

Title: Altruism and Prosocial Behaviour

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Synonyms of altruism and prosocial behaviour: benevolence, charity, civil service, compassion, cooperation, generosity, helping, kind acts, philanthropy, selflessness, self-sacrifice, volunteering

Definition:

Prosocial behaviour is voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another person. Such behaviour is considered to be altruistic if it is motivated by a genuine desire to benefit another person, without any expectation of benefits to oneself.

Prosocial behaviour is the “social glue” that enables people of different ages to live together peacefully and productively. Specifically, prosocial behaviour has been defined as “voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another person”¹ (p. 92). The purpose of this entry is to examine motivators or antecedents of prosocial behaviour, possible benefits or consequences for the helper, and how the underlying processes may differ across different phases of the adult lifespan.

Imagine the following scenario: For the past 38 years, Charlie, a consumer protection lawyer, has made pro bono work an important part of his law practice, working with disadvantaged clients making claims against large corporations. Early in his career, Charlie’s track record of winning these pro bono cases earned him much prestige and was central to his success as an emerging professional. Although career building is no longer a concern for him, Charlie has continued providing free legal counsel to people who could not otherwise afford it and also to his extended family and friends. Being retired now, he gives legal aid to the people he feels close to and cares about, such as his grandson, who recently sought his counsel when suing a fraudulent credit union.

Prosocial behaviour can come in many different forms, ranging from small acts of kindness, such as letting someone in a rush go ahead at the cashier, to more sustained acts, such as volunteering for a charitable organization, and even to things one might take for granted, such as looking after one’s grandchildren. However, the above example clearly illustrates that motivations for engaging in prosocial behaviour may change across the lifespan.

Antecedents of Prosocial Behaviour

There is strong evidence for systematic changes in prosocial behaviour across the adult lifespan, suggesting that older adults behave more prosocially than young adults^{2,3}. The next section reviews a spectrum of possible motivations for engaging in prosocial behaviour, from genuinely psychological mechanisms to evolutionary accounts, examines potential age-related differences in these mechanisms, and reviews frequently chosen methodological approaches for studying them.

Altruism

Social psychological theories often distinguish between altruistic and egoistic motivations for prosocial behaviour. Altruistic behaviour is typically thought of as the type of prosocial behaviour that is motivated by a genuine desire to benefit another person, without any expectation of benefits to oneself^{4,1}. Coming back to the above hypothetical scenario, Charlie may be motivated to engage in pro bono work out of compassion for disadvantaged clients who particularly need his support. There is ongoing debate among psychologists over whether purely altruistic behaviour does in fact exist⁴ and most researchers agree that prosocial behaviour tends to also be driven by egoistic (non-altruistic) motivations. These can include a desire to feel good about oneself, to improve one's social standing (such as Charlie wanting to build a reputation at the beginning of his career), or to avoid uncomfortable feelings of sadness, anxiety, or guilt^{4,5}.

Research seeking to disentangle altruistic from egoistic motivations of prosocial behaviour typically uses experimental paradigms that manipulate aversive arousal, social evaluation, or rewards and link them to prosocial intentions, prosocial responses to hypothetical scenarios, or actual prosocial behaviour⁵. Furthermore, survey methods have been used to explore volunteering motivations including egoism and altruism^{6,2}.

Empathy

An alternative approach to examining antecedents of prosocial behaviour is to delineate the specific skills that enable individuals to understand complex social situations and behave prosocially. For example, individuals may be empathic⁷ independently of whether their prosocial behaviour is primarily altruistically or egoistically motivated. Hence, Charlie might have offered pro bono services over the years because he is the kind of person who has a very sensitive radar for other people's needs.

A large body of research has investigated the empathy-altruism link across species, including humans⁴, suggesting that there may be an evolutionary basis for this ability⁷. In humans, emotional empathy, defined as a merging of emotional contagion and compassion, seems to be particularly closely associated with prosocial behaviour¹. Unlike cognitive empathy (the ability to engage in perspective-taking), emotional empathy has been shown, in cross-sectional but not in longitudinal research, to be higher in older adults than in younger adults, and seems to account for age-related differences in prosocial behaviour^{8,3}. This increased emotional empathy in today's cohort of older adults, as compared to young adults, may reflect older adults' desire to help others and engage in emotionally meaningful experiences, or age-graded cultural expectations to recognize and fulfill others' needs³. Emotional empathy is frequently assessed via physiological arousal (skin conductance, heart rate), nonverbal emotional cues (facial movements, gestures, vocalizations), or self-reports of empathy^{7,1}.

