Prosocial behavior is any behavior intended to promote (or prevent declines in) another person’s welfare. It comes in many varieties, from the rare case of saving the life of a stranger to more mundane behaviors like giving a parent a hug, holding a door open for someone, or listening to a friend’s problems. It also includes giving goods, services, information, advice, or money to other people. However, prosocial behavior also includes actions with less tangible benefits, such as expressing affection, recognizing others’ accomplishments, and celebrating the source of another’s positive emotions with that person. Even intentionally refraining from doing something you would ordinarily do, so somebody else benefits, is a form of prosocial behavior. Refraining from eating the last piece of pie so that another person can enjoy it is a prosocial act. Behavior can also be prosocial even if it does not succeed in benefiting someone. Hunting for a friend’s lost wallet, even if it is never found, and striving to comfort someone who is beyond consolation count as prosocial actions. On the flipside, behavior that benefits another person is not prosocial if it was not intended to support that person’s welfare. Dropping a $20 bill that another person finds and keeps is not prosocial if you did not intend to drop it for that person’s benefit.

Categorizing prosocial behavior. How can the various types of prosocial behavior be classified or categorized? There is no one correct typology. Rather, different typologies are useful for different research purposes. Someone interested in evolutionary fitness (an organism’s ability to survive and reproduce) might classify behaviors as prosocial according to whether they advance fitness. For example, behaviors that benefit the actor but hurt the recipient can be categorized as selfish and not prosocial; those that benefit both organisms can be categorized as cooperative; and those that benefit the recipient while costing the actor can be categorized as altruistic. The question from an evolutionary perspective then becomes the following: Why does each kind of helping behavior exist? Psychologists, however, most often focus on the proximate explanations of prosocial behavior, such as people’s motivations, and they group them together in terms of the nature of those proximal motivations. For instance, psychologists might classify acts according to whether those acts arise from a sense of duty versus interpersonal attraction, whether they arise from empathy for another versus a desire to relieve one’s own distress, and whether the acts are costly to perform versus those that are not costly. These are not mutually exclusive categories; rather, they represent a variety of approaches that are useful for guiding research designed to answer different questions.

Observations and analyses. In studying prosocial behavior, most attention has been devoted to establishing its antecedents. Many situational factors have been identified. For instance, if the signals indicating that somebody needs assistance are ambiguous,
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people are less likely to help. One well-known se-
ries of studies has shown that the number of people
present when situations suggest that help is needed
influences whether people intervene (or fail to in-
tervene): the greater the number of people present,
the less likely any one of them will help.

From a human economics (homo economicus)
view of behavior, it is in people’s rational self-interest
to maximize the rewards and minimize the costs.
Some researchers have thus argued that people en-
gage in a behavior that promotes the welfare of oth-
ers because it has been positively reinforced over
the course of their life spans or when it will benefit
them personally. They should be less likely to help
when doing so is costly. One reason that prosocial
behavior is rewarded may be that people collectively
have settled upon norms of fairness, reciprocity, and
justice, and people reward one another when such
norms are followed. People can also preserve their
reputations by acting in a prosocial manner. In one
study, people paid about three times as much for a
beverage by dropping money into an “honor box”
when they were exposed to cues of being watched;
that is, people paid more when a poster depicting
a pair of eyes was displayed above the honor box
compared to when they were exposed to a poster
depicting nature scenes.

Yet another well-established proximal predictor
of prosocial behavior is mood. Happy people con-
sistently offer more help than people experienc-
ing no particular emotion; people feeling guilt and
gratitude act more prosocially than others; and sad-
ness increases helping when helping others would
boost one’s mood. One of the most well documented
forces motivating prosocial behavior is the empathy
felt upon exposure to another person’s distress. Emp-
athy is especially likely to occur when the target
person is similar to the potential helper and may
result in truly altruistic behavior. In fact, there is
a longstanding debate in the literature over whether
exposure to another person’s unfortunate circum-
stances results in helping through motivating peo-
ple to help another for egoistic reasons (to reduce
their own personal distress; the negative state relief
model) or whether empathic feelings inspire help-
ing behavior that is done for the ultimate purpose
of reducing the other person’s negative state (the
empathy–altruism hypothesis). Evidence exists for
both positions.

