Prosocial Behavior with Peers: Intentions, Outcomes, and Interpersonal Adjustment

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Prosocial behaviors – actions that benefit others (Hay, 1994) – serve a vital function in the social lives of children and adolescents. They promote affiliation with and acceptance by peers (Wentzel, 2014), and contribute critically to positive development and well-being (Tomasello, 2009). Indeed, the associations between positive social behaviors and interpersonal success may be stronger than the links between aggressive behaviors and social difficulties (e.g., Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

Main Issues

Prosociality comprises a diverse set of actions, from providing concrete aid, such as passing someone an out-of-reach object, to more psychologically complex forms of assistance, like comforting a friend experiencing her first romantic break up. Moreover, the motivations underlying these behaviors can differ markedly, across both individuals and contexts. For some youth some of the time, other-oriented actions are driven by genuine concern for others (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014). For other people and in some circumstances, behaviors that benefit another may not actually derive solely from other-oriented concerns. Some prosocial behaviors may be motivated by broader social goals such as gaining the approval of others (Carlo & Randall, 2002), whereas other seemingly “prosocial” behaviors may be produced strategically to achieve self-focused, instrumental objectives (Boxer, Tisak, & Goldstein, 2004); for example, a child who shares a toy with a playmate to distract her from an even more desirable object (Hawley, 2002). In this chapter, we examine critically what is known about how, when, and why youth engage in prosocial behavior with peers during different developmental stages, as well as how these behaviors are linked to social outcomes.

Theoretical Considerations

What is Prosocial Behavior?

Prosocial behavior has been defined broadly as actions benefitting others (e.g., Carlo & Randall, 2002; Hay, 1994). As such, these behaviors often involve responding to the needs of another person, including instrumental needs in which an individual has difficulty completing a goal-directed behavior
(e.g., a classmate who is struggling with a homework project); *material desire*, in which an individual does not have access to a particular resource (e.g., a peer wants to build a tower but does not have any blocks); and *emotional distress*, in which an individual experiences a negative emotional state (e.g., a friend who is upset about failing a test). Dunfield (2014) proposed that to better understand the causes and consequences of other-oriented behavior, we should divide prosociality into more specific behaviors that address each of these needs, namely helping, sharing, and comforting, respectively.

These actions are clear examples of prosocial behavior because each represents a way that one individual can act on behalf of another. In contrast, some prosocial acts, such as cooperation, involve two individuals working together to achieve a shared goal (Warneken, Chen, & Tomasello, 2006). For example, in cooperative games, both individuals have to do their part for the game to work (e.g., playing on a teeter-totter). Two children must work together to create a positive outcome that would have been impossible to achieve alone. Though helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating are each observed within the first three years of life, they show unique ages of emergence and developmental trajectories (e.g., Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O’Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Dunn & Munn, 1986; Hay, 1994), highlighting the multidimensionality of prosociality.

Of course, the particular forms of, and contexts for, these four types of prosocial behavior evolve across development as children become increasingly sophisticated in their understandings of their social and psychological worlds. In the preschool years, children are able to respond to others’ salient and immediate needs by engaging in relatively concrete forms of prosocial action (e.g., handing someone a desired object, giving a hug). With increasing age, children’s prosocial actions reflect both a richer understanding of peer-group dynamics (e.g., overtures to include a peer in a social group) and of the psychological world (e.g., supporting a friend having trouble with a romantic partner; see Bergin, Talley, & Hamer, 2003). Indeed, when children are asked to provide accounts of helping a friend, more psychologically based forms of help become increasingly prevalent with age (Recchia et al., 2015).
Research also reflects age-related shifts in the targets of children’s prosocial behavior. That is, in adolescence, youth increasingly engage in activities such as political activism, volunteering, and community service, which recognize the needs of individuals beyond the boundaries of their immediate social networks (e.g., Flanagan, 2004; Zaff, Kawashima-Ginsberg, Lin, Lamb, Balsano, & Lerner, 2011).

What is Not Prosocial Behavior?

Given the broad definition of prosocial behavior, it can be easy to over-extend the term to include behaviors that are well-received by peers but do not result in benefits for others. For example, in situations likely to elicit antagonistic behaviors, such as being verbally taunted by a classmate, it may be tempting to consider behaviors that are not harmful – for example, assertive strategies such as when the victim tells the aggressor to stop – to be prosocial. However, absence of harm does not equal presence of benefit. The lack of precision resulting from stretching the boundaries of prosociality to encompass all positively valenced behaviors with peers impedes the development of both theory and application. Moreover, there is growing recognition that prosocial and antisocial behavior do not represent two ends of a continuum and can be present simultaneously in children’s social repertoires (e.g., Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002), lending further urgency to the mapping of the various forms and functions of prosocial behavior. We cannot rely on knowledge of antisocial behavior to draw inferences about prosociality.

