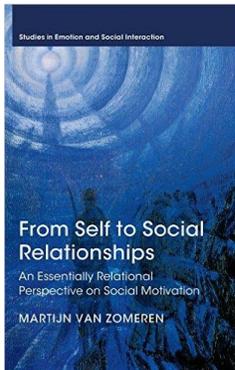


Book Review



From Self to Social Relationships: An Essentially Relational Perspective on Social Motivation

Martijn Van Zomeren

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What is that motivates us in our lives? Martijn van Zomeren proposes that the regulation of social relationships is at the essence of this question. In this valuable work, he develops a novel psychological theory, labelled “selvations theory”.

The main aim of the book is clearly stated from the beginning: to foster a theoretically integrative approach to social motivation. According to the author, integrative theorizing is important because it offers an encompassing and unifying way of achieving synthesis. This ambitious goal is pursued integrating ideas and evidence from different and largely independent research literatures, like social, developmental and clinical psychology, neuropsychology and cultural anthropology. Focusing on six main theories of motivation, Van Zomeren demonstrates how each of them is largely consistent with one of the two main steps of the motivational process, as proposed by the selvations theory.

The book is well organized and it consists of five chapters, with a prologue and an epilogue. The first chapter illustrates the importance and the need of theoretical integration. The second chapter proposes a conceptual shift from the “self” perspective to “selvations”. Chapters 3 and 4 present the specificities of the selvations theory, with a respective focus on the first phase (value infusion) and on the second phase (coping with value-infused events) of the motivational process. Finally, chapter 5 and the Epilogue outline the many theoretical and practical implications of this innovative relational perspective to social motivation.

In extreme synthesis, the leading metaphor of the first phase of the motivational process, named “value infusion“, is the spider in the web. This image reflects the observation that individuals are embedded in networks of social relationships. Our biological and cultural survival depends on the fact that we should be able to feel any changes in our web of social relationships (that is what “selvations” are).

In the second step (coping with value-infused events), selvasions are translated into culturally appropriate thought, feelings, and behaviour that facilitate relationship regulation with the “cultural matrix” (the second leading metaphor). Indeed, culture provides norms about how to regulate which relationships inside and outside of one’s own social network.

Despite this book cannot be easily classified as a proper community psychology work, it is relevant for community psychology for at least two main aspects, that I consider fundamental for this discipline, and that I report below.

First, a shift from “self” to “selvasions” implies a focus on individual’s network of social relationships (including the community). This focus fits with the often-posed social and group-dwelling nature of human beings, and it fits perfectly with community psychology assumptions. In fact, despite selvasions theory represents an integrative approach –and in this sense it is a comprehensive theory – great attention is attributed to the specific cultural matrix that characterizes the second step of the motivational process. As stated by the author, selvasions theory thus fits with the developments toward a stronger potential for relationships and communities (offline and on-line).

Second, the theoretical reasoning at the base of selvasions theory is consistent with the need of stronger theoretical roots for community psychology. This need has been also recently claimed in relation with the opportunity to develop theories which should be able to consider and contextualize previous contributions for their cultural background (Francescato & Tomai, 2001; Francescato & Zani, 2010). In this sense, the book provides critical lenses through which the reader can look at previous theories that (more or less explicitly) identified the self as a psychological basis for social motivation. As proposed by Van Zomeren, these theories can be viewed as connected with the typical Western cultural norms revolving around the self and a selfish perspective on social motivation should be recognized as a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) cultural norm.

Finally, a limitation of the book is that it leaves the impression that the possible contribution of selvasions theory is still underdeveloped. The “so what?” section is very intriguing and presents several lines for future developments. Nevertheless, we look forward to see in what extent the theoretical and practical implications of selvasions theory will have an impact on the scientific world, including social and community psychology.

References

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