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Prosocial behavior

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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63 people are less likely to help. One well-known se-
64 ries of studies has shown that the number of people
65 present when situations suggest that help is needed
66 influences whether people intervene (or fail to in-
67 tervene): the greater the number of people present,
68 the less likely any one of them will help.

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

90 Yet another well-established proximal predictor
91 of prosocial behavior is mood. Happy people con-
92 sistentlly offer more help than people experienc-
93 ing no particular emotion; people feeling guilt and
94 gratitude act more prosocially than others; and sad-
95 ness increases helping when helping others would
96 boost one's mood. One of the most well documented
97 forces motivating prosocial behavior is the empathy
98 felt upon exposure to another person's distress. Em-
99 pathy is especially likely to occur when the target
100 person is similar to the potential helper and may
101 result in truly altruistic behavior. In fact, there is a
102 long-standing debate in the literature over whether
103 exposure to another person's unfortunate circum-
104 stances results in helping through motivating peo-
105 ple to help another for egoistic reasons (to reduce
106 their own personal distress; the negative state relief
107 model) or whether empathic feelings inspire help-
108 ing behavior that is done for the ultimate purpose
109 of reducing the other person's negative state (the
110 empathy-altruism hypothesis). Evidence exists for
111 both positions.

112 Psychologists have also searched for individual
113 differences related to behaving prosocially. Gender
114 and chronic differences in empathy have received
115 a particularly large amount of attention. It is safe
116 to say that a chronic tendency to feel empathic to-
117 ward others is a clear precursor to greater levels of
118 prosociality. With regard to gender, numerous stud-
119 ies have suggested that men and women do not differ
120 greatly in their overall tendencies to act prosocially;
121 however, the nature of the help offered is differ-
122 ent. Women's prosocial behavior is more geared to-
123 ward forming and maintaining close relationships,
124

125 whereas men's prosocial behavior seems to have
126 more individualistic motives.

127 Aside from studying motivations, researchers have
128 also focused on the consequences of prosocial be-
129 havior for the person doing it. A number of studies
130 have demonstrated that giving money to others and
131 engaging in acts of kindness makes people happier.
132 This may be true primarily when recipients are peo-
133 ple with whom one wishes to build or maintain close
134 relationships. In such cases, the act of helping serves
135 to build desired relationships, which may be why it
136 feels good. When one does not desire a close rela-
137 tionship with a recipient, helping can actually make
138 one feel worse.

139 **Relational context.** Obviously, and by definition,
140 prosocial behavior is interpersonal. It also is a tru-
141 ism that any interaction between two or more peo-
142 ple takes place within the context of some kind of
143 relationship. This is the case even if that interaction
144 is between people who have never met before; this
145 is simply one type of relationship (that is, one be-
146 tween strangers). The relationship between people
147 is therefore critical for predicting when prosocial
148 behavior will occur as well as what its outcomes
149 will be. As predicted by kin selection theory, peo-
150 ple who are more closely related are more likely to
151 engage in prosocial behavior with one another than
152 people who are less closely or not at all related.

153 However, beyond the category of kinship, the re-
154 lational context should be considered more broadly.
155 For instance, people have communal relationships,
156 typically with romantic partners, friends, and fam-
157 ily, in which they give benefits in response to the
158 partner's needs and desires without expecting any-
159 thing in repayment. Other relationships, such as
160 those with strangers and acquaintances, operate on
161 a tit-for-tat basis in most situations (except for emer-
162 gencies and when the cost of doing so is extremely
163 minimal). Unsurprisingly, most help is given in com-
164 munal relationships. Importantly, these communal
165 relationships also vary in strength, with people feel-
166 ing more responsibility for some people's needs than
167 others (for example, more responsibility for a child
168 than for a casual friend). The type of relationship,
169 the relationship stage, and the priority of that rela-
170 tionship within one's larger social network are a few
171 of the factors that can powerfully influence whether
172 prosocial behaviors will take place.

173 **Prosocial behavior in human infants and nonhuman**
174 **primates.** Recent research has gone beyond adult
175 humans to demonstrate a basic motivation to act
176 prosocially in both human infants and nonhuman pri-
177 mates. Capuchins reliably give food to conspecifics
178 (individuals of a single species) in role-playing (dic-
179 tator game) scenarios, and chimpanzees appear to
180 have a basic motivation to act altruistically, suggest-
181 ing that the phylogenetic (evolutionary developmen-
182 tal) roots of human altruism in the domain of instru-
183 mental helping may be ancient. However, despite a
184 tendency to cooperate readily with kin and recip-
185 rocating partners, chimpanzees (unlike humans) of-
186 ten 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://learningtogive.org/papers/paper52.html>