It is also important to differentiate prosocial behaviors in particular from socially skilled behaviors in general; although both serve a positive function with peers, they are conceptually distinct. Socially skilled behaviors are actions that are effective in a specific situation (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007). Many prosocial strategies are interpersonally competent: if a friend is crying, most people would agree that the effective response is to comfort her. However, research has hinted that in some situations youth may not perceive prosocial behaviors to be effective or desirable. For example, children and adolescents judge resistance more positively than compliance in situations in which a peer
has made an unreasonable demand (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006). Similarly, research has shown that well-accepted children report that they would respond to unreasonable requests by a peer by asserting their own rights, rather than sharing or acquiescing (Hopmeyer & Asher, 1997), suggesting that, in this situation, the action that benefits the other may not be the one that is deemed to be socially skilled. Thus, in some circumstances, the socially skilled response may not benefit the other person. Moreover, some children, such as those who are highly inhibited, may utilize prosocial behaviors in ways that are not well-received by peers (see Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014). Research has suggested that greater social skill is associated with higher levels of prosocial behavior (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1996). This relationship may arise, in part, because children who are capable of socially skilled behaviors may be better able to enact complex prosocial responses, such as providing effective comfort to a distressed friend. However, social skills, and the social-cognitive abilities upstream from these behaviors, can also be used to cause harm (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). For example, some researcher has suggested that children who bully may be good at perspective-taking (e.g., Gini, 2006). In summary, although many prosocial behaviors are socially skilled, and youth who engage in socially skilled behavior may be more likely to enact effective prosocial behaviors, these constructs are not interchangeable.

Disentangling the Intentions Underlying Prosocial Behavior

We have defined prosocial behaviors as actions that benefit another (Hay, 1994). However, the presence of a positive outcome does not presuppose benevolent intentions, and research has demonstrated that prosocial behaviors can be multiply determined. Research has demonstrated that the intention of the actor may be to benefit the other person: 7- to 16-year-old children report that the needs of the other person typically motivated their helping behaviors (Recchia et al., 2015), and greater concern for others has been linked to higher levels of prosocial behavior, particularly when prosociality involves costs to the self (e.g., sharing a liked toy without being asked; see Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014).
Moreover, careful experiments have examined whether children younger than 2 years engage in prosocial behaviors motivated by another’s need (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006; Dunfield et al., 2011). In these studies, children were presented with both experimental tasks, in which the other person’s need was present (e.g., a toy was dropped out of reach), and control tasks, which were perceptually matched to the experimental task on all features except need (e.g., a toy was tossed out of reach). These control conditions ensured that children were responding to another’s actual need and not simply a behavioral rule (e.g., things shouldn’t be left on the floor), or a general desire to engage with the adult experimenter (e.g., by playing with the toy). Across tasks and ages, children frequently engaged in prosocial behavior when the recipient’s need was present and seldom did so when the need was absent.

Relatedly, children are more likely to intervene on behalf of a recipient who has previously experienced harm than one who has not (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009). Together, these studies suggest that many early instances of prosocial behavior are genuinely motivated by the observation of another’s need.

Prosocial actions may also be driven by broader social motivations. From an early age, one central motivator of prosocial behaviors may be the desire to affiliate (e.g., Carpendale, Kettner, & Audet, 2015). Recent research has demonstrated that engaging in reciprocal, non-prosocial social interactions (Barragan & Dweck 2014), being imitated (Carpenter, Uebel, & Tomasello, 2013), and experiencing social ostracism (Over & Carpenter, 2009) all increase children’s tendency to produce prosocial behaviors. These findings suggest that some prosocial behavior may reflect a more general desire for affiliation, a motivation that could be occurring in tandem with the goal to benefit the other.

Children may also be motivated to behave prosocially, at least partly, by the gains associated with others’ recognition of their acts, or, alternatively, by avoiding the negative social consequences of not sharing or helping (see Wentzel, 2014). For example, children as young as 5-years share resources more generously if they are being observed by peers than if they are not (Martin & Olson, 2015).
Although some prosocial behavior is driven by genuine concern for the other, perhaps embedded within the broader motivation of social affiliation, children may also engage in prosocial behaviors strategically, in service of another goal (Martin & Olson, 2015). In these cases, the gain for the other person is incidental. For example, Hawley (2002) observed preschoolers using behaviors such as helping strategically to gain personal access to a desirable toy. Similarly, Boxer et al. (2004) found that early adolescents reported using prosocial behaviors to achieve their own instrumental goals, in other words, to get what they want. Importantly, this strategic prosociality was associated with greater aggression, whereas other-oriented prosocial behavior (i.e., with no expectation of personal gain) was not. Thus, not only can different goals motivate prosociality, the correlates of prosocial behavior may vary as a function of the actor’s underlying intentions.

In summary, research with young children has contributed to substantial progress in our understanding of prosocial behavior by defining this construct carefully as actions that benefit another, such as sharing, helping, comforting, and cooperating. Prosocial behaviors are not the opposite of antisocial behaviors, and interpersonal actions that do not cause harm, but also do not benefit others, , should not be considered prosocial. However, as we review in the next sections, work on the associations between prosocial behavior and peer functioning has often defined the term more broadly, making it challenging to chart the developmental trajectories of prosociality among older children and adolescents, as well as to disentangle the associations between prosocial actions and intentions and key indices of social adjustment.

Methods and Measures

Measuring Prosocial Behavior

Researchers use multiple methodologies to assess prosocial behavior. Structured observational approaches, in which an experimenter presents a child with a situational cue designed to elicit prosocial action, have been commonly used with young children (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Svetlova et al.,
For example, in a typical paradigm, children are paired with an adult experimenter in a laboratory environment. The experimenter then faces a number of challenges such as an empty snack container (e.g., Dunfield et al., 2011), or emotional distress due to injury (e.g., Svetlova et al., 2010), and children are given an opportunity to provide a response.

