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Kolina J. Delgado

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Social Psychology in Action: A critical analysis of *Alive*

Kolina J. Delgado, B.A.

Wright State University

School of Professional Psychology

Social Psychology

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### Social Psychology in Action: A critical Analysis of *Alive*

Frank Marshall's 1993 film *Alive* captures several key theories of social psychology. The film depicts a true story of a Uruguayan rugby team, who together with friends and family were crossing the Andes Mountains to play a game with neighboring Chile when their plane crashed, leaving them stranded. Twenty-nine people survived the plane crash but only sixteen survived a treacherous seventy days atop the mountain before they were rescued. During their time in the snow covered Andes Mountains the group had to make difficult decisions in order to survive. This paper seeks to provide a thorough analysis of a several primary social psychology concepts using the film as a basis for illustration.

#### Norms

According to Johnson and Johnson (2000), norms are rules that govern what behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions are considered appropriate within a given group. Whether developed formally or informally they emerge out of the interactions among group members. Group norms serve a predictive capacity in that they allow members to predict how others will behave in a given situation. Therefore norms serve to reduce ambiguity by maintaining behavioral consistency. In order for norms to be effective they must first be acknowledged; that is, people must be aware that these regulations exist. Eventually, many norms are internalized by group members to the point that their adherence becomes automatic.

Norms are formed around matters that have significance to the group and can therefore be thought of as value laden behavioral regulations. According to Johnson and Johnson (2000), norms may apply to all or only select group members and some norms allow for more deviation than others. There are some rigid norms within groups that if violated are considered abhorrent; these are often referred to as societal taboos. In the movie *Alive* the group members resort to

cannibalism for survival. Within the greater culture this would be considered taboo however, in their specific group these actions were accepted as necessary to their survival. The group had therefore developed their own set of norms that reflected the significant values of the group which in this case was survival. Turner (1969) refers to this new sense of what is just and unjust as emergent norm theory.

Emergent norm theory posits that new norms emerge when conventional norms are no longer functional. In response, “either a special norm must be created for the situation, or a special definition must be imposed on the situation in order to invoke an emergency norm or to nullify the impact of contradictory norms” (Turner, 1964, p. 132). This is precisely what occurs in the film when the group resorts to cannibalism. The normative standard that humans do not eat humans was no longer functional to the survival of the group and therefore it was mandatory that the group overturn one of the conventional norms of society in order to survive.

This form of cannibalism, the consumption of others under the conditions of starvation has been termed survival cannibalism and is more common than many are aware. There have been several documented cases throughout history which serve as the foundation for *The Cannibal Within* by Lewis Petrinovich which explores the evolutionary underpinnings of survival cannibalism. In such times of crisis, people become freed of the constraints of their culture revealing the “basic core of human nature” (Petrinovich, 2000, p. 6). Although instances of survival cannibalism are typically received with repulsion by society, it is seldom punished or “met by moral censure...when the perpetrators return to organized society” (Petrinovich, 2000, p.11). Although this is most often the case, those that find themselves eating human flesh in order to survive must deal with their own internal moral conflict.

### Morality

Situations wherein an individual has a “clear sense of what is morally right or wrong but nevertheless forms an intention that conflicts with this moral norm, because the person or social consequences of behaving consistently with that norm are felt to outweigh the disadvantage of acting inconsistently with the norm” are referred to as moral dilemmas (Manstead, 1999, p. 12). In such cases often people who sincerely value moral conduct act in ways that seem to blatantly contradict their moral code. Batson and Thompson (2001) offer the overpowered integrity hypothesis which attempts to explain this apparent contradiction. Their research into moral dilemma suggests that a person’s motivation to be moral may become overpowered by stronger self interest motives. This hypothesis shares similar qualities with Petrinovich’s *The Cannibal Within* which suggests that in dyer conditions evolutionary needs will take precedence above all else. This may explain the behavior of the rugby team depicted in the film; their biological need to survive overpowered their need for moral integrity. Regardless, the explanation for their behavior it is inevitable that the group members experienced cognitive dissonance as a result of their deviation from their morals standards.

### Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals become aware of an inconsistency between two or more attitudes or between their attitudes and behavior, making them feel uncomfortable. The film’s characters experienced cognitive dissonance as they struggled to reconcile the belief that eating another human is morally unacceptable and repulsive with their actions of eating the dead. There are both direct and indirect methods of reducing cognitive dissonance, one of which is present in the film.

