From Being Nice to Being Kind: Development of Prosocial Behaviors

Tina Malti and Sebastian P. Dys

Author Note

Tina Malti, Department of Psychology and Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto, Sebastian P. Dys, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tina Malti, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Deerfield Hall, 3359 Mississauga Rd, Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6, Canada. E-mail: tina.malti@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

Empirical findings regarding the origins and development of prosocial behaviors from infancy to childhood have generated new information on when young children act prosocially toward others, how prosocial behavior changes across development, and why children do or do not behave prosocially. We discuss recent advances in three areas of research: First, studies have increasingly focused on age-related differences in various prosocial behaviors. Second, psychological underpinnings of prosocial behavior development have contributed to a better understanding of children's motives for prosocial behaviors. Third, dispositional and situational effects on the development of prosocial behaviors have been examined. We discuss consequences of individual differences in prosocial behaviors and provide recommendations for future directions for the study of prosocial behavior development.

Introduction

It's good to be nice. But being nice doesn't equate with being kind. Acts of kindness necessitate a selfless concern for the welfare of others and thus transcend niceness, or, simply put, basic forms of prosocial behaviors. But, how do we develop from being nice to being kind? What motivates us to become (more) prosocial and kind, and what facilitates this process? Here, we aim to discuss these questions through the lens of recent research on prosocial behaviors in the early years. We selectively review empirical findings on the development of prosocial behaviors from infancy to childhood. We highlight research that generates new information on when young children act prosocially toward others, how prosocial behaviors develop, and why children do or do not behave prosocially. Specifically, we discuss three research areas: age-related differences in prosocial behaviors, psychological processes associated with prosocial behavior development, and dispositional and situational influences on the development of prosocial behaviors (Figure 1). We then outline consequences of individual differences in prosocial behavior development and provide recommendations for future research to advance our current understanding of children's prosociality. Most notably, we argue that we can generate new information by making theoretical and methodological distinctions between simple acts of niceness and kindness.

Development of prosocial behaviors

Prosocial behavior has been defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit another (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). As such, the motive underlying prosocial behavior is opaque and may or may not be other-oriented and caring. For instance, a child may share a toy simply because their parents expect it from them. In contrast, kindness involves acts marked by compassion and a genuine, deep concern for others (Schopenhauer, 1840/2007). Recent advances

in developmental psychology have studied the origins of our prosociality, its early forms, and behavioral expressions (Brownell & The Early Social Development Research Lab, 2016; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). While it is commonly acknowledged that it is part of the human nature to be other-oriented and respond to others in prosocial ways in some contexts, it is also realistic to assume that we aren't born kind; rather, there are possibly developmental paths leading from simple acts of prosociality to kindness. These paths likely take the form of transitions, transformations, and some continuity. Research indicates that the ways in which prosocial behaviors change across development depend on the complex interplay between normative development, biological factors and socialization experiences, as well psychological processes, dispositions, and situational antecedents (Eisenberg et al., 2015).

Recent findings suggest that early forms of prosocial behaviors, such as simple forms of helping and cooperating, occur in the second year of life (Köster, Ohmer, Nguyen, & Kärtner, 2016). Yet, these types of prosocial behaviors are just the beginning of a broad range of prosocial behaviors. Theoretically, researchers have assumed that prosociality increases across the early years, due to related increases in social-cognitive understanding, emotional maturation, and the development of the self in relation to others (Hoffman, 2000). Cross-sectional research supports age-related increases in some types of prosocial behaviors from early to middle childhood, such as sharing (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Malti et al. 2016a). In addition, research indicates that some types of prosocial behaviors appear to develop early while others require more time. For instance, children cooperate in straightforward tasks in the second year, though they don't share or help others until later (Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010).

Some discrepancies in age-related differences are likely due to type of recipient (e.g., friend versus stranger), situational features (e.g., what kind of task), and context (e.g., culture).