Psychologists have also searched for individual
differences related to behaving prosocially. Gender
and chronic differences in empathy have received
a particularly large amount of attention. It is safe
to say that a chronic tendency to feel empathic to-
ward others is a clear precursor to greater levels of
prosociality. With regard to gender, numerous stud-
ies have suggested that men and women do not differ
greatly in their overall tendencies to act prosocially;
however, the nature of the help offered is differ-
ent. Women’s prosocial behavior is more geared to-
ward forming and maintaining close relationships,
whereas men’s prosocial behavior seems to have more individualistic motives.

Aside from studying motivations, researchers have also focused on the consequences of prosocial behavior for the person doing it. A number of studies have demonstrated that giving money to others and engaging in acts of kindness makes people happier. This may be true primarily when recipients are people with whom one wishes to build or maintain close relationships. In such cases, the act of helping serves to build desired relationships, which may be why it feels good. When one does not desire a close relationship with a recipient, helping can actually make one feel worse.

**Relational context.** Obviously, and by definition, prosocial behavior is interpersonal. It also is a truism that any interaction between two or more people takes place within the context of some kind of relationship. This is the case even if that interaction is between people who have never met before, this is simply one type of relationship (that is, one between strangers). The relationship between people is therefore critical for predicting when prosocial behavior will occur as well as what its outcomes will be. As predicted by kin selection theory, people who are more closely related are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior with one another than people who are less closely or not at all related.

However, beyond the category of kinship, the relational context should be considered more broadly. For instance, people have communal relationships, typically with romantic partners, friends, and family, in which they give benefits in response to the partner’s needs and desires without expecting anything in repayment. Other relationships, such as those with strangers and acquaintances, operate on a tit-for-tat basis in most situations (except for emergencies and when the cost of doing so is extremely minimal). Unsurprisingly, most help is given in communal relationships. Importantly, these communal relationships also vary in strength, with people feeling more responsibility for some people’s needs than others (for example, more responsibility for a child than for a casual friend). The type of relationship, the relationship stage, and the priority of that relationship within one’s larger social network are a few of the factors that can powerfully influence whether prosocial behaviors will take place.

**Prosocial behavior in human infants and nonhuman primates.** Recent research has gone beyond adult humans to demonstrate a basic motivation to act prosocially in both human infants and nonhuman primates. Capuchins reliably give food to conspecifics (individuals of a single species) in role-playing (dictator game) scenarios, and chimpanzees appear to have a basic motivation to act altruistically, suggesting that the phylogenetic (evolutionary developmental) roots of human altruism in the domain of instrumental helping may be ancient. However, despite a tendency to cooperate readily with kin and reciprocating partners, chimpanzees (unlike humans) often fail to take advantage of opportunities to deliver
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benefits to familiar individuals at no cost to themselves. Furthermore, prelinguistic children as young as 14–18 months of age spontaneously help adults achieve their goals by engaging in unrewarded instrumental helping behavior (for example, helping an adult pick up dropped clothespins), although the infant’s relationship with the adult can influence whether this help occurs.

Outlook. Prosocial behavior is a topic that has captured the interest of many clinical, developmental, health, personality, and social psychologists. It also has interested researchers in other fields, including sociology, anthropology, and ecology. Although it is difficult to do justice to the rich and extensive literature on this topic, future investigations will surely build upon the scaffolding provided in this paper.

For background information See BEHAVIOR GENETICS; BRAIN; COGNITION; MOTIVATION; NEUROBIOLOGY; PERSONALITY THEORY; PSYCHOLOGY; SOCIAL MAMMALS; SOCIOBIOLOGY in the McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science & Technology.

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URLs

Altruism and Prosocial Behavior

www.unc.edu/~stwolf/courses/33fall06/lecture/13.ppt

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http://learningtogoive.org/papers/paper52.html