Direct methods at dissonance reduction include changing attitudes or behavior, acquiring new information, or engaging in trivialization. The first method is to change attitudes or behaviors so that they become more consistent with one another. Most often since one is not able to “take back” a behavior, a person will change their attitude about the behavior in order to reduce the attitude-behavior discrepancy. The second approach is to acquire new information that supports the attitude or behavior. In the film this is exemplified when the living group members stated that if they themselves were to die, they would want the others to eat their corpses if it meant their survival. They further stated that this would make it so they had not died in vain. In addition, religion was used to provide further information that supported the act of consuming the dead. One of the characters brought up the belief in an afterlife, distinguishing between the body and the soul. This provided a perceptual shift because they no longer viewed the dead as their fellow teammates and friends but rather viewed them as mere flesh—a food source. Moreover, one group member likened consuming the dead to receiving Holy Communion stating, “from their death we will live...people will understand.” The latter part of his statement expresses his internal struggle with shame. Both forms of information helped to rid them of at least some of the dissonance they were experiencing. A third method to reduce dissonance involves trivialization—deciding that the discrepancy between the attitude and behavior is not important and therefore any inconsistency between the two is not important. The methods discussed up to this point have been related to direct approaches at reducing cognitive dissonance, that is, they have focused on the attitude-behavior discrepancy causing the dissonance, there are however indirect methods.

Unlike direct methods that focus on closing the attitude-behavior discrepancy, these approaches focus on reducing the negative feelings associated with the discrepancy. In other

words, they aim to make one feel good about the self in the presence such a discrepancy. One such method is the use of self-affirmations which involves focusing on positive attributes of the self in an attempt to restore the self-image that has been threatened as a result of the dissonance (Byrne & Branscombe, 2006). Steele and Liu (1983) found that self-affirmative thoughts reduced dissonance even when the thoughts were unrelated to the contradictory behavior. That is, a threat to self in one domain could be reduced by self-affirming thoughts about oneself in another domain.

### Group Dynamics

Groups have an inexorable influence on psychological well-being. They impact their members in both subtle and dramatic ways. Groups counter stress by offering support which comes in many forms such as emotional, informational, or task (Forsyth & Elliot, 1999). No one can completely avoid stress but it is likely that stressful events will be more manageable when the burden is shared among a group. It is hard to imagine any one person surviving alone in the Andes for seventy days but as a group this became possible.

According to Wilson (2002) group cohesion refers to the bond that links members to the group, the degree that members are attracted to one another and the group, and the unity a group has toward its members. An aggregate of individuals does not necessarily constitute a group; in order to be considered a group there must be a sense of cohesion among individuals—something that binds them together. Cohesion also has a level of interpersonal attraction; members are both attracted to other members on a personal level and are attracted to the group as a whole for the qualities it possesses. The latter has been shown to be a better predictor of group loyalty. Moreover, cohesion is associated with providing members with a sense of belonging. In the film, the group crashed having already possessed a certain level of cohesion because they were a

team. Their group cohesion continued to grow as the reality of their tragedy and interdependence continued to bring them closer.

The development and maintenance of group cohesion is a complicated process. Factors that promote group cohesion include sharing similar attitudes, values, and goals, group identification, status consensus, leadership style, participation, and well-managed conflict. Barnard et al. (1992) found a positive correlation between cohesion and the similarity between member attitudes such that as attitudes among members become more similar, group cohesion becomes stronger (as cited in Wilson, 2002). Similarly, goal consensus is an important factor in group cohesion. In the film, the group members shared an intensely important goal—survival. This contributed to their group cohesion in that it was the primary thing that bound them together as one and promoted group identification.

Group identification refers the level that members see themselves as more of a group than individuals within a group. They begin to use terms such as *us* and *we* rather than *I* or *me*. According to Bormann (1992) groups with strong identification will often tell stories of their experience (as cited in Wilson, 2002). Bormann calls these stories fantasy themes—“the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need to make sense of their experience and to anticipate their future” (Bormann 1992, as cited in Wislon, 2002, p. 252). The film itself is has captured the rugby team’s “fantasy theme” as it is *their* story of survival.