At the same time, there is some degree of consistency across various types of prosocial behaviors in 18-months-year-olds (Newton, Thompson, & Goodman, 2016), which has also been shown across childhood (e.g., Malti et al., 2016b). Longitudinal studies on prosocial behaviors in the early years are relatively sparse. The existing findings suggest an increase in prosocial behaviors from early to late childhood, although advances depend on type of prosocial behavior, measure, and task (see Eisenberg et al., 2015).

Despite overt increases in prosocial behaviors in the early years, developmental psychologists have argued that increases in prosocial behaviors taper off beyond early childhood. For instance, children might increasingly discriminate who they help, such as friends and ingroup members versus strangers or outgroup members, and when, such as helping in low-cost and high-cost contexts (Hay & Cook, 2007). Indeed, some recent research has shown inconsistent developmental trends in prosociality between early and late childhood. For example, Peplak, Song, Colasante, and Malti (in press) found that both 4- and 8-year-olds showed more inclusive behavior toward a peer of the ingroup compared to a peer of an outgroup. Using a 6-year longitudinal design from age 6 to 12, Malti and colleagues (2016b) found increases in cooperation, but decreases in helping and no linear change pattern in sharing behavior across time. Thus, it is less clear if and how simple forms of prosocial behaviors change across the early to late childhood years, and how they relate to more general prosocial tendencies.

Methodologically, supplementing the abundance of studies using a variable-centered approach with those using person-centered approaches might yield additional information regarding differences between children who are early versus late to begin acting prosocially (Malti, Eisenberg, Kim, & Buchmann, 2013). There are likely subgroups of children who differ in their trajectories of prosocial development—for example, a group of “early starters” who are

high in empathy and extraversion—which may be masked by nomothetic, group–level analyses. Thus, more longitudinal research is needed to clarify differential trajectories in prosocial behaviors and its various subtypes from infancy to childhood.

Psychological processes in prosocial behavior development

The origins and development of prosocial behaviors depend on the interplay between distal, i.e., biological factors and socialization experiences, and proximal psychological processes (Brownell, 2016; Israel, Hasenfratz, & Knafo-Noam, 2015; Xu, Saether, & Sommerwille, 2016; Figure 1). Here, we focus on the proximal psychological mechanisms that may underlie the development of early prosocial behaviors.

Three psychological processes have been received attention in the recent literature: Children's emotional responses, social evaluations, and physiological arousal and regulation (Malti, Sette, & Dys, 2016c). Developmental scientists have theorized that early affective processes play a substantial role in the development of prosocial behaviors and orientations (Malti, 2016). To date, it is unclear whether early forms of prosociality are based on an understanding of others' needs, concern for others, or related other-oriented motives (Eisenberg, VanSchyndel, & Spindrad, 2016). Recent research has focused on emotions and social evaluations in response to situations necessitating prosocial action to generate new information on the foundations of early prosocial behaviors. Specifically, emotional responses may facilitate young children's prosocial conduct through the affective consequences of their actions for the self (Malti, 2016) and/or the affective concern for others (e.g., empathy/sympathy; Hoffman, 2000).

Investigators have studied young children's other-oriented and self-conscious emotions—such as sympathy and guilt—and their links to prosocial behaviors. From infancy, empathic

concern is evident (Davidov, Zahn-Waxler, Roth-Hanania, & Knafo, 2013) and acts as a foundation for behaving prosocially; by toddlerhood, sympathetic responding emerges and promotes prosocial action (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009). Early precursors of guilt, such as distress following a perceived transgression, emerge between the first and second year of life (Kochanska, Koenig, Barry, Kim, & Yoon, 2010). Around 3-5 years of age, children begin to anticipate guilt in response to transgressions, which predicts sharing (Ongley & Malti, 2014), and other prosocial behaviors (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013). In a recent longitudinal study, Malti et al. (2016b) found that both sympathy and guilt can motivate different types of prosocial behaviors, both concurrently and longitudinally.