These approaches allow researchers to examine specific types of prosocial behavior (e.g., providing instrumental aid versus emotional support) in different circumstances (e.g., whether or not help was requested explicitly) allowing for the development of a precise taxonomy of prosociality and strong inferences about the conditions under which such behavior occurs and developmental changes in these processes. Further, these designs have helped to identify the specific cognitive and motivational factors that may both limit and support the emergence and development of other-oriented acts. On the other hand, due to the need for standardized presentation of the tasks, children typically interact with a novel adult. When peers are included in these designs, they are often unfamiliar individuals who have been paired for the study (e.g., Brownell & Carriger, 1990; Nichols, Svetlova, & Brownell 2009) or hypothetical peers the children are asked to imagine (e.g., Paulus, 2016). Interacting with a stranger limits opportunities to examine how relationship type and history may shape prosocial behavior. Moreover, it is unclear how well behavior with a novel partner in a relatively impoverished environment will generalize to the complexity of natural interactions with peers.

To answer questions about the role of prosociality in “real world” peer interactions, researchers have used more naturalistic observational procedures to examine children’s behavior with classmates, friends, and unfamiliar peers (e.g., Ensor, Spencer, & Hughes, 2011; Ianotti, 1985). This approach affords no control over the circumstances preceding prosocial behavior, although researchers can map naturally occurring contextual variability by noting the conditions that elicited the response (e.g., spontaneous versus requested; Ianotti, 1985). It may also be challenging for researchers to disentangle prosocial
behavior from more general sociability (e.g., being friendly) in the chaos of children’s social environments (Frey, Nolen, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2005).

Participants in observational studies are typically children younger than 6 years, although there are exceptions (e.g., Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). With older youth, researchers are more likely to use questionnaires and interviews. One approach is to ask children how they would respond to hypothetical situations likely to elicit prosocial responses. For example, Rose and Asher (2004) examined children’s reported responses to situations in which a friend sought their help (see also Glick & Rose, 2011). Like structured observations, vignettes allow researchers to present standardized stimuli. Moreover, it is possible to ask children how they would respond to many different situations, an important feature given the marked situational specificity of children’s interpersonal behavior (Dirks et al., 2007).

More typically, researchers obtain global ratings or judgments of how often children engage in prosocial behavior. For younger children, questionnaires are often completed by parents or teachers. Many widely used measures of children’s behavior contain prosocial subscales or items, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (Goodman, 1997) and the Child Behavior Scale (CBS; Ladd & Profilet, 1996). Researchers working with older children and adolescents may ask peers to report on the prosocial behavior of their classmates, using an instrument such as the Extended Class Play Measure (e.g., Pursell, Laursen, Rubin, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2008), or items such as “which classmates support you .... when having problems at home?” (Dijkstra & Gest, 2015).

Not all of the measures used to assess prosocial behavior align with current theoretical understanding of the construct. Rather, some of these instruments and items appear to be tapping positive interpersonal behavior, more broadly. For example, the descriptions capturing prosocial behavior on the Extended Class Play peer-nomination instrument include someone who “waits his/her turn,” and “[has] good ideas for things to do” (Pursell et al., 2008). The CBS prosocial behavior subscale asks teachers to evaluate the extent to which children cooperate, listen, compromise, take turns, and
are friendly. Researchers assessing children’s responses to hypothetical vignettes have also used the term prosocial to refer to a variety of positively valenced behaviors, including compromising and making a polite request (e.g., Delveaux & Daniels, 2000; Smith-Schrandt, Ojanen, Gesten, Feldman, & Calhoun, 2011). These behaviors play an important role in children’s peer groups (e.g., Newcomb et al., 1993); however, broadening the definition of prosociality in this way may contribute to equivocal inferences about its correlates and consequences, due to variability across studies in the precise nature of the construct being assessed.

Some self-report measures for older children and adolescents assess prosocial behavior more precisely. For example, several researchers have used or adapted the Self-Report Altruism Scale (e.g., Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shephard, 2005), which includes items such as “I have helped a classmate who I did not know that well with a homework assignment when my knowledge was greater than his or hers.” The Prosocial Tendencies Measure – Revised (PTM-R; Carlo et al., 2003), assesses prosociality in different contexts, including publically, anonymously, to comply with a request, and under emotional circumstances. Inclusion of such contextual detail provides more precise knowledge of when and how youth engage prosocially.

**Measuring the Goals and Motivations Underlying Prosocial Behavior**

In general, measures of prosocial behavior do not also assess the underlying goals; however, contextual information can provide some insight into the intentions motivating prosocial actions. Indeed, because young children cannot reliably report their goals and motivations, researchers have drawn inferences about why children 5 years of age and younger are behaving prosocially by manipulating key situational features and observing how children respond (Martin & Olsen, 2015). For example, 18-month-olds are more likely to share with an experimenter who experienced harm than an experimenter who had not (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010), suggesting the behavior is at least partly motivated by concern for the other. Researchers have also gained insight into the motivations
underlying younger children’s prosocial behavior by linking broader measures of social cognition and emotion to children’s prosocial actions. For example, physiological markers of children’s empathy have been shown to predict helping behaviors, suggesting that other-oriented concerns play a role in these actions (see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990).