Kin Selection

Unlike the psychological theories described above, evolutionary accounts of prosocial behaviour have focused on the survival benefits of prosocial behaviour. For example, kin selection theory^{4,5} holds that individuals are particularly motivated to help members of their own family because this ultimately helps their own genes survive. Linking this back to the altruism-egoism distinction, kin selection then becomes, in a sense, both altruistic and egoistic. It is altruistic to the extent that an individual may sacrifice his or her own wellbeing to help a blood relative; at the same time, kin selection may also be seen as egoistic because it serves to propagate one's own genes⁴. Several studies have documented preferential helping for kin over unrelated individuals, even when this contradicts social norms⁵.

Of note, kin selection theory can be extended to apply to prosocial behaviour directed towards grandchildren. In other words, post-reproductive adults can still improve their inclusive fitness (the likelihood that others who share some of their genes will survive) by investing resources in their grandchildren⁹. This idea is also in line with the 'grandmother hypothesis', which explains the relatively long post-reproductive period of women based on the survival benefits for not just their own children but also for their grandchildren⁹. Although particular attention has been paid to the role of grandmothers, evolutionary-based theories of grandparental investment also apply to grandfathers, although this depends on paternity certainty (how sure the grandfather is that the child in fact carries his genes)⁹. Going back to the example of Charlie, the help he devotes to protect his grandson could be an illustration of kin selection. This is assuming that Charlie believes that his grandson is biologically related to him; kin selection theory would not apply to adopted grandchildren. One could make a stronger case for kin selection if Charlie were a woman because the maternal grandmother (for example) is certain of her relationship with her daughter and her daughter's relationship with her grandchildren. Regardless of Charlie's gender, however, kin selection theory cannot account for the time Charlie spends with other young pro bono clients to whom he is not biologically related. To explain this, one would need to invoke other, more psychological mechanisms.

It is not possible to directly test or falsify evolutionary theories of prosocial behaviour in human beings. However, in line with kin selection predictions, experimental work has found that people are more likely to help those to whom they think they are more genetically related⁵. Animal models and research in the area of genetics have supplemented these findings to provide more support for the overall concept of kin selection^{7,5}.

Age- and Future Time Perspective-Related Differences in Prosocial Motivations

There is solid evidence for age-related differences in prosocial behaviour in the literature¹⁰. Below, we introduce two prominent lifespan theoretical models that provide potential explanations for why this may be the case. The model of generativity is built on the idea that adults have to master distinct challenges as they move across different life phases, with the mastery of earlier challenges predicting the likelihood of succeeding with later challenges¹¹.

Generativity, which is thought to peak in midlife and continue until later in life, may be defined as the need to make a contribution to the well-being of the next generation, along with a sense of responsibility for those younger in age¹². Hence, by virtue of their position in the life course, middle-aged and older adults may be particularly motivated to engage in behaviors that help younger

individuals thrive¹³. Going back to the legal aid example, Charlie may indeed be driven by generative goals when he assists younger clients - does he perhaps wish to bestow a tradition of social justice-oriented legal action that will inspire generations to come? Generativity may also reflect a desire to leave a lasting legacy, thus combining altruistic with egoistic connotations¹⁴. Nevertheless, the end result is that society reaps the benefits of older adults' generative investments. Survey methods have been used to investigate associations between generativity and prosocial behaviour across the lifespan, indicating that both tend to peak in mid-life and continue to be high in older age¹⁵, although cohort effects cannot be ruled out because age differences in generativity have been found mainly cross-sectionally, not longitudinally¹³. Generative motivations have typically been investigated through autobiographical methods, self-reported motivations and behaviour, and personal goal analysis¹³.

According to Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, the recognition of future time becoming more limited prompts motivational shifts away from autonomy or knowledge acquisition goals typically found in young adults and towards emotionally meaningful social goals that focus on close others, possibly including generative themes^{16,17}. Coming back to the illustrative scenario, Charlie's motivation to provide pro bono services may have been guided by knowledge acquisition goals early in his career, whereas later in life, he may have come to the conclusion that his limited time left is too valuable to be spent on anything else but the people he really cares about and feels close to, like his grandson. Predictions originating from Socioemotional Selectivity Theory have frequently been tested using longitudinal survey methods and experimental methods¹⁶. For example, hypotheses derived from this theory have been tested directly in a study of volunteering motivations¹⁸. Although socioemotional selectivity seems to be a very relevant framework for understanding prosocial behaviour across the lifespan, to our knowledge, no research has yet directly investigated the effects of changing future time horizons on prosocial behaviour; correlational and experimental work is needed to fill this gap.

