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978-0-521-33771-7 - The Roots of Prosocial Behavior in Children

Nancy Eisenberg and Paul H. Mussen

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

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When we open a newspaper or turn on the television or radio, we are bombarded with news about human violence, cruelty, and injustice: Racial conflict in South Africa, wars in Central America and the Middle East, terrorist attacks, hijackings, savage crimes – such are the recurring themes that dominate the news. History seems to be repeating itself endlessly; human history is replete with instances of inhumanity: war, torture, genocide, racial brutality, and crime.

Also in the news, although perhaps less prominent, are stories of large and small acts of helping, sharing, and kindness. During World War II, many people in France, Poland, and other countries risked their lives by welcoming and rescuing Jews and other victims of the Holocaust (Hallie, 1979; Oliner & Oliner, 1988). Less dramatic, but more common, are news stories about needy families or abandoned children who are generously helped by people who hear about their plight. The story of people who worked feverishly to save a young child trapped in an underground pipe in Texas recently was reported nationwide, and stories of heroes who save others during fires or other mishaps are not uncommon.

Given the prevalence of both violent and altruistic acts throughout history, questions arise about what is fundamental in human nature. What traits and behaviors are inherent in humanity? Are humans basically aggressive and violent, or are they basically kind and decent?

In complex societies such as our own, it is evident that there is a wide spectrum of individual differences in nearly all personality traits and patterns of social behavior. Some people seem to be consistently self-seeking – placing their own interests above those of others, and pursuing their own needs, desires, and wants relentlessly. In contrast, other people seem to be concerned principally with the welfare of others and

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with the good of the larger group. Of course, most individuals lie somewhere between these two extremes on a continuum from unmitigated selfishness to selfless altruism.

The norms or standards related to selfish, violent, sympathetic, and kind behaviors and values vary from culture to culture and society to society. These norms or standards are generally reflected in the behavior of members of a given culture. Consider, for example, the Ik, the mountain people of Uganda, described by the anthropologist Colin Turnbull (1972). This small tribe of hunters had an established social structure and culture, with laws, rules, and customs, until because of political and technological changes, they were deprived of their hunting grounds. Then their social organization disintegrated, and they broke into small ruthless bands concerned only with personal survival. They became dehumanized and savage; lying, stealing, plotting, scheming, deceit, treachery – even killing – became aspects of their “normal” way of life. No one seemed to have any compassion for anyone else, not even for mates, parents, or children. Caring for others, generosity, and kindness (the kinds of behavior we label prosocial) simply no longer seemed to exist in this group.

In sharp contrast with the Ik disintegration is the traditional Hopi way of life. In the view of this Arizona Indian tribe, all aspects of the universe, human and natural, are interrelated and interdependent. Consequently, community cooperation is regarded as essential for survival, and most, if not all, of what an individual thinks and does has reference to the group. From earliest childhood onward, nothing is more important to the Hopi than having a “Hopi good heart,” defined as having trust and respect for others, having concern for everyone’s rights, welfare, and feelings, seeking inner peacefulness, and practicing avoidance of conflict. In the Hopi family, the needs of the individual and those of the household are both served through helpfulness and cooperation; family interactions are not controlled by rules and regulations. The ideals of personal characters and the compelling motives of the Hopi include cooperativeness, industriousness, compliance, and an unaggressive approach to people and to situations. Not surprisingly, competition, dissension, and self-assertion are strikingly absent from the traditional Hopi community (Dennis, 1965).

The striking contrast between the Ik and the Hopi regarding values and behaviors illustrates the variability encountered in human social

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interactions and beliefs. People are not fundamentally and irrevocably good or bad. Thus, the age-old question – “What is human nature?” – has not been, and may never be, resolved. An individual’s behavior, selfish or altruistic, admirable or deplorable, is the product of a complex interaction among biological, social, psychological, economic, and historical events – the result of both biological (i.e., genetic) potentialities and environmental (learning) experiences.

**Definition of prosocial behavior**

As mentioned earlier, the traditional Hopi engage in much altruistic and prosocial behavior, whereas the Ik came to display very little. Now that we have given some examples of prosocial behavior (and the lack thereof), we must define our terms explicitly. Although we have used the two terms *prosocial behavior* and *altruism* to refer to positive behaviors, we define these two terms somewhat differently. “Prosocial behavior” refers to voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals. Prosocial behaviors are defined in terms of their intended consequences for others; they are performed voluntarily rather than under duress. Although prosocial actions are intended to have positive consequences for others, they may be performed for a variety of reasons. For example, an individual may be motivated to assist someone for selfish reasons (to get a reward), to gain the approval of others, or because she is really sympathetic or caring about others. We all know of instances of helping, sharing, or comforting in which the people who assisted seemed to have had ulterior motives; similarly, we can think of instances in which a helper or benefactor seemed to be genuinely concerned about the well-being of another (other-oriented).