In addition, researchers have explored children's evaluations of acts involving prosocial issues. Infants appear to possess capacities to form rudimentary social evaluations. For example, 6-month-old infants prefer those who help over those who impede another's goals (Van De Vondervoort, & Hamlin, 2016). Infants as young as 9 months show an awareness of others' social goals and needs (Köster, Ohmer, Nguyen, & Kärtner, 2016). Other social-cognitive aspects associated with prosociality, such as fairness expectations, have been shown to develop as early as 6 to 16 months of age (Ziv & Sommerville, 2016), and toddlers prefer equal allocation of resources over unfair distributions (Gummerum, Hanoch, Keller, Parsons, & Hummel, 2010).

Another potential source for early prosocial behaviors is arousal and regulation, which might heighten empathic feelings and prosocial tendencies in young children (Hepach, in press; Miller, Nuselovici, & Hastings, 2016). In a recent longitudinal study on prosocial development from age 2 to age 4, Srimgeour, Daivs, and Buss (2016) found that children who showed parasympathetic reactivity consistent with more effective emotion regulation during a lab-based

disappointment task were rated as more prosocial at age 4. These findings suggest that physiological arousal and regulation effect the development of prosocial behavior.

Thus, recent studies have investigated how other-oriented and self-conscious affective responses, social evaluations, and arousal relate to prosocial behavior. Most of this research has been cross-sectional and focused on either overall prosocial behavior ratings or a single type of prosocial behavior. Still, precisely how these psychological processes are associated with various types of prosocial behaviors over time remains an open question.

Dispositional and situational features in prosocial behavior development

Whether young children behave prosocially is associated with dispositional and situational characteristics. Some dispositional features have been rather consistently related to early prosocial behaviors. For instance, children who are dispositionally more sympathetic—feel concern for others—tend to share more at their cost, defend victims of bullying, and make amends for their wrongdoings (e.g., van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2015; Song, Colasante, & Malti, in press). Similarly, children's low temperamental emotional negativity proneness, high regulation, and high trust positively predict prosocial behavior concurrently and over time from kindergarten through elementary school (Laible, Carlo, Murphy, Augustine, & Roesch, 2014; Malti et al., 2016d).

The role of situational factors—characteristics unique to the situation—in prosocial behaviors has been documented as well. For instance, infants and toddlers act more prosocially toward peers with whom they have a closer relationship and who are prosocial themselves (Blandon & Scrimgeour, 2015). In addition, the ways in which children process situational features of social dilemmas are also related to their prosocial behaviors. For example, children's attention toward self-serving cues—such as attractive toys—rather than other-oriented cues—

such as the emotional state of other children—at age 2 were less likely to cooperate with peers during play at age 3 (Blandon & Scrimgeour, 2015). Finally, certain situational factors may allow dispositional factors to more strongly determine whether children behave prosocially. For example, the self-transcendence values of children aged 5 to 12 years, are associated with their costly, but not their uncostly, sharing (Abramson, Daniels, & Knafo-Noam, 2017).

Some types of prosocial behaviors have been shown to depend on situational features, such as the group status of a peer. For example, Yu and colleagues (2016) investigated the role of an in-group (friend) and an outgroup member (stranger) on children's sharing behavior. While 3- to 4-year-olds did not treat strangers and friends differently, older children showed strong in-group favoritism. In contrast, Peplak et al. (in press) found that 4- and 8-year-olds alike showed in-group bias when making decisions about including versus excluding an ingroup versus outgroup peers. Similarly, the type of task and recipient's characteristics influence prosocial behavior. For example, Malti and colleagues (2016a) found that children discern the needs of recipients (e.g., those with many versus few toys) when sharing resources. Thus, both dispositional and situational features are associated with some types of prosocial behaviors and links with age.

Conclusions

The development of prosocial behaviors likely involves a process from simple, "nice" forms of behaviors to varied, complex, and perhaps sometimes truly "kind" prosocial acts, as well as increasing differentiation of when, how, and why to act prosocially. Yet, few existing frameworks and measures of children's prosociality can differentiate niceness from kindness—a distinction integral to our conceptual understanding of children's pro-social orientations. To do

this, future studies may assess the motivations (e.g., social expectations versus other-oriented concern) underlying children's prosocial acts.

