Examining Prosocial Dispositions in 18-Month-Olds: Taking a Person-Centered Approach

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Introduction

Research Question: Do 18-month-olds have reliable prosocial dispositions?

Currently, there are unanswered questions related to the ontogeny of prosocial behavior. One of the most debated is the existence of varying prosocial dispositions in early childhood. Although research has confirmed that individuals have differing prosocial dispositions in adulthood (e.g. Carlo et al., 1991), some recent research suggests that young children do not (Dunfield et al., 2011). Theoretically, it could be argued that young children have an innate and generalized prosociality, but do not have the requisite experiences and skills to have developed unique dispositions. On the other hand, one could argue that infants' temperamental predispositions and early emotional and social experiences could result in unique prosocial dispositions as early as 18 months of age.

A person-centered approach focuses on the differences among individuals rather than the relationships between variables, lending itself to the investigation of individual profiles. For the present analysis, we use a person-centered approach (latent class analysis) to investigate the existence of prosocial profiles.

Method

Toddler Prosocial Behavior:
At 18 months of age, 87 children participated in two trials of each of the following task types with an unfamiliar, female experimenter.

Instrumental Helping, Sad Condition: The experimenter needed help to complete a task (either hanging something up or putting something away). She either dropped a necessary tool or bumped into an obstacle in her way. The child had 30 seconds to respond while the experimenter displayed *sad affect.*

Instrumental Helping, Neutral Condition: These tasks were exactly the same as those in the other instrumental helping task, but the experimenter displayed *neutral affect.*

Repairing: A favorite toy of the experimenter's falls apart, and she is very sad about it. Children had 60 seconds to respond while the experimenter displayed *sad affect.*

Sharing: The child had many toys (or crackers), but the experimenter had none. Children had 60 seconds to respond while the experimenter displayed *neutral affect.*

Method

Coding:
Prosocial behavior in each trial was coded using the following scale.

0: attending for fewer than 5 seconds
1: sustained attention
2: referring to the situation
3: attempted prosocial act
4: target behavior including sharing with, repairing the toy of, or instrumentally helping the experimenter

Scores from the two trials of each task type were summed, and the resulting scores could range from 0-8.

Results

	2.	3.	4.	*M (SD)*
1. Helping (S)	.44**	.12	.16	4.60 (2.08)
2. Helping (N)	---	.18	.22*	4.88 (2.06)
3. Repairing (S)		---	.08^	4.00 (1.49)
4. Sharing (N)			---	4.22 (1.69)

Table 1. Correlations between different types of prosocial tasks with means and standard deviations. *$p < .05$, ^ $p < .10$

Variable-Centered Approach

- Correlations between the four types of prosocial tasks are presented in Table 1.
- Behavior in both helping tasks were significantly correlated, and sharing was significantly correlated with the other neutral task.

Person-Centered Approach

- Latent class analysis (using the four scores from the four task types) was used to examine the existence of prosocial profiles in 18-month-olds.
- Four models were tested with 1, 2, 3, and 4 classes. The best fitting model, based on common criteria (lower BIC and BLRT, high entropy) was the one with three classes.
- The means of each prosocial task type for each latent class are listed in Table 2.
- The three resulting profiles are characterized by low prosociality, moderate prosociality, and children who were moderately prosocial in sharing and repairing conditions but frequent helpers.

Results

	Low Prosocial Group	Moderately Prosocial Group	Frequent Helper Group
Participants	N = 24	N = 43	N = 20
Helping (S)	3.47	4.52	6.11
Helping (N)	2.14	5.05	7.68
Repairing (S)	3.22	4.52	4.48
Sharing (N)	3.46	4.41	4.05

Table 2. Means of prosocial behavior for each task type in each latent class from the three class model.

Discussion

These results support the existence of unique prosocial dispositions in children as young as 18 months of age. The individuals fit into three latent classes characterized by:

- ✧ Low prosociality
- ✧ Moderate prosociality
- ✧ Moderate prosociality in sharing and repairing conditions, but frequent helping behaviors

The variable-centered approach showed few associations between prosociality in the four task types, but the person-centered analysis allowed us to the let the individuals' scores guide the shaping of the profiles resulting in three distinct prosocial profiles in the participants in this study. These profiles suggest that there are individual differences in prosociality spanning across the emotional expression of the person needing help (neutral or sad) and the types of prosocial behaviors (helping, sharing, repairing), especially in differentiating children low and moderate in prosociality.

In contrast to our expectations, no group was especially high in prosociality in just sad or just neutral conditions suggesting that the emotional demands of the situation were less critical than other motivational factors. Indeed, the emergence of the frequent helper group suggests that some children are especially motivated to help when a social partner's needs are simple and the prosocial act does not require relinquishing one's own resources or a desirable toy.

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