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Prosocial Behavior during Adolescence

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Abstract

Prosocial behaviors are an aspect of adolescents' positive development that has gained greater attention in the developmental literature since the 1990s. In this article, the authors review the literature pertaining to prosocial behaviors during adolescence. The authors begin by defining prosocial behaviors as prior theory and empirical studies have done. They describe antecedents to adolescents' prosocial behaviors with a focus on two primary factors: *socialization* and *cultural orientations*. Accordingly, the authors review prior literature on prosocial behaviors among different ethnic/cultural groups throughout this article. As limited studies have examined prosocial behaviors among some specific ethnic groups, the authors conclude with recommendations for future research.

Adolescence is a period of human development marked by several biological, cognitive, and social transitions. Physical changes, such as the onset of puberty and rapid changes in body composition (e.g., height, weight, and sex characteristics) prompt adolescents to engage in greater self-exploration (McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2003). Enhanced cognitive abilities permit adolescents to engage in more symbolic thinking and to contemplate abstract concepts, such as the self and one's relationship to others (Kuhn, 2009; Steinberg, 2005). Furthermore, adolescence is marked with increased responsibilities at home and in the school context, opportunities for caregiving within the family, and mutuality in peer relationships (American Psychological Association, 2008). Moreover, society demands a greater level of psychosocial maturity and expects greater adherence to social norms from adolescents compared to children (Eccles et al., 2008). Therefore, adolescence presents itself as a time of major life transitions. In light of these myriad transitions, adolescents are further developing *prosocial behaviors*.

Although the emergence of prosocial behaviors (e.g., expressed behaviors that are intended to benefit others) begins in early childhood, the developmental transitions described above allow adolescents to become active agents in their own developmental process. Behavior that is motivated by adolescents' concern for others is thought to reflect optimal social functioning or prosocial behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2008). While the early literature focused primarily on prosocial behaviors among young children (e.g., Garner, 2006; Garner et al., 2008; Iannotti, 1985) there are several reasons to track prosocial development into adolescence. First and foremost, individuals develop cognitive abilities that allow them to better phenomenologically process and psychologically mediate life experiences that may facilitate (e.g., completing household chores and caring for siblings) or hinder (e.g., interpersonal conflict and perceptions of institutional discrimination) prosocial development (e.g., Brown and Bigler, 2005). Adolescents express more intentionality in which activities they will engage in and become selective in where they choose to devote their energies (Mahoney et al., 2009). Finally, adolescents are afforded more opportunities to express helping behaviors in other social spheres beyond the

family context, such as in schools, communities, and civic society (Yates and Youniss, 1996).

Origins and Definitions of Prosocial Behaviors

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been growing interest in understanding the relationships that exist between the strengths of individuals and resources within communities (e.g., person ↔ context) in order to identify pathways for healthy development, or to understand how adolescents' thriving can be promoted. This line of thinking is commonly described as the positive youth development perspective (e.g., Lerner et al., 2009). Although the adolescent literature still predominantly focuses on problematic development (e.g., delinquency and risk-taking behaviors), studies on adolescents' prosocial development have increased substantially since the 1990s (Eisenberg et al., 2009a), paralleling the paradigm shift from a deficit-based model of development to one focusing on positive attributes of youth (e.g., Benson et al., 2006; Lerner, 2005).

Generally described as the expression of voluntary behaviors with the intention to benefit others (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg, 2006; see full review by Eisenberg et al., 2009a), prosocial behavior is one aspect among others of positive adolescent development that is gaining greater attention in the literature. Theory on prosocial development is rooted in the literature on moral development, which includes cognitive aspects of moral reasoning (e.g., how individuals decide between moral dilemmas; Kohlberg, 1978), moral behaviors (e.g., expression of behaviors that benefit society; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998), and emotions (e.g., empathy; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1990).

Empirical studies on adolescents' prosocial development have found that different types of prosocial behaviors may exist. For example, Carlo and colleagues (e.g., Carlo et al., 2010; Carlo and Randall, 2002) found six types of *prosocial tendencies* (intentions to help others): *compliant*, *dire*, *emotional*, *altruistic*, *anonymous*, and *public*. Compliant helping refers to an individual's intent to assist when asked. Emotional helping refers to helping in emotionally evocative situations (e.g., witnessing another individual crying). Dire helping refers to

intentions to assist in emergency situations. Altruistic helping refers to a person's intention to help with no expectation of reward. Anonymous has been described as helping without anyone knowing. Finally, public helping has been described as intentions to help when others are watching. Research on these types of prosocial tendencies indicates that some behaviors are more related to each other than others. For example, [Calderón-Tena et al. \(2011\)](#) found that compliant, emotional, and dire helping may be related positively to one another, while other studies suggest that altruistic helping may be different from other types of prosocial tendencies (e.g., [Brittian et al., 2013](#)).