By middle childhood, children are able to report their interpersonal goals reliably (Rose & Asher, 1999; 2004), although, of course, they may be acting on motivations not available to verbal report (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001). Researchers often assess motivations for prosocial behavior among older children and adolescents by asking them to rate, endorse, or report the goals they are trying to achieve or the reasons for their behavior. Two types of goals have been investigated. Prosocial goals, specifically, are the extent to which youth are trying to benefit others (Wentzel, 2014). For example, the Prosocial Goal Pursuit scale asks youth how often they “try to cheer someone up when something has gone wrong,” and “try to help [their] classmates solve a problem once [they]’ve figured it out” (Wentzel, 1991; Barry & Wentzel, 2006; Wentzel, Filisetti, & Looney, 2007). The broader reasons underlying these proximal goals are also of interest. These motivations have been indexed directly, by asking youth to rate or describe the reasons why they hold these prosocial intentions (e.g., Sengsavang, Willemsen, & Krettenauer, 2015; Wentzel et al., 2007). Youth could also be asked to explain the reasons for their behaviors in actual situations (e.g., Murphy & Eisenberg, 1996), and youths’ narrative accounts of their prosocial actions have been coded for references to reasons underlying behaviour (e.g., Recchia et al., 2015). Alternatively, researchers may assess more general goal orientations, such as children’s pursuit of dominance, affiliation, and avoidance (e.g., Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996; Ojanen, Groonroos, & Salmivalli, 2005) and then link endorsement of these goals to their prosocial behavior (e.g., Ojanen et al., 2005).

Like behavior, children’s social motivations vary markedly as a function of situation (Ojanen, Aunola, & Salmivalli, 2007), yet few studies have examined youths’ goals specifically in situations that
call for prosocial action. In one example, Rose and Asher (2004) asked youth to endorse the goals they might have when confronted with a friend in need of help, including prosocial objectives such as helping the friend to feel better. A number of studies have examined youths’ goals in response to other types of situations, such as transgressions by a friend (MacEvoy & Asher, 2012) or conflict with peers (Delveaux & Daniels, 2000). In these investigations, goals such as maintaining the relationship and being fair are often construed as prosocial, in that they are broadly positive and do not involve harming the other person (Samson, Ojanen, & Hollo, 2012). Here again, although these goals are important, looser conceptualizations may obfuscate key individual differences in prosocial motivations, as well as the outcomes of these intentions.

Key Research Findings

Prosocial Behavior across Development

Prosocial behaviors emerge in the first two years of life and become increasingly frequent and complex over childhood and adolescence (e.g., Hay, 1994; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Yet, when we examine both age of emergence and developmental trajectories, this claim does not apply equally well to all varieties of prosociality. Structured observations of infants and toddlers interacting with adults suggest that helping emerges first, shortly after the first birthday, showing rapid development over the second year (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). Sharing emerges later in the second year and, between 18- and 24-months, increases in how frequently and spontaneously resources are offered (Brownell et al., 2009). Similarly, children begin cooperating with novel adults by 18 months (Warneken & Tomasello, 2007) and with peers by 24 months (Brownell, Ramani, & Zerwas, 2006). Comforting appears to show the most heterogeneous pattern of development. When comforting is assessed by examining children’s ability to intervene on behalf of an emotionally distressed, novel adult it appears to emerge late in the second year (Dunfield et al., 2011). Yet, these overt acts of comfort are preceded developmentally by
clearly related behaviors, such as concerned attention (Spinrad & Stifter, 2006) and can be facilitated in younger children by clarifying the underlying need (Svetlova et al., 2010).

Importantly, there remains a need for more controlled investigations into how the relational context influences young children’s prosociality. Many toddlers will comfort a novel adult by the age of 4 years; however, naturalistic observations have demonstrated that although preschoolers oriented towards a classmate’s distress about 86% of the time, they only responded prosocially during about 11% of these episodes (Caplan & Hay, 1989). This discrepancy may occur because understanding peers’ emotional signals is more challenging for young children (Nichols, Svetlova & Brownell, 2010). Moreover, social experiences may contribute to individual differences in young children’s prosocial displays. For example, between 16 and 33 months, toddlers who cried frequently themselves were also likely to respond to the distress of their peers, particularly if they had seen this care modeled by their teachers (Howes & Farver, 1987). Clearly, much work remains to be done to track the influence of social partners on early expressions of prosociality.

The same complexities are compounded with respect to prosocial development in middle childhood and adolescence, in part because measurements tend to be more global and specific subtypes of prosociality are less frequently assessed. There is a general trend towards increasing levels of prosociality from childhood to adolescence (see Fabes & Eisenberg, 1998); in contrast, during the early to middle adolescent years, self-reported prosociality appears to show modest declines, with a slight rebound in late adolescence (e.g., Carlo, Crockett, Randall & Roesch, 2007; Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffiano, & Caprara, 2013). Nevertheless, age-related findings vary across types of prosocial behavior and methods of assessment (see Fabes & Eisenberg, 1998). For example, sharing/donating behavior may particularly increase in frequency from childhood to adolescence, as compared to other types of prosociality. In turn, when prosociality with peers is measured via teacher-reports, findings suggest either stability or declines (rather than increases) in prosociality across the elementary school
years (Côté, Tremblay, Nagin, Zoccolillo, & Vitaro, 2002; Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006). Other cross-sectional and longitudinal studies imply complex, nonlinear changes over time in particular forms of prosocial behavior across both childhood (e.g., Jackson & Tisak, 2001) and adolescence (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2005). Thus, overall, findings regarding the age of emergence and developmental trajectory of prosocial behavior are somewhat mixed, and appear to depend on which prosocial behaviour is being considered and how it is measured.

