

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Prosocial Development Across the Lifespan

¹Stuart I. Hammond, PhD, ²Celia A. Brownell, PhD

¹University of Ottawa, School of Psychology, Canada, ²University of Pittsburgh, Department of Psychology, USA

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Introduction

Prosocial behaviours are voluntary acts intended to benefit others.¹ Prosocial acts emerge early in life, soon after babies learn to crawl,² and increase in complexity across the lifespan, with the emergence of paradoxically prosocial acts such as prosocial lying in middle childhood, and acts of long-term commitment in adolescence and adulthood.

Subject

The appearance of prosocial behaviour in infancy has led to recent claims that babies are born with a predisposition for morality and altruism.^{3,4} A lifespan perspective on prosocial development both enriches and challenges this view. Throughout life, prosocial behaviour serves many functions, from simple enjoyment, to relationship building, to reputation enhancement, to explicitly moral aspirations.⁵

Problem

By taking a lifespan perspective, we can identify how prosocial behaviour changes in both form and function with age, as well as how age-specific mechanisms may affect its emergence and development. For example, infants' early prosocial behaviour, although superficially similar to adult forms, may have unique motives and functions that are less evident in later behaviours.⁶ A lifespan perspective on prosocial development can also assist researchers in determining the role parents, peers, and other adults can play in, and in intervening to promote, its development throughout the lifespan.

Research Context

The majority of research on prosocial behaviour has involved direct and indirect observations of behaviour, through experimental and naturalistic studies, and self- and parent- and teacher-reports, in single time point, cross-sectional, longitudinal, and more rarely, twin study, designs. However, more recent studies have also used other methods, such as neural imaging,⁷ and pupil dilation and eye-tracking⁸ to explore prosocial behaviour. It is likely that future research will use converging methods, combining behavioural methods with other methodologies.

Key Research Questions

Important research questions for the lifespan development of prosocial behaviour include understanding general patterns of development in prosocial behaviour over the lifespan, and studying how individual levels of prosocial behaviour change or remain stable within development.

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Recent Research Results

a) Infancy and toddlerhood helping, sharing, and caring

Infants as young as 12 months will inform adults of unseen events by pointing these out, and will also offer instrumental help by assisting adults complete thwarted tasks, such as picking up an out-of-reach object.^{9,10} As they approach age 3, toddlers are more reliably able to comfort people in distress, for example, by hugging someone who is hurt, and sharing resources with those who express a need for food or a toy.¹¹⁻¹⁵ In experimental studies, these early appearing prosocial behaviours are relatively undifferentiated by gender; however, in parent and teacher report of younger children, and in experimental studies in childhood and beyond, females tend to engage in more comforting behaviours, and males in riskier helping behaviours.^{16,17}

Cross-cultural studies find the same basic forms of prosocial behaviour in infants across diverse cultures,¹⁸ and there is evidence that individual differences in prosociality are heritable.¹⁹ However, there is also substantial cross-cultural and individual variability in prosociality across all ages.²⁰⁻²⁴

A potential mechanism supporting early prosocial behaviour is empathy,²⁵ which first manifests through reactive crying in response to another infant's cries.²⁶⁻²⁹ In toddlers, expressions of empathic concern are related to comforting others.^{15,30} Other forms of prosocial behaviour, such as children's attempts to assist adults with routines and chores in the home, may arise out of young children's desire for affiliation, such as social engagement with others in fun and amusement, and in mastery of adult tasks.³¹⁻³⁵ Although less well understood, motives behind a particular prosocial act may change with development; for example, feeding a family pet may be "fun" for a young child, but gradually become motivated by a sense of responsibility and care for the pet.^{2,24}

Throughout infancy, parental behaviour contributes to the early development of prosocial behaviour, for example through talking about others' emotions and mental states with their toddlers (e.g., 'sad,' 'remember'¹²), and by structuring affiliative and collaborative interactions to facilitate young children's participation in prosocial events as well as their imitative learning.³⁵⁻³⁷

b) Childhood: Reflecting on self and others

By the age of 4, children become more sophisticated in thinking about their own and others' actions.^{5,38,39} Whereas infants expect equality in the partition of goods,^{40,41} as children acquire more complex social understanding, resource division may come to be unequal, as they take factors such as effort, need, group membership, cost, and historical experiences, into consideration when distributing goods.⁴²⁻⁴⁶