Consequences of Prosocial Behaviour

When one thinks of prosocial behaviour, the implication typically is that this kind of behaviour benefits the recipient, whether emotionally, financially, or otherwise⁵. Importantly, however, behaving prosocially may also benefit the actor - the person who is helping or giving to others. Indeed, prosocial behaviour has well-documented physical health, cognitive, and psychological wellbeing benefits, particularly in old age^{2,19,10}. The benefits of prosocial behaviour for the giver, if known, may also drive motivation to engage in such behaviour, thereby reinforcing a positive cycle that builds both prosocial behaviour and health and wellbeing. The following section describes some of the key benefits of prosocial behaviour that have been documented in experimental, experience-sampling, and longitudinal work, using volunteering as a case study for prosocial behaviour.

Volunteering, Health, and Wellbeing

The majority of research on prosocial behaviour in older adults looks specifically at volunteering, which can be defined as "any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization"¹⁰ (p. 215). Typically, volunteering involves some commitment of time and effort (not just a single act of kindness) and serves to benefit people outside of one's family. Hence, volunteering is a special, but readily recognized, form of prosocial behaviour. Volunteering is especially relevant for

today's aging population as it may be a vehicle to stay connected and make an active contribution to the functioning of society past retirement^{20,2}. Furthermore, volunteering has recently attracted a lot of attention for its health-promotion potential in old age^{2,10}. This section will discuss some of the key documented benefits for physical health, cognitive functioning, and social integration and wellbeing.

A well-known volunteering program for older adults is the Experience Corps²⁰, which successfully integrated older volunteers into public elementary school programs to help vulnerable children improve their reading, problem-solving, and other social-cognitive skills. Findings from this program document a host of benefits for the older adult volunteers themselves, including but not limited to physical health benefits such as increased physical activity and reduced declines in measures of physical strength and health²⁰.

Volunteering has also been linked to reduced cognitive decline in old age. For example, findings from the Georgia Centenarian Study reveal that, among the oldest old, leading an engaged lifestyle (which involves volunteer work) is associated with higher cognitive functioning in domains that typically have a strong age gradient, namely, orientation skills, attention, memory, arithmetic, motor skills, and language abilities²¹. This is in line with the idea that volunteering encourages people to learn and adapt to new situations, and to make use of their knowledge and skills, thereby helping to maintain cognitive abilities.

Volunteer activities also have well-documented social wellbeing benefits. For example, participants in the Experience Corps program, compared to controls, reported having more people to who they could turn to for help²⁰. It seems that a key benefit of volunteering is that it facilitates building high-quality social relationships that may serve as social support resources in old age²⁰. Furthermore, participating in volunteer work can make older adults feel needed and appreciated, which can improve their overall sense of wellbeing². For instance, findings from the Americans Changing Lives study demonstrate positive associations between volunteering and both life satisfaction and perceived health¹⁹. Importantly, this study revealed that participating in volunteer work had greater wellbeing benefits for adults over age 60 years than for their younger counterparts, which further speaks to protective effects of prosocial behaviors in old age specifically¹⁹. With few exceptions^{20,2}, the vast majority of research on the social and psychological wellbeing benefits of volunteering has employed cross-sectional and longitudinal survey methods.

Other Forms of Prosocial Behaviour and Links with Wellbeing

In line with the research on volunteering described above, recent longitudinal and experimental work has also demonstrated the benefits of other, more discrete forms of prosocial behaviour. For example, spending money on others has been shown to have a more positive impact on happiness than spending money on oneself in cross-cultural samples across the lifespan²². Other experimental work looking at younger adult samples has revealed that engaging in small acts of kindness can increase positive emotion in individuals who are socially anxious²³, and dyadic studies confirm that short-term prosocial behaviours give an emotional boost to the helper as well as the recipient²⁴. The benefits of small or short-term prosocial behaviours on wellbeing continues to be a hot topic, and these recent trends in social psychology could be fruitfully extended to older samples. Further research is needed to also explore potential cognitive and physical health benefits of small, short-term prosocial behaviours.

Future Directions

The literature on motivations and consequences of prosocial behaviour is rich in findings and in implications for social engagement and wellbeing across the lifespan. This next section will selectively focus on some avenues that may be worth pursuing.