With respect to the stability of individual differences in prosociality, longitudinal research generally suggests some stability of prosocial tendencies over time, especially with increasing age. Using a self-report measure that assessed various forms of helping and sharing, Carlo et al. (2007) found moderate stability of prosociality among adolescents in Grades 7 to 12. In turn, Eisenberg, Guthrie, Murphy, Shepard, Cumberland, and Carlo (1999) reported that spontaneous sharing with peers in the preschool classroom was related to various measures of prosociality across childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood; in contrast, compliant sharing and low-cost helping were less predictive of prosociality over time. These latter findings are in line with the conclusion that prosocial behavior may stem from varied motivational, cognitive, and emotional underpinnings.

*Motivations for Prosocial Behavior across Development*

Consistent with the complexity evident in age-related changes in the forms of prosociality, research reveals conflicting patterns regarding developmental shifts in the motivations that may underlie prosociality. On the one hand, some studies based on children’s responses to hypothetical vignettes and behavior in experimental tasks suggest that young children’s reasoning about prosocial behavior is relatively self-oriented (i.e., aimed at meeting their own needs) and externalized (i.e., motivated by reward); with increasing age, this body of research indicates that youths’ prosocial motivations become increasingly other-oriented and internalized (Eisenberg, 1986).
Yet these findings stand in contrast to more recent experimental work, suggesting that even the earliest instances of prosociality are responsive to others’ needs, and produced independently of reward. In fact, offering children material incentives appears to reduce (Warneken, Hare, Melis, Hanus, Tomasello, 2007; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008) or have no influence on (Grusec, 1991) early prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, the genuinely other-oriented nature of early prosocial behaviors is evident in toddlers’ and infants’ intrinsic desire to see others’ needs met (Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012). This genuine concern is also apparent in school-aged children who exhibit a considerable degree of other-oriented reasoning when responding to hypothetical vignettes measuring their prosocial moral orientation in peer contexts (Kochanska & Murray, 2000). Moreover, consistently from ages 6- to 16-years, youth spontaneously describe their motives for past prosocial actions with friends as overwhelmingly other-oriented (Recchia et al., 2015).

Despite these findings, other investigations suggest that children bring varied concerns to bear on their prosocial actions throughout development. Research has documented that both young children (Hawley, 2002) and adolescents (Boxer et al. 2004) will use prosocial behavior to achieve self-oriented instrumental goals. Of course, strategic use of prosocial behavior does not have to be in service of purely selfish outcomes (Martin & Olson, 2015). For example, research examining the targets of children’s prosocial behavior suggests that these behaviors may serve a strategic function in relationship maintenance. For example, children are more likely to behave prosocially with familiar than unfamiliar others (e.g., Young, Fox, & Zahn-Waxler, 1999), and are more likely to share with a friend who already has a lot of resources than with a disliked peer or a stranger who has less (Paulus, 2016). Costly sharing is also more common among children when the recipient is a friend as opposed to a disliked peer (Thompson, Barresi & Moore, 1997), although there are limits to what children are willing to do. Though children maintain their motivation to help when minimal costs are imposed (Warneken et al., 2007), there is a reduction in prosocial behaviour when the personal costs increase (e.g., giving away one’s own
as opposed to another’s good, Svetlova et al., 2010). Thus, children seem to be concerned with balancing strategic concerns about gaining others’ approval and meeting their own needs, alongside more purely other-oriented motives. Broadly speaking, however, little is known about the developmental trajectories of these more strategic functions of prosociality.

Research beyond the preschool years does suggest that, with age, youth may become increasingly adept at coordinating their own and their friends’ needs in their reasoning about prosociality. For example, Komolova and Wainryb (2011) presented 5-, 10, and 17-year-old children with hypothetical vignettes depicting conflicts between a protagonist’s and their friends’ preferences (e.g., attending a rock concert or a friend’s birthday party). Across all scenarios, most 5- and 10-year-olds judged that protagonists should act in ways that meet their friends’ desires. In contrast, many 16-year-olds endorsed acting in ways consistent with their own desires, justifying these judgments on the basis of concerns with autonomy (e.g., “she doesn’t have to do everything her friend asks”) and the nature of friendship (e.g., “a friend will understand that sometimes you just do what you want to do”). Importantly, however, when youth were presented with scenarios in which the friend’s desire was more significant than their own, virtually all of the adolescents endorsed behaving in a way that prioritized their friend’s need. Such results underscore the importance of considering prosocial motivation in situational, relational, and developmental context.

In addition to examining age-related changes in the motivations underlying prosociality, a large body of research also suggests a number of factors that may consistently influence prosocial behavior across development. Although not all of these variables are directly related to goals, they speak indirectly to some of the motivational processes that may account for children’s prosocial tendencies. Specifically, research tends to reveal a modest but significant link between children’s sympathy for others and their prosocial behavior (see recent review in Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). Inasmuch as sympathy is defined as the tendency to feel concern for others in distress, this positive
association is generally consistent with the view that prosocial behavior may be largely other-oriented (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991). Also in support of this interpretation, affective arousal in response to another’s suffering that results in self-oriented personal distress tends to be associated with lower levels of prosociality (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1989).