Research indicates that adolescents evaluate the situational context when determining whether to engage in prosocial behavior (e.g., [Tisak et al., 2002](#)). Some youth who engage in high levels of public prosocial behavior may do so out of self-interest needs rather than for the benefit of others. For instance, in a study of largely Caucasian adolescents, *proactive prosocial behavior* (e.g., behaving prosocially to benefit the self) was the only type of prosocial behavior that was related to aggressive behavior. Specifically, adolescents who reported positive or normative beliefs about engaging in aggressive behaviors were more likely to engage in proactive prosocial behaviors, and were less likely to engage in altruistic helping and reactive aggressive behaviors ([Boxer et al., 2004](#)). Proactive prosocial behavior requires more socially sophisticated and manipulative conceptualizations of behaviors ([Boxer et al., 2004](#)). In this particular study, adolescents who endorsed retaliatory aggressive beliefs were more likely to engage in proactive prosocial behavior. This suggests that prosocial behaviors that are self-serving may be facilitated by motivations that are similar to those that facilitate aggressive behavior. If this is true, then perhaps the label prosocial behavior is inadequate or inappropriate for these types of self-serving behaviors since the behavior is not based on helping others, but rather is motivated by satisfying the needs of the self. More importantly, what does it mean to engage in prosocial behaviors for the benefit of the self? Does it yield differential effects for adolescents? Do these types of behaviors still serve as a protective factor against challenging or problematic experiences? These questions not only have research implications, but applied implications as well. For instance, educators and providers have to consider how and what types of prosocial behaviors are promoted through programs, in schools, and by parents and caregivers.

The expression of prosocial behaviors also varies by demographic and developmental characteristics, such as gender and age. In general, adolescent girls are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors compared to adolescent boys (e.g., [Hastings et al., 2007](#)). However, some studies have observed that boys engage in more public helping (e.g., helping when one is being observed; [Carlo and Randall, 2002](#)). More helping behaviors among girls may reflect that girls are socialized to be more caring and nurturing and to exhibit greater levels of concern for others ([Eisenberg et al., 2009](#)). Divergent from other studies on prosocial behavior that found gender differences, [McMahon et al. \(2006\)](#) reported that African-American boys exhibited more prosocial behaviors than African-American girls. Therefore, gender differences in prosocial behaviors may vary among US

adolescents based on cultural differences ([Eisenberg and Morris, 2004](#)) as well.

The literature on prosocial behaviors and ontogeny has yielded mixed age difference findings depending on the type of prosocial behavior assessed. Some research ([Carlo and Randall, 2002](#); [Fabes et al., 1999](#)) contends that older adolescents engage in more prosocial behaviors while other research has noted mixed findings. In general, older children have more advanced prosocial skills typically due to increased empathetic and perspective taking abilities, and increased and nuanced opportunities for social interactions ([Kokko et al., 2006](#)). In addition, some types of social interactions run counter to each other. For example, individuals on average tend to become more prosocial and less competitive and individualistic across the life span ([Van Lange et al., 1997](#)). Differential findings have shown that prosocial behaviors decrease in late adolescents, while other researchers have not found age differences among adolescents. For example, there is some research that revealed a declining trend in prosocial behavior when children are assessed longitudinally using the same forms of measurement ([Kokko et al., 2006](#); [Côté et al., 2002](#)). Therefore, it is unclear whether the decline in prosocial behaviors observed was due to developmental changes as adolescents mature or were attributed to issues of measurement (i.e., measurement of prosocial behavior across time is not robust enough to detect developmental changes). Due to mixed findings, future research needs to explore gender and developmental age changes in a more sophisticated way that examines the intersectionality of these two demographic issues (gender and age) along with the role of culture.

Antecedents to Prosocial Behavior

Adolescents' prosocial behaviors do not develop void of contextual influence. Youth are part of a larger system, involving family, peers, school, societal values, and the historical context ([Bronfenbrenner, 2005](#)). Indeed, research describes two major contextual factors that foster prosocial behaviors: *socialization* and *cultural orientations*.

