ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Prosocial Development Across the Lifespan

Stuart I. Hammond, PhD, Emma M. Grant, PhD Student, Ariana I. Furlong, PhD Student

School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, Canada

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Introduction

Prosocial behaviours are defined as voluntary acts intended to benefit others.[1] Prosocial acts include caring, helping, sharing, and informing,[2,3] and emerge early in life, even before babies begin to crawl.[4-7] As we grow up, our prosocial behaviours reach a wider group of people, from peers at school in childhood and to wider communities in adolescence and adulthood, and take new forms within social organizations such as classrooms, workplaces, and broader communities in person and online.[8,9] Prosocial behaviours circle back towards care for families and future generations in old age. In our review, we also briefly examine prosocial behaviour through computer-mediated interaction (e.g., through social media).

Problem

Prosocial behaviours are woven into all aspects of life (e.g., childcare, relationships, work). That means that prosocial development is influenced by biological features (e.g., human infants' prolonged need for care), socialization practices (e.g., parenting), and socio-cultural institutions (e.g., school). Prosocial behaviours can also occur in routine (e.g., holding a door open for someone) and extraordinary contexts (e.g., bystander intervention after a car accident).

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Nevertheless, the overall theme of prosocial behaviours is simple: prosocial behaviours contribute to our individual and collective wellbeing.[10]

Key Research Questions

Research on prosocial behaviour uses a variety of research methods, including naturalistic methods such as observation and interviews, and experimental methods, including innovative technologies[11] and genetics.[12] An overarching research tension in the field lies in the conceptualization of prosocial behaviour. Some researchers view prosocial behaviour as a routine aspect of human life (e.g., participating and collaborating with others) likely sustained by a variety of motives,[13] and others focus on prosocial behaviour as a form of bystander intervention (e.g., problem solving), which is more likely to have moral or altruistic motives.[14] From these tensions stem key research questions:

1. The motives of prosocial behaviour: Is prosocial behaviour a morally motivated act, or can it also be sustained by other motives such as interest in social interaction and personal fulfilment?[13,15] This is an important research question in the study of early infancy, and has important policy implications for issues such as volunteering.
2. Universal and culturally-distinct forms of prosocial behaviour: How can the universal aspects of prosocial behaviour, such as caring, helping, informing, and sharing which are seen across cultures (and even across species), be reconciled with powerful cultural influences which impact relative valuing and even timing of prosocial behaviours?[16] In general, Western cultures have shifted prosocial behaviours and community participation until later in the lifespan (e.g., support and caregiving for the family and volunteering in the community is not expected until adolescence, and is often elective).[17]
3. Gender and prosocial behaviour: Although males and females show a full range of prosocial behaviours, why do females tend to engage in more comforting behaviours, and males in riskier helping behaviours?[18] These findings reflect a larger debate on the biology and socialization of gender, however, at both a research and policy level, the importance of caregiving as a prosocial behaviour that is central to human survival is often undervalued.

Recent Research Results

a) Infancy and toddlerhood: Being cared for and learning to care

Babies begin to act in helpful ways early in life (by about 4-6 months) in the context of being cared for by others.[5,19,20] For example, a baby may hold their own bottle when bottle fed, or arch their back when a parent comes to pick them up, both of which are helpful for parents. Biologically, human infants remain in a period of dependency for longer than most mammals, whereby many social experiences (i.e., being held, fed, changed) are common across human societies, and may shape early prosocial responsiveness in similar ways.[21,22] In this period of dependency, infants respond to others' positive and negative emotions, a form of empathy relevant to comforting others.[23,24] Infants' prosocial behaviour becomes more impactful as they learn to crawl and walk.[25,26] Infants begin to get involved in routines and chores in the home, and become capable of intervening in problems, such as informing another of an unseen event or helping by picking up an out-of-reach object, or what is called bystander intervention in social psychology. Toddlers' helping is not always very helpful to parents, leading to 'unhelpful helping', and parents may seek to discourage or redirect their children (e.g., having a toddler use a toy broom or vacuum).[27] However, in many Indigenous-heritage cultures, unhelpful helping is encouraged and shaped as valued community participation.[17,28,29]

