Introduction

The early ontogeny of prosocial behavior is a growing area of interest in developmental and evolutionary science. A substantial research literature has shown that toddlers willingly help and share with others (e.g. Rheingold, 1976, 1982) yet some research shows that different types of prosocial behaviors may have different sources of motivation and require different types of competence (Dunfield et al., 2011). In addition, studies have shown that there are individual differences in early prosociality with some children helping more readily or often than others (Newton et al., submitted). We are just starting to investigate the origins of these differences. This study addressed the following questions:

Research Questions:

❖ Are 18-month-olds’ prosocial behaviors consistent across different task types including instrumental helping, sharing, and repairing tasks (which vary in emotional demands)?
❖ Do differences in maternal mental state language when infants are 12 months old and 18 months old relate to individuals differences in 18-month-olds’ prosocial behaviors in different types of tasks?

Method

Participants were 86 infants and their mothers (44 boys). Maternal Mental State Language (MMSL): When infants were 12 months old and 18 months old, they visited the lab with their mothers where they participated in a book reading task. Mothers “read” two wordless picture books to their infants, and the resulting maternal verbalizations were coded for semantic content including references to emotions, desires, and thinking/ knowing. In addition, the referent of the maternal comment (either the mother or the child) was also coded for each verbalization.

Table 1. Correlations between different types of prosocial tasks with means and standard deviations. **p < .01, *p < .05, . p < .10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1. Helping (S)</th>
<th>2. Helping (N)</th>
<th>3. Repairing (S)</th>
<th>4. Sharing (N)</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Helping (S)</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.537 (2.79)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Helping (N)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.569 (1.81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Repairing (S)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.484 (2.26)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Sharing (N)</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.570 (2.79)</td>
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</table>

Correlations between the four types of prosocial tasks are presented in Table 1. Behavior in both helping tasks and the repairing task were all significantly correlated, but sharing was only related to the other neutral task. Correlations between prosocial behavior in each of the four task types and MMSL at 12 and 18 months are presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Discussion

The present study shows that:
❖ Not all prosocial behaviors relate to each other
❖ The emotional and social context of the situation may be differentiating motivational factors for children’s prosociality
❖ MMSL relates to children’s prosocial behaviors
❖ These relationships differ depending on the child’s age, the type of MMSL, the referent of the MMSL, and the type of prosocial behavior

Future research should examine the motivational complexities and social and emotional competencies required to engage in different types of prosocial behaviors, as well as the ways that parental interactions support the development of prosociality. In addition, both developmental and evolutionary scientists must consider that while “prosocial behavior” is a useful umbrella term, the behaviors within the construct differ in their development.

Acknowledgments

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