Socialization

Socialization is the process through which individuals acquire beliefs, values, social norms, and practices that allow them to successfully interact with society ([Göncü and Gauvain, 2012](#); [Rogoff, 2003](#)). Parents represent a key socializing agent through which adolescents learn to express prosocial behaviors ([Carlo et al., 2007](#)). One direct way that socialization relates to prosocial behaviors is through parenting practices. A study by [Carlo et al. \(2011\)](#) found that parents' socialization, measured as parental inductions (e.g., degree of positive reasoning and explanations that parents use with their adolescent) played a significant role in promoting sympathy among adolescents, consequently promoted prosocial tendencies indirectly; however, no significant ethnic differences in these associations were found between Mexican-American and Caucasian adolescents who participated in the research. A multicultural study by [Shen](#)

et al. (2013) indicated that inductive parenting practices were positively related to moral development indirectly through empathy among Caucasian, Mexican-American, and Taiwanese adolescents. Interestingly, the aforementioned study reported that parenting practices were related to sympathy but not perspective-taking among Mexican-American and Taiwanese adolescents compared to Caucasian adolescents. Researchers noted that more studies are needed across cultural groups to understand why these cultural differences were observed.

In addition to direct socialization (e.g., talking to adolescents about helping others), adolescents may acquire prosocial behaviors through informal social learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where parents model behaviors and youth observe how parents interact with other members of society. Certainly, some research indicates that adolescents are likely to engage in helping behaviors with parents, such as volunteering and community service (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000). These activities may or may not continue throughout adolescence, as youth form their own goals and interests.

Peers represent another prominent social context for adolescents' prosocial behaviors. Wentzel et al. (2007) found that peers played an influential role in adolescents' prosocial behavior. Specifically, adolescents' perceptions of their peers' expectations regarding prosocial behavior was significantly related to the adolescents' engagement in actual prosocial behaviors at school. Important note, researchers indicated that the racial demographics of the school may have influenced this effect. In this case, peer influence on adolescents' behavior appeared to be influenced by whether the student attended a school where his or her racial group represented the majority of the student population. Peer influences are typically discussed in terms of negative or antisocial influences; however, this research provides initial support for the positive influence that peers can have on adolescents' developmental outcomes, mainly prosocial behaviors. Although further research is needed to unpack this finding, these findings do highlight the positive influential role of peers in adolescents' development.

Socialization of prosocial behaviors can occur in more indirect ways than social modeling. Mainly, adolescents' perceptions of their parents and peers' perspectives on prosocial behavior can also have a significant impact on adolescents' prosocial behaviors. For example, adolescents' perceptions of parental and peer prosocial behavioral norms, assessed as parents and peers approval or disapproval of their participation in problem behaviors, emerged as protective factors in reducing risk factors associated with American Indian youth's engagement in violence in an urban context (Bearinger et al., 2005). While the literature on cultural variations of socialization and adolescents' prosocial behavior is limited, there is evidence to suggest that the environment that parents create and parents' expectations for service, as well as peer culture, are directly and indirectly related to the development of adolescents' prosocial behaviors.

Cultural Orientations

It has been well documented that culture influences children and adolescents' development (Rogoff, 2003); however, less is

known about the relationship between culture and positive aspects of adolescent development, such as prosocial behaviors. Systematic research on the development of prosocial behaviors among youth from diverse cultural backgrounds is underdeveloped and rarely explored (Humphries and Jagers, 2009). The use of a cultural framework or perspective to understand adolescents' prosocial development acknowledges that human development is situated in and is influenced positively by cultural values, traditions, and institutions (American Psychological Association, 2008).

This section reviews research in two main contexts where studies elucidate how culture intersects with prosocial behaviors among adolescents: (1) communal/collective orientations and (2) religious/spiritual orientations. Both cultural orientations have been examined in relation to prosociality. First, the authors will discuss the literature on communalism/collectivism, followed by religiosity/spirituality.

Communal/Collective Orientations

Research on collective and communal orientations and prosocial behaviors among minority youth dates back to the 1970s. Knight and Kagan (1977) observed that Mexican-American children (ages 5–9 years) expressed more prosocial behaviors compared to Anglo-American children who exhibited higher levels of individualism and competitiveness. Researchers currently posit that collaboration, a group or communal orientation, is a central feature of Mexican-American cultural orientation that promotes prosocial behaviors (Knight and Carlo, 2012). Several contemporary studies have sought to understand how cultural factors relate to the development of prosocial tendencies among Latino adolescents (e.g., Armenta et al., 2011). For example, a study by Schwartz et al. (2007) found that an orientation toward Hispanic culture was positively related to Latino early adolescents' prosocial behaviors. Calderón-Tena et al. (2011) found that Mexican-American cultural values, assessed as *familism* (e.g., respect for elders and family obligations), were positively related to Mexican-American adolescents' prosocial ideas. Moreover, Armenta et al. (2011) observed that Mexican-American cultural values (assessed as types of familism values) were positively related to several types of prosocial tendencies (e.g., compliant, emotional, dire, and anonymous) compared to mainstream American values (assessed as self-reliance, material success, and personal achievement) that related to more public helping and less altruistic helping.

