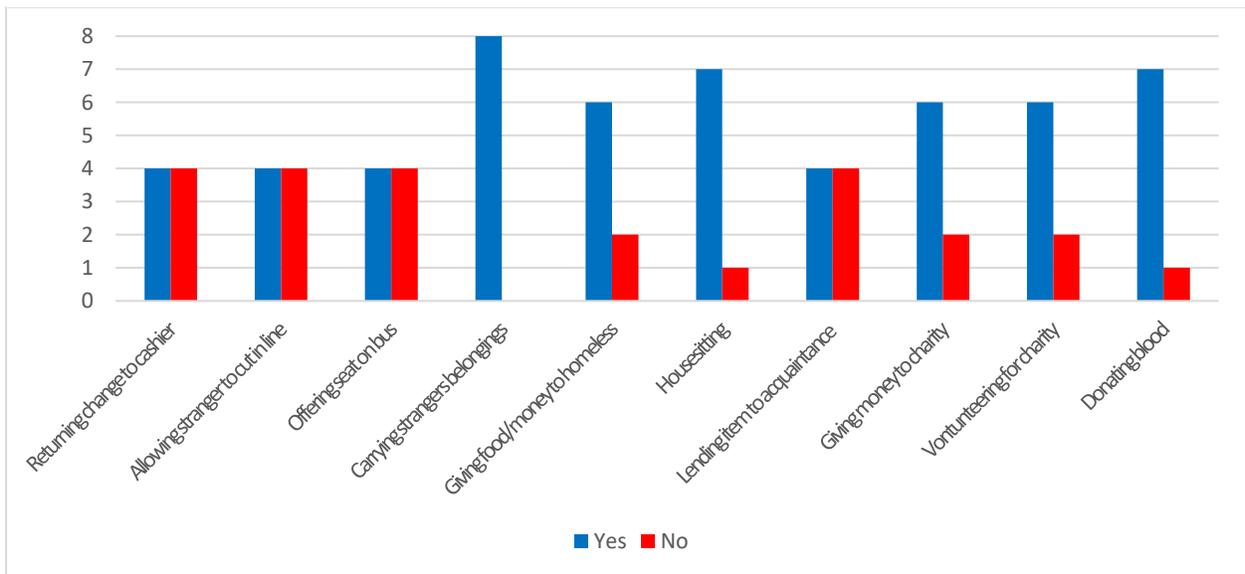
In his 2008 book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, Dr. Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) outlined the importance of stories in Indigenous cultures and

provided a model for ethical Indigenous research. Thus, the current research involved audio recording contemporary and traditional Osage stories during focus group discussions to address participants motives for helping. Contemporary stories were the stories about the lived experiences of participants, whereas traditional stories were stories passed down from previous generations. Following Wilson's guidelines, participant recruitment followed Osage cultural values. This meant that I started by asking my family if they wanted to participant (they declined) then moved to people they introduced me to. Using this snowball style convenience sample, I recruited 8 participants aged 19-80 ( $M = 45.5$ ) for the survey and 6 of those volunteered to participant in the focus group discussions. The focus group participants were split into two groups based on their availability and, due to lack of time there was only one session per group.

## **Results**

Based on the open-ended question, participants most commonly defined helping as assistance given during a time of need. Participants also indicated that this help could be with something big or small, and could take a variety of forms, including physical (e.g., helping a friend move) and emotional (e.g., offering encouragement). Figure 1 shows the frequency of behaviors marked on the 10-item checklist. Although there was some variation, each behavior was considered helping. Interestingly, only carrying a stranger's belongings (e.g., helping take groceries to their car) was considered helping by every participant.

Figure 1. Frequency of behaviors considering helping.



Participants had some difficulty in sharing both contemporary and traditional stories related to helping which I will expand on when discussing the limitations of the current research. Because there were only a few stories shared, contemporary and traditional stories were grouped together and analyzed for common themes. Through this analysis one minor and two major themes were identified.

*Major Theme: Upbringing*

By far the most common theme motivating participant helping was their upbringing. Every participant talked about being raised to help others, and some indicated that they were not supposed to think too much about it. Amidst sharing when she has helped others, Alaina (group 1) said, *“that’s how my family taught us. Just help your family whenever they need help.”* Christopher (group 1), one of the younger participants, stated, *“But for me...growing up it was just like, if you can help somebody, do it, ya know? Don’t sit and wait. Don’t think about it. If you’re right there and you can lend out your hand, do it.”* An older participant, Vann (group 2) added to this saying, *“we’re all...always taught to, I think, to help other people. That’s kinda the way I was brought up. I just try to be that kind of person.”* John (group 1), mentioned that *“when you grow up in an Indian house you help each other”* illustrating that helping is an integral part of Osage life.