Another factor associated with group cohesion is status consensus. This refers to the group’s agreement on the roles and status of its members. Most groups form a hierarchy wherein some members desire high status and while others do not. If there are multiple people taking on a “leadership” role a power struggle emerges. In the film Antonio, who as the team captain had



declared himself the group leader, felt that Cannessa had threatened his leadership position when he went behind his back and “stole” food. Antonio said “Am I the leader?” to which Cannessa responded, “I don’t know are you?” Someone in the group suggested a vote take place but Cannessa said this was not necessary declaring Antonio was the leader. This scene illustrated both a power struggle and status consensus.

Leadership style also contributes to the level of cohesion within a group. According to Benne and Sheats (1948) the various roles that emerge in individuals do so as the individuals work together in a group. The leadership role is viewed as a functional role which is directed at helping the group to grow and work productively. Unlike other theories of group roles, in this view there are no clear distinction between leadership and membership functions or their roles, therefore, any member can fulfill a leadership position. The effectiveness of this position however is determined by leader-member relationships. That is, the leader must be well received by his/her fellow group members or he/she will ultimately be ineffective within that role. This theory proposes that contrary to popular belief, the development and pursuit of goals is not the responsibility of the leader but instead belongs to all group members as they will all reap the benefits of group success.

Benne and Sheats (1948) have classified member roles into three broad categories that include task, maintenance, and individual roles. Group task roles are aimed at helping the team succeed at performing tasks. Maintenance roles are those that are concerned with maintaining group cohesion and relationships among group members. Task and maintenance roles are functional whereas individual roles are dysfunctional. The behaviors of those that take on individual roles are often motivated by individual needs thus are associated with hindering positive group progress.

Benne and Sheats (1948) have identified several task roles for which any member, including the group “leader” may fulfill. Moreover, there is no limit to how many roles one member can take on. A brief description of each of the proposed task roles are provided in Appendix A, however the characters in the film will be used to illustrate some of these roles herein.

According to Benne and Sheats (1948), the *initiator-contributor* is someone who suggests new ideas to the group or a different perspective on a problem. In the film Cannessa acted in this role when he suggested they remove the seat covers to use as blankets. Another example is when Nando made the suggestion that they consume the dead in order to survive. The *information seeker* asks for clarification or facts in relation to a suggestion that has been made or a problem that being discussed. After the plane crashed, Antonio told Cannessa that it was getting too late for any search party to be able to see them therefore they would have to stay the night. Cannessa asked him how they would manage in temperatures of 40 below. In asking this question, Cannessa was playing the role of the information seeker. The majority of the group played the role of *opinion seeker* after Nando had suggested that they eat the dead. In this role the individual asks for clarification of the values involved within a suggestion that has been made. Cannessa also played the role of the *elaborator* when he offered support and rationale for Nando’s suggestion to eat the dead. Another task role the *coordinator* was played primarily by Cannessa and Antonio although others filled this position at different times. The coordinator pulls ideas together and coordinates the activities of members. Although Cannessa was the person that had the provided the suggestion to use the chairs as blankets, it was Antonio that “rounded the troops” to perform this task. A second example of this role in action is portrayed in the film when Cannessa is delegating tasks to others to take care of those that were wounded.

The role of the *procedural technician* was illustrated by Antonio when he took on the responsibility of rationing the food. The proposition that any one member can fill multiple roles is evidenced in these examples.

In addition to task roles, Benne and Sheats (1948) identify maintenance roles that emerge within groups. These roles are concerned with “maintaining and perpetuating group centered behavior” (p. 44). A brief description of each role is provided in Appendix B however a few will be described with examples herein. The role of the *harmonizer* is that of a mediator who attempts to reduce tension experienced by the group and its members. In the film *Carlitos* fills this role most often through his light-heartedness and ability to bring people together through their faith. Spirituality played a significant role in reducing tension and it was Carlitos who led them in praying the rosary nightly. Cannessa played the role of the *compromiser* when in order to avoid further conflict he yielded status in the debate over who was the leader.

### Conflict

According to Benne and Sheats (1948), the third category of roles that often emerge within groups are individual roles. These are self serving roles and are either not related or negatively related to group maintenance. These roles promote conflict within the group. An example of the role referred to as the *aggressor* is depicted by the crew member that stole the young woman’s coat for himself. From this man’s behavior conflict ensued ending in Cannessa threatening the man’s life.