Although empathic affective responses to others’ signals of need may support other-oriented prosocial motivations, they appear to do so in conjunction with other socio-moral factors. For instance, Malti, Gummerum, Keller, and Buchmann (2009) found that, among 6-year-old children, both sympathy and moral motivation independently predicted prosocial behavior. In their study, moral motivation was defined by a combination of moral emotion expectancies (i.e., children’s expectations that they would feel badly after a transgression) justified by references to moral norms or concerns for others’ welfare in response to hypothetical harm vignettes. The same study revealed that moral motivation moderated the association between sympathy and prosociality, such that the association was stronger when moral motivation was weaker. Broadly speaking, then, this work implies that both social-cognitive and affective factors may function in combination to predict other-oriented motivation and behavior.

Building on the moral cognitions and motivations that may be influential across childhood (Thompson, 2012), the emergence of a full-fledged sense of moral identity in adolescence has been linked to individual differences in prosociality during the teenaged years. Moral identity is most commonly defined as the extent to which moral concerns are central to a person’s sense of self (although see Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015), and is posited to emerge as a result of the integration of the moral and self-systems in adolescence (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). In a recent meta-analysis of studies with adolescents and adults, Hertz and Krettenauer (2016) found that moral identity was modestly related to prosocial behavior (including helping, sharing, caring, and volunteering). Nevertheless, the causal nature of this link remains unclear; studies provide evidence that engaging in prosocial acts may provide opportunities for deriving morally laden self-related insights (Recchia et al., 2015; Soucie, Lawford, &
Pratt, 2012) but also that self-transformations resulting from helping others in turn predict increases in prosociality (e.g., Cox & McAdams, 2012). In terms of connections between moral identity and prosocial motivation, some theorists posit that moral identity implies the centrality of other-oriented goals to the self-concept (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992). Yet others describe this association as more indeterminate; for instance, Krettenauer and Casey (2015) make a distinction between authentic (“feeling good about what I did”) and hubristic (“feeling good about who I am”) moral pride, and found that only the former was associated with self-reported prosociality among adolescents and young adults.

Associations between Prosocial Behavior and Functioning in the Peer Group

Although the forms of and motivations for prosocial behavior change as children age, these behaviors maintain a positive association with key indices of social well-being across development. Many studies examining the links between prosocial behaviors and peer relationships have defined the construct to encompass a variety of positive social behaviors that do not necessarily result in benefits for others. This work has demonstrated that, during both childhood and adolescence, youth who engage in these behaviors are more likely to have friends (e.g., Bowker, Rubin, Burgess, Booth-Laforce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2006; McDonald, Wang, Menzer, Rubin, & Booth-Laforce, 2011; Sebanc, 2003), and these relationships are more stable (Bowker et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2011), and of better quality (e.g., McDonald et al., 2011; Sebanc, 2003). In studies that define prosocial behavior more narrowly as actions that benefit others, similar patterns are observed (e.g., Cillessen, Jiang, West, & Laszkowski, 2005; Poorthuis et al., 2012; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). Clear gender differences in the associations between positive social behaviors and friendship adjustment have not emerged (e.g., Cillessen et al. 2005; Sebanc, 2003; see MacEvoy & Asher, 2012). It is not surprising that behaving prosocially is associated with better friendships, given that youth perceive one of the defining features of this relationship to be that friends help and support each other (e.g., Furman & Bierman, 1984). Violating these expectations may contribute to discord in the relationship (MacEvoy & Asher, 2012).
Positive social behaviors, more broadly, and prosocial behavior, specifically, have also been robustly linked to being well-liked, or accepted, by peers (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1996; Newcomb et al., 1993; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). Moreover, some research indicates that prosocial behavior contributes uniquely to subsequent peer acceptance. Two studies have indicated that for children in early elementary school, prosocial behavior predicted increased acceptance by peers one (Caputi, Lecce, Pagnin, & Banerjee, 2012) or two (Kuppens et al., 2009) years later, although a third investigation did not find a prospective association between prosocial behavior in grade 3 and peer acceptance in grade 6 (Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger, & Crick, 2005). A recent randomized control trial revealed that 9- to-11-year-olds asked to perform three prosocial acts each week experienced a greater boost in peer acceptance after a month than did those who were assigned to visit three places (Layous et al., 2012). Here again, prosocial behavior does not appear to benefit youth of one gender more than the other. Some investigations have found that contemporaneous associations between prosocial behavior and peer acceptance are stronger for girls (Oberle et al., 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2005), but others have not identified gender differences (e.g., Newcomb et al., 1993; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999), and Kuppens et al. (2009) found that the longitudinal associations between prosocial behavior and social acceptance were stronger for boys.