#### *Major Theme: Survival*

The second major theme revealed in group discussion related to survival. Speaking primarily about previous generations of Osage, Janis (group 2) said, *“I think, historically, that Osages have always been helping people because...they had to, to help their families survive but...it didn’t stop there. It went on to their village, the people they lived with, the people they depended on because they were depending on each other for everything, for food, for clothing, for survival.”* Janis tied these past needs with current motives stating, *“I think we all know how important that is to help each other.”* John added to this theme saying, *“That’s how you’re able to survive as a free people for so long, is you have to depend on each other and help out.”*

#### *Minor Theme: Humility*

I felt it important to include humility as a minor theme for two reasons. First, because it was a novel motive for helping that I had not expected. I classify it as minor in comparison to the

other themes because although multiple participants discussed the significance of humility as an Osage cultural value only one explicitly mentioned it as a reason for helping others. Alaina stated that because of the value on humility Osage people are taught to put others first and “that’s why we help people.” Second, as was mentioned earlier, humility has a significant role in Osage society. Thus, while it was not explored in this study further research could provide a better understanding of the relationship between humility and helping behaviors.

### **Discussion**

As stated earlier, the primary goal for this research was to help fill the gap in prosocial research by exploring Osage helping behaviors and motives. The research that has been done with other populations shows that ‘help’ is a broad term, encompassing many definitions, behaviors, and motives. To my knowledge, the current research is the first of its kind to apply this knowledge to the Osage people. Through the survey, participants revealed that how they define helping and what behaviors they consider helping is as varied as other populations. Furthermore, that depending on each other for survival was a major theme of the focus group discussions suggests that Osage motives for helping are similar to other Indigenous peoples. However, it is important to note that no comparative analysis was performed so proper comparative claims are limited.

The current research was limited in a multitude of other ways. First, the Osage Nation website indicates that the Osage population is close to 20,000 members so the views of the 8 participants in the current research may not represent the true diversity of prosociality in Osage society. Relatedly, the sampling method, while appropriate for the population, still comes with certain limitations. As a type of convenience sample, being introduced to potential participants through my family limits the generalizability of the conclusions made. Family members and their

closest friends often hold similar views, so it is possible that definitions and motives discussed above do not generalize to other Osage people.

Second, participants spontaneously reported that they were taught to simply help when they can and not think much about it. This presents a number of limitations. When introducing this research to and discussing it with the participants many professed difficulties defining help. If given more time to think about the topic it is possible that the same participants would report different or more refined definitions for 'help.' It is also possible that this difficulty came from how the topic was discussed. Although I utilized an Indigenous research methodology, the current study and my perspective is largely rooted in a Eurocentric worldview. Many Indigenous perspectives are centered around harmony and balance (Nelson, 2008) so perhaps the more traditionally raised participants in this study would have been more receptive and comfortable talking about prosocial behavior in these terms.

Based on the history of dominant American society's disinterest in Native perspectives (Wilson, 1988) it is most appropriate to use an Indigenous research methodology (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) for research with Indigenous populations. A foundational element of this methodology is learning with the participants not from them, often achieved by involving participants in more of the research, effectively making them co-researchers. Because I was a student in Wisconsin, with few connections to Osage people when creating the current research, I was primarily designing it by myself with some direction from the Traditional Cultural Advisors Committee (TCA), a group of Osage elders from the three districts who advise on research and other matters conducted in The Osage Nation. Future works would do well involve the TCA and others in the community in more of the process. Working with them to develop the proper questions to ask and how to best phrase them would better situate this research in an Osage

context, making it easier for participants to discuss the topic. It would also give them more familiarity with the concepts which was a significant limitation for the current research.

Involving the TCA and participants from the current research in more of the design process aligns with another major component of Indigenous research.

Relationality is a key aspect of Indigenous research because connections between people, animals, and nature are key to Indigenous worldviews (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). By involving Osage people in more of the research I hope to strengthen the relationships I have already developed and start new relationships within the community. This has two major benefits. First, by building on existing relationships we learn to better trust each other. Through personal experience I know that individual relationships are not the only way relationality is understood by Osage people. During my time in Oklahoma I met many people, and one of the first questions I was asked was about my family. Knowing familial relations is important because it provides a basis for an understanding and trusting relationship. With this trust comes a better understanding of how this research and the information learned by it will be used. Thus, participants could feel safe in knowing that what they share is not to be viewed as boastful but educational. This works to correct the limitation that humility may have had on the current research. Second, because I already have established some relationships with the Osage community, building on them increases the potential pool of participants. As more people participate in this research it becomes more representative of the whole of Osage culture.

Understanding Osage history is important because it provides a basis for understanding the significance of prosocial behavior in Osage culture but focusing solely on history limits the ability to know how this value has changed over time and what motives undergird prosocial behavior in contemporary Osage society. Furthermore, Indigenous people on the land now

known as America fight a narrative that situates them in the past, creating a sense in the dominant society that they are no longer living. Because Indigenous peoples still very much exist today it is important to include in research a narrative of contemporary Indigenous peoples. Thus, to best understand the motives underlying Osage prosocial behavior, a deep understanding of past and contemporary Osage society is necessary.

Third, the value of humility in Osage culture limited the stories shared during focus group discussions. As Chris stated, “...*any instances where I’ve really helped anybody...I’ve never really talked about it. Cause I always felt like I didn’t want to boast about it.*” Janis expanded on the interaction between helping and humility. She described how having a reputation for helping others can increase one’s social status but personally boasting about how you help others is frowned upon. Analyzing these stories was the intended method for understanding Osage helping motives but the few stories shared limited the analysis that could be done. Future research would do well to consider the role of humility to inform the methodology used and phrasing of questions. Finally, it should be noted that the current research was an exploratory study and as such opens up many avenues for future research.

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