According to Deutsch (1969), conflict occurs anytime incompatible actions occur. Most often we imagine conflict as a negative resulting in destructive consequences however; conflict can be constructive as well. When conflict is managed effectively it can produce positive consequences wherein both parties feel they have gotten gained something valuable. Destructive

conflict can adversely affect the group creating hostility or violence whereas constructive conflicts can elicit a clearer view of the problems promoting motivation; constructive conflicts can also inform an individual about their values, teaching them about themselves (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

Deutsch (1969) discusses factors that contribute in determining the course a conflict will take (constructive or destructive). The factors proposed include the quality of the relationship prior to the conflict situation, the nature of the conflict, characteristics of the parties involved, estimation of success, and third party involvement. Many of these factors were involved in determining the course of the conflict that developed between Nando and Cannessa in the film's final scene. Nando deceived Cannessa into climbing to the top of the mountain by making him believe that just over the mountain lay Chile. When he arrived at the top he was so distraught to find nothing but snow covered mountain peaks that he fell to the ground in defeat and despair. Cannessa wanted to go back to the plane whereas Nando wanted to continue onward to Chile. A major factor in how the conflict resolved was the quality of Nando and Cannessa's relationship prior to the conflict. They appeared to have a strong relationship showing cooperative action throughout the film. The strength of their relationship became evident when Nando told Cannessa, "I love you man!" In addition, the estimation of success likely played a role in the course of the conflict; Cannessa said that they would die walking the fifty miles to Chile. Although not explicitly stated, it is likely that he considered the alternative of returning to the plane to be no more hopeful than the fifty mile trek. Both of these factors along with the personality characteristics of the parties involved contributed to the constructive resolution of this conflict and consequently to the rescue of the rest of the group.

In summary, the film *Alive* provides a rich context that realistically captures several social psychology concepts. As the group interacted roles emerged that contributed to the successful completion of necessary tasks and to the maintenance of the group cohesion. The severity of the situation called for a reevaluation of normative standards as those prescribed by society were no longer conducive to the needs of the group. However, the deviation of moral norms did not come without psychological consequences including cognitive dissonance. All in all, it was the group's ability to work productively as a team, effectively manage conflict, and to work toward common goals that resulted in their ultimate survival.

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## **APPENDIX A: TASK ROLES**



**TASK ROLES**

INITIATOR/CONTRIBUTOR	proposes goals, new ideas, and solutions; defines problems; suggests procedures; points out benefits
INFORMATION GIVER	offers facts and relevant information or experience
OPINION GIVER	states belief about alternatives; focuses on values rather than facts
INFORMATION SEEKER	seeks clarification of suggestions based on facts relevant to the problem
OPINION SEEKER	asks for clarification of values which the group holds in relation to the problem
COORDINATOR	clarifies the various suggestions, ideas, and opinions and coordinates them
SUMMARIZER	summarizes and restates back to the team; draw member's activities together; offers conclusions
CLARIFIER/ELABORATOR	interprets; gives examples; defines terms; clears up confusion or ambiguity
EVALUATOR	subjects the team's activity to some criterion, for example, practicality, logic, etc.
ORIENTOR	tries to show the team the position it is now taking and may raise questions about its direction
PROCEDURAL TECHNICIAN	performs routine tasks for the group such as secretary/treasurer; timekeeper
ENERGIZER	stimulates the group to action leading to closure

## **APPENDIX B: MAINTENANCE ROLES**

**MAINTENANCE ROLES**

ENCOURAGER	praises good points, exhibits acceptance (the "we" feeling);and group solidarity
HARMONIZER	attempts to mediate differences among members or their points of view; reduces conflict and tension; attempts to reconcile differences
GATEKEEPER/EXPEDITER	attempts to encourage communication, bringing persons into the discussion who have not given their ideas, keeping the discussion to the point, etc.
STANDARD SETTER	expresses standards for the group to attempt to achieve, and applies them to evaluating the group process
COMPROMISER	is willing to compromise or yield his or her idea or point of view, or admit an error
GROUP OBSERVER	keeps records of the group process in action and brings much data into the discussion as seen pertinent
FOLLOWER	more or less a passive and accepting person; going along with the ideas of others