“Altruism” refers to one specific type of prosocial behavior – voluntary actions intended to benefit another that are intrinsically motivated – that is, acts motivated by internal motives such as concern and sympathy for others, or by values and self-rewards rather than personal gain. Internalized values that instigate altruism include a belief in the importance of others’ welfare or justice. Individuals may reinforce or reward themselves with feelings of self-esteem, pride, or self-satisfaction when they behave in ways consistent with those internalized values, and they may punish themselves (with guilt or feelings of worthlessness) when they do

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not (Bandura, 1977, 1986). For this reason, some have argued that prosocial acts motivated by values are actually selfishly rather than altruistically motivated (Batson, Bolen, Cross, & Neuringer-Benefiel, 1986). However, we believe that people may act in ways consistent with their internalized values for reasons other than, or in addition to, self-reinforcement or self-punishment.

Altruistic acts may take a variety of forms – generosity, expression of sympathy, sharing of possessions, donating to charity, and activities designed to better the welfare of the community by reducing social inequalities and injustices. What determines whether or not these and other prosocial actions are considered altruistic is the motive underlying the behavior. However, it is usually difficult (if not impossible) to assess the motives underlying prosocial actions.

For this reason, we use the term “prosocial behavior” when discussing voluntary actions intended to benefit another. Only when egoistic motives are not involved can we assume that prosocial behaviors are altruistic. Unfortunately, such situations have been studied relatively infrequently.

#### **Norms and behavior**

The principal focus of this book is on prosocial *acts*, that is, on overt responses and manifest prosocial *behavior*. For this reason, from the outset we must draw attention to several important distinctions.

First, the *acquisition* (learning) of prosocial behavior must be clearly differentiated from its *performance*. An individual may have learned a particular prosocial response, but may actually manifest it only on certain occasions or under certain circumstances. Consider this simple instance: A youngster has learned that he or she should come to the aid of another youngster who is being “picked on” unfairly. The first youngster often acts according to that principle. But under circumstances in which this prosocial response is potentially dangerous (e.g., if the aggressors are big and tough and the would-be altruist risks becoming another victim), he or she may leave the scene rather than try to aid the victim.

Knowledge of societal norms may be quite separate from conduct that conforms to these norms. Some prevalent norms (cultural expectations or prescriptions of how one *ought* to behave) are acquired early in life through learning, identification, or imitation of the behavior of others.

For example, according to the *norm of reciprocity*, people should help those who have helped them; that is, a recipient of assistance should repay the benefactor. In contrast, the *norm of social responsibility* prescribes that we should assist others who depend on us and need help. When this norm is internalized, giving becomes an end in itself, and we “act on behalf of others, not for material gain or social approval but for [our] own self-approval, for the self-administered rewards arising from doing what is ‘right’” (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966, p. 228). By the age of 8 or 9 years, children have learned the norm of responsibility, can explain the norm to other children, and judge others’ behavior on the basis of its conformity to this norm. Yet this knowledge of the norms per se does not ordinarily instigate prosocial actions; elementary-school children’s endorsement of the norm is not significantly related to generosity in donating to the needy (Bryan & Walbek, 1970; Eisenberg-Berg & Geisheker, 1979).

To act in accordance with learned or internalized norms, the child must first perceive the other person’s needs, interpret them accurately, and recognize that the other person can be helped. In addition, the child must feel competent in this situation, that is, capable of providing what is needed, and the cost or risk entailed in helping must not be prohibitive (Eisenberg, 1986; Schwartz & Howard, 1984). Unless these preconditions are met, even the child who knows the norm of social responsibility is not likely to render aid. A self-concerned or egocentric youngster, or a child who has not yet developed the requisite cognitive capabilities, may not be aware of the needs of others or may be unable to interpret those needs accurately. In addition, failure to conform with the norm of social responsibility may be the result of ignorance of how to help in certain situations (Midlarsky, 1984; Peterson, 1983a,b). In short, although societal norms bearing on prosocial behavior are widely accepted, even among children, they guide behavior only some of the time and under particular circumstances. Internalization of norms is not sufficient to explain or predict prosocial behavior; in fact, there is very little evidence that knowledge of norms exerts control over children’s actions.