Ward (1995) contended that the dominant culture in the United States negatively impacts African-American adolescents' positive development. Mainly, she asserted that the excessive focus on autonomy of the individual and the preoccupation with and competition for consumption of materialism is thought to erode prosocial behaviors among African-American adolescents. Moreover, she argued that American mainstream cultural values of *individualism* and *materialism* actually run counter to the cultural orientations of African-Americans, which includes *communalism* and *religiosity/spirituality*.

Communalism implies an awareness of the fundamental interdependence of others with a premium being placed on

social bonds and group obligations (Boykin et al., 1997). This specific cultural orientation places the needs of the group before those of the individual. Studies on African-Americans have found that communalism is related positively to correlates of African-American adolescents' prosocial behaviors, including empathy (Humphries et al., 2000; Jagers et al., 2007) and moral reasoning (Humphries et al., 2000; Woods and Jagers, 2003). Humphries et al. (2000) observed that communalism emerged as a significant predictor of moral reasoning among African-American fifth and eighth grade boys, but not among African-American girls. This gender by culture finding was surprising given that African-American girls in the study reported higher communalism scores and seemed to resonate to a communal orientation more so than their male counterparts. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the intersection between aspects of culture, such as communalism, and gender among African-American youth.

This is not to suggest that a communal or collective orientation is uniquely associated with African-Americans. Research indicates that other cultural groups that utilize a collective or community-focused frame of reference exhibit similar associations with prosocial behaviors. For example, similar patterns of association have been found among Native American youth. Reservation living, even in the context of intergenerational poverty, may provide Native American youth with a source of support and protection facilitating their positive development. Specifically, LaFramboise et al. (2006) noted that community support, maternal warmth, and enculturation (orientation toward one's culture of origin) emerged as protective factors for Native American early adolescents living on a reservation. Notably, the majority of youth in this study (over 60%) were characterized as prosocial while avoiding problem behaviors (LaFramboise et al., 2006).

Religious/Spiritual Orientations

Many studies have acknowledged the positive association between religious/spiritual orientation and prosocial behaviors (e.g., Furrow et al., 2004; Jagers and Mock, 1993; Johnson, 2008; King and Benson, 2005). Some research indicates that religious orientation serves as a type of social control by discouraging risky behaviors among adolescents, including substance use and delinquency (e.g., Brittain et al., 2013; Wallace and Forman, 1998). Most religions encourage adolescents to think beyond themselves, bolster concern for others well-being, and promote development of a broader worldview (Furrow et al., 2004; King, 2003). Moreover, it has been suggested that many religions are associated with prosocial behaviors due to an emphasis on helping others, service to the community, and promoting a collective orientation (Saroglou et al., 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2011). Furthermore, a spiritual or religious orientation requires the belief in a higher being and a conceptualization that connects the individual to this higher being. Therefore, this relationship requires perspective taking, a skill that is necessary for optimal social development and implementation of prosocial ideas and behaviors.

Research on adolescent populations from various cultural groups has yielded findings that support the association between religious/spiritual orientation and prosocial

behaviors. In a diverse sample of youth, involving largely Latino adolescents, religious identity was associated with prosocial beliefs and attitudes (Furrow et al., 2004). A significant association was found between religiosity and certain types of prosocial behavior for Caucasian adolescents (Hardy and Carlo, 2005). Specifically, Caucasian adolescents who reported higher levels of religiosity were more likely to engage in altruistic, compliant, and anonymous forms of prosocial behaviors. Eisenberg et al. (2009b) found that cross-religious friendships were a significant factor for Indonesian adolescents' socioemotional functioning and prosocial behaviors at school. Moreover, French et al. (2008) observed that religious involvement was positively related to prosocial behaviors among eighth and ninth grade Indonesian Muslim youth, and researchers attributed this positive association to the collectivistic nature of religion. Similarly, a longitudinal study of Italian adolescents indicated that religious coping was predictive of more prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2011).

