Baby altruists?

Exploring the Early Origins of Prosocial Motivation

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Prosocial behavior

• Actions taken to benefit others, not self
• Volitional rather than obligatory
• General term for different behaviors – such as helping, sharing, empathic responding – that may have different motivational and developmental origins
• Target and cost of assistance are important
• We can see differences in prosocial motivation very early
Babies help unlock the origins of morality

The roots of human altruism

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Human infants as young as 1 year old, for example, by helping adults. They do this to increase the probability of food and other resources being available for others as well as themselves. Humans' need to help others is not just a simple altruistic act, but rather the result of an inherent motivation to care for others and participate in social interactions with them.

The Moral Life of Babies
A developmental perspective

- early-emerging social-cognitive understanding provides the basis for a primitive premoral sensibility that underlies social evaluations and motivates prosocial behavior and socially constructive actions

- these "moral primitives" develop in the context of parent-child interaction, particularly the sensitivity and warmth of care

- conversational discourse linking the child's intuitive moral sensibility to explicit social cognitive understanding is also important to the growth of sociomoral motivation

developing an early premoral awareness . . .

- understanding of another's intentions and goals
developing an early premoral awareness . . .

• understanding of another's intentions and goals

*shared intentionality*: intersubjective participation in activity involving shared mental states (pointing, collaborative problem-solving, cooperative social play)

helping responses to helpers and hinderers
Fairness judgments of helpers and hinderers are especially clear early in the preschool years:

(3 ½-year-olds; Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallie, 2012)
developing an early premoral awareness . . .

• understanding of another's intentions and goals

• emotion understanding
  • Emotions are an important entreé into the psychological experience of another person
developing an early premoral awareness . . .

• understanding of another's intentions and goals

• emotion understanding
  
  • Emotions are an important entreé into the psychological experience of another person
  
  • There is evidence for early resonant or empathic responding to the sight or sound of another's emotions
  
  • **But** others' negative emotions are conceptually and motivationally complex events for young children
  
  • Adult guidance is necessary to help children understand others' emotional expressions and enlisting this understanding into constructive social responding
developing an early premoral awareness . . .

- understanding of another's intentions and goals
- emotion understanding
- self-regulation
  - developing executive functions may be important to children's ability to respond helpfully to another person, especially in a context of competing interests
  - temperamental effortful control may also be important
  - **But** the growth of self-regulation is slow and has an extended developmental course
Toddlers assisted significantly more in experimental than control conditions, $F (1,35) = 14.98, p < .001$
Prosocial measures . . .

- Helping (neutral experimenter)
- Helping (sad experimenter)
- Sharing
- Empathy
Are there reliable individual differences in prosocial responding by toddlers?
How is prosocial behavior associated with children's sympathetic concern and personal distress?

for Personal Distress: $F(2,80) = 4.78, p < .05$

for Sympathetic Concern: $F(2,75) = 8.08, p < .001$
What characteristics of children, mothers, and their relationship are associated with differences in prosocial behavior?

Maternal personality characteristics

Toddler's emotion understanding

Toddler's temperament

Self-regulation

Prosocial behavior (combined) 18 months

Mother's mind-mindedness

Picturebook reading: emotional references to child

Maternal sensitivity
Interim conclusions . . .

- Individual differences in early prosocial behavior are consistent across helping, sharing, and empathy tasks, suggesting that a core disposition to assist others is developing during this period.
- Differences in prosocial behavior across tasks are associated with empathic concern but are negatively associated with personal distress, consistent with theoretical expectations about prosocial motivation.
- Differences in prosocial behavior across tasks are associated with maternal sensitivity and the mother's more positive, psychologically-oriented approach to her child, pointing to the importance of the child's experience of care. Child’s emotion understanding is also important.
- The influence of child temperament – particularly of effortful control – remains unclear in prosocial motivation.
• You didn’t like that he was bouncing your guy off the game, and that made you really mad.

• It’s hard when you feel so angry. You’re going “AAAAH, she’s bouncing my guy off there!” Right?

• How did the other kids feel when you turned off the game?

• You know, after you stopped the game, the other guys said, “Joey wasn’t really doing so bad.” You thought you were losing, but you weren’t.

2 ½ years: Mother-child conversation elements during conflict episodes in the lab

- Talking about rules
- Talking about the consequences of actions
- Talking about people’s emotions
- Moral evaluative statements (“good girl!”)
- Compromising or bargaining
- Justification and reasoning / Low use of threats, teasing or insistence

Do preschoolers show reliable differences in prosocial responding at age 4 ½?
Prosocial groups at 6 years of age

- Low (N=4)
- Medium (N=12)
- High (N=27)
- Helpers of convenience (N=8)

Prosocial Aggregate Score

- Helping
- Sharing
- Empathy
Mother-child conversation about helping and not helping

• References to emotions, needs, and desires – of the (potential) help recipient or the child -- were frequent for each conversation type, along with positive or negative moral evaluative statements

• Conversations about not helping at age 4 ½ were shorter but were more strongly associated with prosocial behavior at age 6

• In the conversations about not helping, mothers' use of positive moral evaluatives ("That was nice to do") and their references to negative moral emotions (e.g., "sorry") were significant predictors of prosocial behavior at age 6

• Shared positive affect between mothers and children at age 4 ½ was also a significant predictor of prosocial behavior at age 6

• Maternal rule-based justifications were never associated with children's prosocial behavior at any age
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