Methodological Directions

While experimental paradigms are typically used to study discrete prosocial acts, such as donating to charity or helping a confederate^{22,24}, more sustained prosocial behaviour, such as formal volunteering, is more often studied using cross-sectional and longitudinal designs that incorporate a variety of data sources¹⁰. There are challenges and limitations to each of the above research designs, for example, laboratory and field experiments are limited with respect to the conclusions that can be drawn regarding how and to what extent people behave prosocially in their everyday lives. Prosocial behaviour has been found, in fact, to be very situation-specific and hence can vary from day to day or from hour to hour. The use of methods such as experience sampling can help resolve this issue; a key advantage of experience sampling is that it allows researchers to investigate behaviour and associated cognitions and emotions as they arise naturally in participants' daily lives²⁵. An experience-sampling study could be used, for example, to investigate the short-term, dynamic emotional antecedents and consequences of lawyers' engagement in different kinds of pro bono work over the course of a two-week period. A promising avenue of research involves combining experience-sampling and experimental methods, in order to assess prosocial behaviour (and its antecedents and consequences) in the most scientifically rigorous manner while taking into account the daily life context in which it occurs.

Lifespan Development Knowledge Gaps

In order to understand lifespan developmental changes in prosocial behaviour, its antecedents, and its consequences, it is important to include participants of varying ages in a given study. However, the current literature tends to use different approaches when investigating prosocial behaviour in young adult samples as compared to older adult samples. Specifically, the vast majority of experimental work in psychology relies on the recruitment of university student samples, who also tend to be WEIRD: from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies²⁶. Experimental investigations of older adult volunteers in the Experience Corps²⁰ and field studies of older adults' helping behaviour² are notable exceptions to this trend. Further intervention studies (with appropriate controls) in this vein are needed to look at long-term outcomes of sustained volunteerism in older adults. Furthermore, such studies should include middle-aged adults in order to better understand what will motivate them to be active volunteers by the time they leave the labor force, and to what extent the benefits of volunteering might extend to this age group.

Many studies of volunteerism in older adults also investigate underlying motivations¹⁰. However, although much is known about the benefits of volunteering, less is known regarding whether achieving these benefits depends on volunteers' motivations for their work. For example, it might be interesting to determine whether volunteering that is driven by generativity or that which is driven by socioemotional selectivity produces greater benefits - or if perhaps both sources of motivation need to be there in order for volunteering to be maximally satisfying for older adults. There are a few intriguing

studies in this area showing, for example, that volunteerism may reduce mortality in old age, but only when volunteers are driven by other-oriented (more altruistic) reasons for volunteering⁶.

Emotion Regulation and Cognitive Decline

Behaving prosocially is potentially an effective means of regulating one's emotions, as it can activate neural pathways related to reward²⁷, reduce the emotional distress of seeing a person in need⁴, and help solidify positive relationships with others. However, effective emotion regulation (such as the ability to deal with emotional complexity and high-arousal negative emotion) relies on cognitive resources that decline with age^{28,29}. As a result, older adults might find it more difficult to put their emotion-regulation skills into action²⁸. Hence, despite their great capacity for empathy and altruism, age-normative cognitive decline could become an obstacle to older adults' pursuing and reaping the emotional rewards of prosocial behaviour. Further research is needed to investigate the possibility of direct linkages between emotion regulation abilities and prosocial behaviour as people age.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Given what is known about the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering and other forms of sustained prosocial behaviour in old age, what can be done to encourage these kinds of behaviour in an aging society? From a public policy perspective, society might do well to offer more opportunities for volunteering, as well as leisure activities with a generative focus, for older adults. Businesses, schools, or non-profit organizations could provide volunteering opportunities through which retired experts can make meaningful contributions. For example, senior experts could provide counsel to young individuals who are starting a new business. Older adults who held management or other high-level positions during their careers could also continue applying their supervisory skills in community volunteering settings, maintaining their status as leaders. Such programs can capitalize on older adults' vast skills and experience in ways that benefit them and also society at large²⁰.

Conclusions

Prosocial behavior is a fundamental ingredient of life across the lifespan. This entry has explored the antecedents or motivations of prosocial behaviour and how these may shift over the life course, and has discussed various health and wellbeing benefits of behaving prosocially. Further research in this area needs to directly examine developmental trajectories and outcomes of prosocial motivation and behaviour by including older, middle-aged, and younger adults in the same study, making use of longitudinal methods whenever possible. It will also be interesting to expand our current knowledge by looking at a variety of short-term as well as sustained kinds of prosocial behaviour in the context of adults' daily lives. This area of inquiry can inform a social model of health promotion that fosters active social engagement throughout adulthood and into old age and that at the same time benefits society.

Cross-references

Aging and Psychological Well-Being (ID: 139)

Intergenerational Relationships (ID: 9)

Loneliness and Social Embeddedness in Old Age (ID: 70)
Psychological Theories of Successful Aging (ID: 108)
Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, Social Gerontology (ID: 167)

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