Furthermore, in addition to cross-sectional work illustrating the origins of some types of prosocial behaviors, more longitudinal work is necessary to identify distinct trajectories of multiple forms of prosocial behaviors (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). In addition, more information about affective and social-cognitive processes underlying prosocial behaviors can deepen our understanding why some children may change from niceness to kindness, while others don't. Lastly, progress is needed to disentangle how dispositional and situational features, such as ingroup and outgroup distinctions, affect prosocial behaviors using naturalistic designs (Dahl, in press). Better understanding when various types of prosocial behavior develops, how, and why, can provide critical support to enhance current efforts to nurture prosociality and health-related outcomes in children (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017; Malti, Chaparro, Zuffiano, & Colasante, 2016e). Ultimately, moving this research agenda forward will help identify what it takes to become kind.

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Figure Captions.

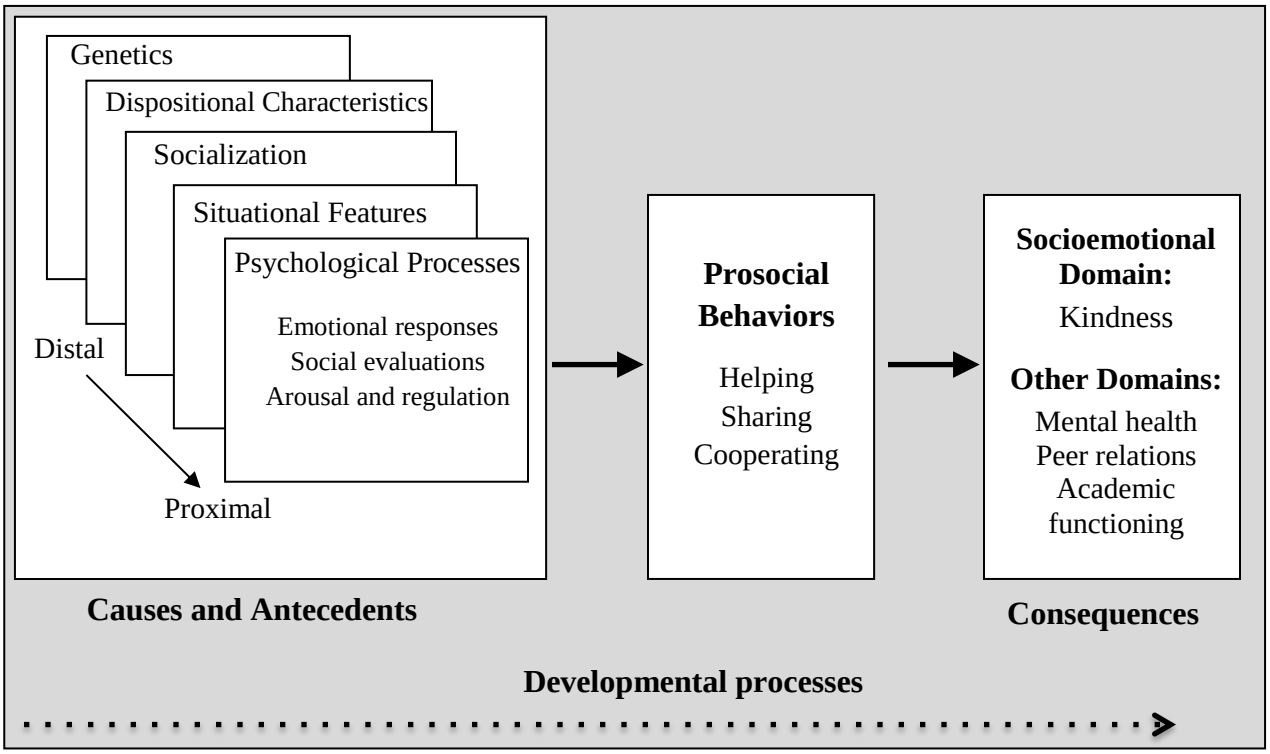

Figure 1. Development of prosocial behaviors: causes, processes, consequences.