Research has not yet mapped the specific mechanisms by which prosocial behavior contributes to greater liking by peers. A first step will be determining the unique contribution of prosocial behavior, relative to other types of positive behaviors, such as being fun, to greater peer acceptance and better quality friendships. As described previously, researchers have often pushed the boundaries of prosociality to include other types of positive behaviors. Moreover, measurement batteries often contain only a handful of positive items among a longer list of negative items. As such, judgments about prosocial behavior could be co-varying with perceptions of other, unmeasured, positive characteristics that may also contribute to peer acceptance. Assuming unique associations with prosociality are indeed
observed, it will also be important to understand more precisely how it is that behaving prosocially increases general likeability with peers. There is some evidence that children engage in more prosocial behavior with friends than with classmates (e.g., Buhrmester, Goldfarb, & Cantrell, 1992), perhaps, in part, because they expect that friends are more likely to reciprocate (Martin & Olson, 2015). As such many classmates may not benefit directly from a given individual’s prosocial behaviour. Intriguingly, research has shown that children as young as 5-years will tell another person to choose an interaction partner who had behaved generously towards them (Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2016); that is, they engage in prosocial gossip, giving others information that could help them in the future. In this way, the larger social network may come to know who is likely to be helpful and cooperative, which could increase a child’s likeability. Similarly, although not all peers may be direct recipients of children’s prosociality, they may have the opportunity to observe children behaving prosocially with their friends. Therefore, inasmuch as prosociality is seen as a laudable characteristic, children may report greater liking for peers who are seen as “helpers” in the broader peer group.

Although behaving prosocially may help youth to be liked, it may not make them sought after. When Thomas and Bowker (2012) asked early adolescents whom they desired as friends, they identified classmates who were popular, well-liked, and aggressive, but not prosocial, possibly because youth gain status themselves by having a popular friend (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010). Indeed, early adolescents who are popular may not need to engage in prosocial behavior to increase the quality of their friendships (Poorthuis et al., 2012). Moreover, simply being prosocial may not be sufficient to achieve popularity with peers. Although research has suggested that being a popular or highly central member of the peer group is associated with greater prosocial behavior, it is simultaneously associated with increased aggression (e.g., Dijkstra & Gest, 2015; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Lease et al., 2002). Perhaps being popular requires engaging in socially skillful behavior, and the ability to coordinate multiple different types of strategies, depending upon the specific situation (e.g., Hawley et al., 2002).
The Influence of Peer Relationships on the Development of Prosocial Behavior and Motivation

Not only does prosocial behavior contribute to greater acceptance by peers (e.g., Kuppens et al., 2009; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999), this heightened regard, in turn, could shape subsequent prosociality. Few longitudinal studies have examined the prospective links between peer acceptance and later prosocial behavior, and findings are not unequivocal. Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2005) found that greater social preference in grade 3 predicted increased prosocial behavior in grade 6, and Wentzel (2003) reported that peer rejection in grade 6 predicted decreased prosocial behavior in grade 8. On the other hand, a study with children in grades 2 to 4 found no predictive association between social preference and prosocial behavior two years later (Kuppens et al., 2009). Thus, it appears that experiences in the peer group might shape prosocial behavior, but additional research is needed. Moreover, it will be important to elucidate the mechanisms by which positive peer experiences contribute to increased prosociality. One possibility is that children who are well-liked may receive more prosocial overtures from others, and they may then engage in reciprocity by behaving prosocially in return (Martin & Olson, 2015). However, little is known about who the most common recipients of prosocial behavior are, and a recent study examining the targets of early adolescents’ prosocial and aggressive actions found that well-liked adolescents were slightly less likely to be treated prosocially by peers (Closson & Hymel, 2016).

Children’s friendships may be a central context for the development of prosociality. Research has suggested that higher-quality friendships may contribute to increased prosocial behavior. For example, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Black, and Bean (2015) found that for early adolescents, greater reported connection with a friend was linked to greater prosocial behavior towards that person. Here, increased sympathy was identified as a mechanism. A second study demonstrated that for both children and adolescents, having a higher-quality friendship prospectively predicted selection of prosocial strategies in response to hypothetical situations in which a friend seeks help (Glick & Rose,
Such increases in prosocial behavior specifically targeted to the friend may be explained, at least partly, by reciprocity (Martin & Olson, 2015). However, Barry and Wentzel (2006) reported that early adolescents who had a friend who behaves prosocially showed increases in prosocial behavior, indexed by peer nominations, as well as reported pursuit of prosocial goals with classmates, one year later (Barry & Wentzel, 2006). These findings suggest that friendship experiences may increase prosocial behavior beyond that relationship, and processes other than reciprocity may account for these changes. For example, youth may come to value the benefits of prosocial behavior by receiving them, and may learn the skills necessary to coordinate complex prosocial responses by having them modelled. In sum, peer relationships characterized by concern and caring may contribute to youth engaging in other-oriented behaviors, which, in turn, may benefit their interpersonal relationships, contributing to a virtuous cycle.

Associations between Prosocial Goals and Functioning in the Peer Group

As the preceding review makes clear, youth who engage in prosocial behaviors are better liked. What is not clear is the extent to which prosocial goals, or having the intent to benefit others, matters for these positive interpersonal outcomes. Experimental research with young children has suggested that these goals are critically important. Before the age of 2 years, children are sensitive to an actor’s intent, preferring those who unsuccessfully try to help over those who do not even try (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010). By the age of 3 years, children have been shown to help an actor who intended harm and failed less often than an actor who caused harm by accident (Vaish et al., 2010). Thus, having the goal to help may confer social benefits, even when the desired result is not achieved. Conversely, intending to harm could be linked to social sanction, regardless of whether the negative outcome occurs. To some extent, it may be the thought that counts.