Prosocial *behavior* must also be distinguished from moral *judgment*, a term that refers to the *cognitive* aspects of morality – conceptualizations and reasoning about moral issues. In recent years, much of the research on moral development, stimulated largely by the creative theories and

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investigations of Jean Piaget and of Lawrence Kohlberg, has been centered on moral judgment. As we shall see in Chapter 8, moral judgment and moral conduct are associated, but there is not a one-to-one correspondence between them. An individual with mature, sophisticated concepts and judgments about moral issues may or may not ordinarily *behave* in prosocial ways.

It is important to make these distinctions at this point because all the key variables on which we shall concentrate pertain to prosocial *actions*. Variables such as knowledge of societal norms, motives, moral conceptualizations, and moral judgments are extremely important topics, the subjects of a great deal of important research and theory (e.g., Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1984; Rest, 1979), but in this book we are concerned with them primarily as they relate to prosocial *conduct*.

### **Purpose of this book**

Although it may be assumed that all human beings have the *potential* for acquiring prosocial behavior, the behavior itself – the forms and frequency of prosocial actions – must be *learned*. For example, if a young Ik infant were adopted by the Hopi and reared in the foster parents' culture, he or she probably would act as a Hopi, not as an Ik. And a Hopi raised from early childhood among the Ik would show Ik characteristics rather than Hopi characteristics.

This book is designed to provide an analytical examination of what is known about how prosocial behavior develops and the processes or mechanisms underlying that development. How are children socialized to behave in prosocial ways? What personal attributes or capabilities, and what environmental conditions, facilitate or inhibit expressions of generosity, helping, and comforting behavior? These are some of the primary issues explored in this volume.

Intimately related to these questions are questions pertaining to *variability* in prosocial behavior. Two kinds of variability are of concern: differences among people and variations in an individual's behavior from time to time. Why do some people have a strong predisposition toward prosocial conduct, whereas others show very little concern about others and display little prosocial behavior?

In attempting to understand the first kind of variability (variation among people or individual differences), we must examine biological

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factors as well as the process of socialization – specifically, children’s interactions with, and reactions to, the major agents of socialization: parents, teachers, siblings, peers, cultural and religious institutions, and the mass media. What role do genetic factors play in the predisposition to respond to others’ distress? How do the values of culture affect the child’s tendencies to help others? What kinds of child-rearing practices or parental attitudes foster or inhibit the development of prosocial behavior? What role do siblings and peers play in shaping the degree and intensity of the child’s predisposition to altruism? Do school and the mass media have significant impacts? The key to understanding individual differences in prosocial behavior lies in the answers to these questions.

The second type of variability, variability *within* an individual, is concerned with the fact that everyone’s behavior varies from time to time. Most of us have acquired many prosocial responses; under some conditions we *perform* them, but at other times we do not. We shall survey what is known about situational factors – circumstances or events that increase or decrease the likelihood that prosocial responses will be performed.

Because prosocial behavior is acquired, it can be modified. Theoretically, at least, it is possible to find ways that parents, educators, and the media can enhance children’s prosocial behavior, thus contributing to improvement of the human condition, society, and the general welfare. Such practical measures will prove to be effective, however, only if they are based on scientific knowledge of how prosocial behavior is acquired and augmented. Such knowledge is derived from systematic research.

**A brief historical note and a word of warning**

Trends in the behavioral sciences – the issues and questions investigated or theorized about – are linked with social and historical events, as well as with the general tenor of the times (*zeitgeist*). As the concerns of a society change, so do the research foci of behavioral scientists.

For many years, behavioral scientists have been committed to the betterment of human welfare and the reduction of societal ills, such as aggression, conflict delinquency, and prejudice. When these concerns have been translated into empirical research, the emphasis usually has

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been on understanding actions that are clearly inimical and directly threatening to society and on providing information that can be used to reduce antisocial behaviors. For example, it is well known that delinquency and violence often have their roots in parental rejection and in an aggressive family milieu (Parke & Slaby, 1983; Patterson, 1982). This information can be used in the treatment and alleviation of these social problems. Similarly, there is a substantial body of information about how tensions between groups develop and how they may be counteracted. This information can also be applied in real-life social actions.

By contrast, the history of psychological research in prosocial behavior is relatively short. Most of the studies reviewed in this book were conducted during the last 20 years. We do not understand all the reasons for the neglect of this area of research until around 1970, but we can suggest some possibilities.

First, problems that threaten to undermine the structure and functioning of the society have a quality of urgency; they demand immediate attention. Scientists are likely to be concerned first with conditions that urgently demand alleviation before they turn their attention to the promotion of positive social behavior. The history of medicine provides an analogy. Until the last few decades, virtually all medical research and practice were focused on the cure or control of illness, disease, and disorder. The field of preventive medicine, emphasizing health education, the promotion of good health, and community psychiatry, and oriented toward better psychological adjustment of whole populations, developed relatively recently.