Finally, spirituality and religion are important cultural dimensions that are present in African-American culture and the everyday lives of African-American people (Mattis and Jagers, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). A longitudinal study by Smetana and Metzger (2005) found that African-American adolescents' religious and spiritual beliefs were longitudinally predictive of their community involvement and engagement in prosocial behaviors 3 years later. This overall body of research provides further evidence for the need of future studies to examine particular types of prosocial behaviors and attitudes as they relate to religiosity and spirituality among adolescents in order to gain a better understanding of the associations between this cultural orientation and positive development.

Methodological Issues and Future Directions for Research

One persistent question that remains unanswered in the literature is around intentions to engage in helping behaviors. Some research attempts to address this question. For example, prior literature indicates that, in general, youth are more likely to assist close friends than acquaintances or strangers (Tisak et al., 2002). In addition, some studies have found that an adolescent's willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors may be influenced by the cultural background of the 'other.' Specifically, adolescents may be more willing to direct prosocial actions toward those who share their same cultural background; this has been found among studies with children (e.g., Zimmerman and Levy, 2000; Zinser et al., 1981). Furthermore, this issue may be complicated by whether the adolescent is in an environment where his or her cultural group is in the majority or minority (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2009). Therefore, future studies should consider how the target of one's prosocial behavior influences intentions to help in various social situations.

In addition, some critical areas around conceptualization (e.g., definition) and measurement of prosocial behaviors as they relate to cultural groups exist. For example, some studies may assess volunteerism or civic engagement among adolescents (e.g., Hart et al., 2007), but may not specifically describe

these actions as prosocial behaviors. For example, [Sherrod and Lauckhardt \(2009\)](#) posit that the literature on civic engagement has yielded mixed findings with regard to minority youth. It appears that culture and ethnicity influence adolescents' prosocial behaviors but in complex ways (e.g., [Carlo et al., 1999](#)). In addition, it may be difficult to distinguish how ethnicity and race independently influence adolescents' prosocial development since these characteristics are often confounded with social class ([Sherrod and Lauckhardt, 2009](#)). In this case, more within-cultural group investigation is needed. Furthermore, when studies account for the availability of opportunities to engage in prosocial behaviors, research findings become more complicated ([Balsano, 2005](#)). For this reason, it is possible that some of the differences observed in previous studies can be attributed to definition and measurement of prosocial behaviors. Therefore, more research is needed to understand how culture intersects with other demographic characteristics (e.g., income) to influence prosocial behaviors among adolescents.

Emerging literature indicates that negative social experiences, such as perceived interpersonal and institutional discrimination, pose a significant threat to prosocial development (e.g., [Brittian et al., 2013](#); see also [Sherrod and Lauckhardt, 2009](#)). However, other research suggests that a strong sense of fidelity (e.g., the ability to maintain prosocial values in spite of societal contradictions; [Erikson, 1965](#)) may lead to prosocial behaviors, if adolescents commit to social groups and institutions. For example, if a young person feels strongly and positively about his or her cultural group and perceives that his or her group is treated unfairly in society (e.g., perceived institutional discrimination), he or she may choose to engage in social and political arenas in order to improve the conditions for his or her cultural group (e.g., [O'Leary and Romero, 2011](#)). This type of prosocial behavior may be described as a precursor to engagement in social justice among adolescents (e.g., [Ginwright, 2007](#)) or a form public helping. [Brittian et al. \(2013\)](#) found that perceptions of ethnic discrimination were indirectly related to public helping among Mexican-American adolescents through a direct relationship with Mexican-American cultural values. [O'Leary and Romero \(2011\)](#) found instantiations of increased civic engagement in response to an antiethnic studies government bill among Mexican descent students' and this type of 'public' helping served as a protective factor for students' mental health. Therefore, future studies should further investigate factors that impede prosocial behaviors among minority adolescents and continue to explore conditions through which prosocial behaviors occur in spite of these perceived challenges.

Conclusions

Although research on adolescents' prosocial behaviors has burgeoned significantly over the past 20 years, there are several areas that the literature can be advanced. Despite the relative growth in research examining adolescents' prosocial behaviors in general, research on cultural groups is scarce, with notable exceptions described in this article. In addition, several areas were elucidated that promote adolescents' prosocial behaviors

(e.g., parent and peer socialization, and cultural orientations) that warrant further investigation.

See also: Eisenberg's Theory of Prosocial Reasoning; Prosocial Behavior During Infancy and Early Childhood: Developmental Patterns and Cultural Variations; Prosocial Behavior, Effects of Parenting and Family Structure on.

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