b) Childhood: Reflecting on right and wrong and going to school

As children become more sophisticated in thinking about their own and others' actions, children's prosocial behaviour becomes more complex.[10,30,31] Through their expanding social circle at school and outside the home, children are exposed to wider cultural expectations around preventing harm, promoting fairness, group membership, and ensuring the needs of others.[32] As a result, children may engage in prosocial lying because they value protecting someone's feelings, or, in some cultures, to appear modest.[33] Similarly, children also learn to appreciate that necessary harm, such as pulling someone off an unsafe play structure, may lead to a greater good.[34] Social context also influences children's prosocial behaviours, with certain contexts even promoting prosociality through acts of omission, such as choosing to be quiet during class.[8] Some examples of this can be children choosing to help others to maintain an altruistic public image or in an effort to encourage reciprocal helping from their peers.[35]

c) Adolescence and emerging adulthood: Volunteering and identity

Prosocial behaviour tends to change in early adolescence as individuals become more socially independent.[36] Participating with peers in church groups, playing team sports, and involvement in school and extracurricular clubs requires a maintenance of prosocial activity over time.[37]

Other forms of planned prosocial behaviour, such as volunteering and civic engagement, allow adolescents to strengthen their communities, and contribute to a sense of agency that one's prosocial acts can make a difference in the lives of others.[38,39] Prosocial behaviour can also be made compulsory, and school-based community service initiatives in high schools are designed to foster lasting civic and prosocial engagement.[40] Institutional transitions occurring in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, for instance, the transition from high school to university, produce a return to elective volunteer engagement,[40,41] which may be motivated by self- and other-oriented goals.[13,42] Prosocial engagement in adolescence and emerging adulthood contributes to personal, social, and moral development,[43] well-being and purpose,[44–46] and is linked to other forms of civic engagement, including voting, social activism, and future volunteering.[39,47]

d) Adulthood and beyond: Future generations and moral exemplars

Adults engage in prosocial behaviour at and through work and in their lives in their communities. Although work itself is compensated, interactions with customers and co-workers are opportunities for kindness and assistance to others. The selection of careers can also reflect prosocial goals, such as with recognized helping professions (e.g., nurses, teachers) and also careers such as running for public office that can reflect engagement and civic beliefs. An adult's level of formal and informal political engagement is also reflective of prosocial orientation.[48] The sustained period of adult life allows for exceptional individuals to become moral exemplars, and for individuals to demonstrate heroic sacrifice.[14] Prosocial activism (e.g., protesting an unjust law) can be disruptive to social norms and costly to the individuals performing it,[49] reflecting the complex nature of prosocial behaviour.

Being a parent or caregiver is an important context of prosociality, although one that is seldom recognized in the research literature. Beyond helping others directly, parents, teachers, and caregivers also attempt to socialize prosociality in children, with explicit reference to moral expectations and through facilitating children's cooperation in family and societal life. Older adults may return to volunteering after retirement,[50] and grandparents also serve a caregiving role.[51] In old age, as in infancy, the average person will require more care, closing the loop on prosocial development across the lifespan.

e) The role of technology: Prosocial behaviour is online

There is a great deal of concern that emerging technologies negatively impact human life, including prosocial behaviours, yet prosocial behaviour is widely present online.[52,53] People routinely show care and support on social media and other online platforms to both friends and strangers, and this form of prosocial engagement is particularly prevalent among youth.[54] Social media platforms have supported prosocial behaviours such as activism and donation campaigns and allowed for virtual volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic.[9,54,55] Furthermore, technology has affordances, such as its relative permanency and extended reach, which means that prosocial behaviours such as an informative post or video can be accessed across geographic distances or later in time.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Prosocial behaviours support life in society, offline and online, and parents and teachers have an important role in promoting prosocial development.[8,56] Infancy is an important period for the emergence of prosocial behaviours.[4,6,19] Infants and young children show empathy for others and they may also take part in prosocial acts, such as chores, for interest and fun.[23,29] Over time, these motives can become transformed into personal and moral motives, as children learn to identify themselves as helping individuals, and come to care about the recipients of these behaviours.[10] In general, these intrinsic motivation for prosocial behaviours (through values, interests, social bonds) will be more stable foundations than extrinsic motives over time.[13,42] Children's prosocial behaviours such as sharing resources can coexist with favouritism, such as to family and in-groups, so as parents and educators encourage sharing of resources, they can also address biases.[32]

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