During early and middle childhood, children in industrialized countries also begin to associate regularly with peers and less frequently with parents. Although both peers and parents influence children's competencies and opportunities in assisting others,⁴⁷ childhood prosocial behaviour increases in complexity in these new social contexts.^{2,5,48,49} As children begin to understand the emotions of their friends and peers, and the expectations of schools and teachers, they begin to engage in prosocial lying to protect another's feelings or, in some cultures, to appear modest.⁵⁰ Similarly, children also learn to appreciate that necessary harm, such as pulling someone off an unsafe play structure, may lead to a greater good.⁵¹

c) Adolescence and emerging adulthood: Volunteering and identity

Prosocial behaviour tends to decline in early adolescence,⁵² partly in relation to hormonal and other physiological events of puberty,⁵³ but then recovers.⁵⁴ A new form of prosociality, civic engagement and volunteering, emerges as adolescents become more socially independent. Participating in church groups, playing or coaching sports, and involvement in school clubs, which require maintenance of prosocial activity over time, contribute to a sense of agency, that one's acts can make a difference in the lives of others,⁵⁵ and the development of identity.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸ Volunteering in adolescence is linked to later civic engagement.⁵⁹

d) Adulthood and beyond: Future generations and moral exemplars

Adults have access to more material resources, knowledge, independence, and, particularly with older and retired adults, more time, than in other stages of life. Exceptional individuals become moral exemplars, demonstrating exceptional moral commitment or heroic sacrifice.⁵⁸ However, classic social psychology research on phenomena such as bystander effect, wherein adults in a crowd are less likely to help, show that adults are not automatically more prosocial than children and adolescents.^{5,60}

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, closing the loop on prosocial development across the lifespan.^{2,37,47,61-63}

Research Gaps

The principal gap in the research on prosocial behaviour over the lifespan is understanding the developmental relation between the earliest prosocial behaviours and those behaviours emerging later in life.^{2,5} Another important gap is understanding how some prosocial behaviours come to have moral motives. This is a daunting task because prosocial behaviours originate from many sources, such as increasing social and moral understanding, the formation and maintenance of social relations, and changing social roles, such as student or parent, and it is difficult to entangle these influences.⁵

Conclusions

Prosocial behaviour is a concept whose relatively straightforward definition, as voluntary acts intended to benefit others, conceals a remarkable diversity.⁵ This diversity is particularly apparent across a lifespan perspective, as when prosocial behaviour is viewed across age, the changes in its motives, its structure, its timeframe, and its beneficiaries become apparent. The prosocial behaviour of the infant is not completely that different from that of the adult, nor is it identical. Furthermore, the prosocial behaviour of a single individual may not be identically motivated at all times. Considered across the lifespan, we can see that human nature is oriented socially, towards interacting with others, though not always morally. In its developmental complexity, we should also consider the possibility that prosocial behaviour serves many functions. It may be that through life experiences, and with hard work, reflection, and commitment, that it truly comes into its moral form.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Prosocial behaviours are a normal and necessary part of living in society, and of social development, and promoting prosocial behaviour in all its forms is clearly desirable,⁶³ However, parents and teachers should be aware that prosociality is complicated, and that some motives for and structures of behaviour are more desirable than others. For example, although encouraging sharing of resources is important, this behaviour can easily come to involve favoritism, such as to in-groups. These biases can be addressed and corrected by parents and educators.⁴⁵

Developmentally, there is some evidence that prosocial acts initially carried out for social reasons, such as chores that infants participate in for fun, can become legitimately personal and moral, as children learn to care about the recipients of these behaviours.^{31,34} At the same time, parents should not be overly concerned if an infants' prosocial behaviour, supported by interest or fun, declines as the child masters the task and it becomes a "chore," and some age-related declines prosocial are also expected.

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