Research with older children has not, however, consistently revealed direct links between youths’ interpersonal goals and their social functioning. One study found that early adolescents’ self-reported pursuit of prosocial goals predicted greater peer acceptance (Wentzel, 1994), but a second did
not, although children who were neglected by peers endorsed more prosocial goals than did their average classmates, and controversial children endorsed fewer (Wentzel, 1991). Wentzel (2003) reported no contemporaneous association between endorsement of prosocial goals and sociometric groups among 6th grade students, but being rejected in Grade 6 predicted decreased pursuit of prosocial goals in grade 8. Rose and Asher (2004) found that children’s report that they would be trying to help in response to a hypothetical friend in need did not predict the number or quality of their friendships, although children who endorsed not wanting to get involved were perceived to be less good friends, and those who reported they would try to get the friend to take responsibility for the problem had fewer friends. Studies examining the associations between endorsement of other types of interpersonal goals, such as affiliation and dominance, and peer acceptance have also not revealed direct links (Jarvinen & Nicholls 1996; Ojanen et al., 2005). Greater endorsement of revenge goals has been linked to having fewer friends, as well as relationships characterized by less positivity and greater conflict, but reported pursuit of relationship-maintenance and instrumental-control goals did not predict friendship functioning (Rose & Asher, 1999).

Arguably, one reason that compelling associations between youths’ goals and their social adjustment have not emerged is that it is not clear how children communicate their intentions, nor how peers assimilate and interpret this information. In other words, how do peers know whether a child is trying to help? Children’s perceptions of intent are likely shaped by factors other than the stated aim of the actor. Thus, simply having a prosocial goal may not be sufficient for peers to know that a child is well-intentioned. Moreover, in the experimental work demonstrating that young children’s behavior depends more on an actor’s intent than the outcome (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010), participants consider salient cues against a quiescent background. In the real world, children and adolescents must judge peers’ intentions amidst a lot of competing information, and in the context of on-going relationships. Nevertheless, research with young children suggests that older youths’ interpersonal goals
will affect their functioning with peers. To test this hypothesis rigorously, it may be necessary to conduct controlled investigations of how characteristics of children and contexts influence judgments of their prosocial intent and other motivations, and then translate this knowledge into the development of studies that examine links between intent and outcomes under more real-world conditions. Moreover, it will be important to examine the role of prosocial intent in social adjustment at both the dyadic and the group levels. It may be that intentions matter more for interactions with friends, when youth may be better able to make nuanced assessments of actions, and less so for functioning in the broader group, when the outcome may count for more.

Implications

Positive social behaviors, including other-oriented, prosocial actions, promote acceptance and friendship with peers, suggesting that they should be key targets for prevention and intervention efforts. Variability in the conceptualization of prosociality across studies, however, has rendered a fuzzy map of which behaviors may matter most at which developmental stages. Greater recognition that prosociality is multi-dimensional (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014), and distinct from other adaptive social behaviors, such as assertiveness, will provide a clearer picture of the unique contributions of specific behaviors to social success. Research has also suggested that the goals underlying other-oriented actions may themselves serve a critical function with peers, independent of the outcomes of their behaviors. Determining if and how prosocial intent contributes to higher-quality relationships will also inform efforts to help children struggling with peers.

Future Directions

To date, research on prosocial behavior with very young children, which has emphasized precise delineation of the construct, has developed relatively independently from work conducted to understand the function of prosocial behavior in the peer group, which has often defined prosociality broadly. A critical next step is cross-pollination of these two lines of investigation. Incorporating more
ecologically valid measures of peer functioning into observational studies that carefully distinguish among different types of prosocial behavior in young children will elucidate the links between these behaviors and peer relationships early in development. Conversely, extending the focus on contextual variability that has characterized research with young children to investigations with older youth may help to elucidate goals and motivations beyond those that youth can report themselves, as well as provide detailed information about the circumstances conditioning precise types of prosocial behavior.

More generally, researchers should diversify the methodological approaches that they use to conduct systematic investigations of prosocial behavior and goals. Studies have typically documented static snapshots of youths’ prosociality. Daily diaries and ecological momentary assessments would allow for an examination of prosocial behaviors in youths’ day-to-day lives, testing more proximal predictors and outcomes. Carefully controlled laboratory studies may be necessary to examine how youth make determinations about the intent underlying prosocial actions. Use of observational paradigms with older youth will allow us to assess the quality of their prosocial behaviors, which, when linked to information about their social functioning and their prosocial goals, could help us to disentangle the relative contributions of intent and execution.

Associations between prosocial behavior and interpersonal outcomes should also be examined in more diverse samples. More studies should examine prosocial behavior among youth living in economically disadvantaged environments (e.g., Torrente, Capella, & Watling Neal, 2014), as the types of prosocial behavior in which youth engage, and the reception of these behaviors by peers, may differ in environments characterized by limited resources and greater violence. There may also be cultural differences in the associations between prosociality and peer relationships. For example, cultural variations in the extent to which prosocial behavior is seen as obligatory (e.g., Baron & Miller, 2000) may impact its associations with social functioning. Finally, careful examination of prosocial behavior among youth experiencing clinically significant psychopathology may also yield gains. Both internalizing and
externalizing syndromes are associated with marked interpersonal impairment (see Dirks et al., 2007), and decreased prosociality may be one mechanism contributing to these poor outcomes.

Conclusion

Available evidence suggests that prosocial behavior contributes to social well-being for children and adolescents. Increasing our understanding of the types of prosocial behavior that matter the most in peer interactions, and how youth make sense of the complex pattern of outcomes and intentions that comprise their social lives, will help us to understand how best to facilitate the interpersonal success of individual youth, and more harmonious peer group experiences more broadly.

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