Another reason for the lag in research on prosocial behavior is inherent in the field itself: The phenomena of interest are enormously complex and difficult to study. There are few standard methods for assessing prosocial dispositions in the sense that there are standard tests for measuring intelligence, language, aptitude, learning, or problem-solving ability. To evaluate children's generosity, different investigators have used different techniques – for example, teachers' or parents' ratings, experimental or situational tests, paper-and-pencil tests, and direct observations of naturally occurring responses (see chapter 2). Because these different measures often are found to be relatively independent of each other, it is difficult to identify the best or most representative criterion of prosocial behavior.

Methodological problems such as these accounted in large part for the



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apparent failure of early studies of prosocial behavior. For example, in the 1920s, after an extensive study of moral development (Hartshorne & May, 1928; Hartshorne, May, & Shuttleworth, 1930), a group of researchers concluded (incorrectly) (see chapter 2) that school-age children's prosocial behaviors were specific to the situation. That is, they concluded that there was no consistency in children's moral behaviors, such as generosity; rather, children varied their behaviors as situations changed. That study, which was extensive, costly, and widely publicized, highlighted the difficulties of studying prosocial conduct (as well as other morally relevant behaviors) and thus had the effect of discouraging, rather than stimulating, further research on this critical social issue.

In the last 20 years, we have seen increased interest in research on prosocial conduct, undoubtedly related to a change in the spirit of the times. Somehow the general public became more aware of the long-standing injustices suffered by women, ethnic minorities, and the disabled, and this awareness helped to motivate affirmative action programs. Also, American participation in the Vietnam War led to a diversity of activist protest movements, liberalization of laws, and wider acceptance of humane values. Particularly in the 1960s, people (especially the student counterculture) seemed to be searching for a way to improve the quality of human life for all, and humanistic concern for others was seen as one way to alleviate some of the salient social problems. In this atmosphere, behavioral scientists concentrated more of their efforts on trying to understand the growth and enhancement of humane attitudes and behavior (Bar-Tal, 1984).

An unusual dramatic event also served to trigger a considerable number of relevant investigations of helping behavior. One night in March 1964, a young woman named Kitty Genovese was fatally stabbed in the parking lot near her apartment in Queens, New York. There were 38 witnesses who heard her screams and saw her murdered, but none of them did anything to help; no one even called the police until the woman was dead. Extensive press coverage of this episode shocked many people into a realization of how apathetic or unconcerned with each other people can be. That, in turn, spurred some prominent social psychologists to initiate research and to formulate theories about why people help, or refrain from helping, others in distress (Latané & Darley, 1970; see Bar-Tal, 1984).

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Much of the initial research that came in the wake of the Kitty Genovese murder was conducted by social psychologists who were interested in the situational factors that affect whether or not people assist others. This work usually was experimental in nature; investigators would set up a situation in which individuals could help and would manipulate various situational factors (e.g., the number of other people available who could help a person in need, the cost of helping for a potential benefactor, or the degree to which the needy other's distress was obvious to an observer). Even today, the bulk of the social psychological work concerning helping is focused on situational determinants of prosocial behavior.

In contrast, in the 1970s, developmental psychologists studying children's prosocial behaviors frequently examined social learning conditions and cognitive processes related to the development of prosocial behavior, as well as the situational determinants of such behavior (Bartal, 1984). In fact, social learning conditions were the most popular focus in that research. That trend seems to have continued into the 1980s; developmentalists examine socialization and cognitive antecedents of prosocial action somewhat more frequently than situational determinants. Thus, developmental and social psychologists complement one another in their attempts to understand prosocial behavior.

In 1976, we wrote a book entitled *Caring, Sharing, and Helping: The Roots of Prosocial Behavior in Children*, in which we attempted to summarize the current state of knowledge about prosocial behavior:

Although interest in prosocial research has expanded substantially in recent years, there are still very complex and troublesome problems regarding methods of investigation. Furthermore, the findings of some studies are contrary to the findings of others. All these things make it very difficult to synthesize research findings and to arrive at general conclusions. [1977, p. 11]

That summary statement is still true today. We know considerably more than a decade ago; indeed, research on prosocial behavior has become quite prominent in the last few years. Nonetheless, as was true then, we must warn the reader that there are numerous questions for which we do not have definite answers. Therefore, as in 1977, our goals are modest: to survey the best research on prosocial development that has been completed, to show how this research has been conducted (examining both the advantages and limitations of various approaches), and to draw reasonable conclusions, with the explicit acknowledgment that in many