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Trajectories of prosocial behaviors conducive to civic outcomes during the transition to adulthood: The predictive role of family dynamics[☆]



Bernadette P. Luengo Kanacri^{a,*}, Concetta Pastorelli^a, Antonio Zuffianò^b, Nancy Eisenberg^c, Rosalba Ceravolo^b, Gian Vittorio Caprara^a

^a Psychology Department, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

^b Interuniversity Center for Research on Development of Prosocial and Antisocial Motivations, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

^c Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, USA

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the prediction of civic engagement by diverse trajectories of prosocial behaviors as well family dynamics (i.e., filial self-efficacy and relational parent–child support) across four times of assessment (from age 16–17 to age 22–23) during the transition to adulthood. Three different trajectories of prosocial behaviors were identified for 686 Italian youths: high-increasing (18%), medium-stable (48%), and low-stable (34%). An increasing pattern of change in prosocial behaviors was predicted by filial self-efficacy at age 16–17, which in turn mediated longitudinal relations to civic engagement and civic values at age 22–23. Results highlighted that during the transition to adulthood youths' beliefs about their ability to negotiate with their parents without losing autonomy and relatedness are relevant in promoting prosocial behaviors and civic involvement, especially in the context of Mediterranean countries.

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Understanding the predictors of civic engagement is becoming a relevant task in the agenda of developmental psychologists (e.g., [Flanagan, Beyers, & Žukauskienė, 2012](#); [Marzana, Marta, & Pozzi, 2012](#); [Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010](#); [Youniss et al., 2002](#)). Examining the relative contribution of family dynamics to the development of civic commitment and values may elucidate the way these contextual influences operate through the course of youth development. However, little research has examined different routes to civic involvement or identified the developmental processes through which family and parental influences are effective. Some scholars have argued that adolescents who feel more connected to parents may come to feel more connected to the community, leading to greater civic involvement ([Flanagan & Faison, 2001](#); [Smetana & Metzger, 2005](#)). Parents may also serve as models of civic action or may provide children with opportunities to behave prosocially—e.g., to benefit others by helping, caring, sharing ([Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006](#)). However, how family relationships influence prosocial development during the life transition to adulthood and how these behaviors might affect young adults' civic outcomes merits further investigation. The present study focuses on how family dynamics and different patterns of prosocial behavior from adolescence (age 16–17) to young adult age (age 22–23) are conducive to young adults' civic engagement and civic values.

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* Corresponding author. Sapienza University of Rome, Via dei Marsi 78, 00185 Roma, Italy.

E-mail address: paula.luengo@uniroma1.it (B.P. Luengo Kanacri).

We studied youths living in Italy, a country where, as with some other south European countries, the majority of young adults (age 18–25) still live at home. This prolonged cohabitation probably results in closer parent–child interactions than in places where young adults live independently (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). In investigating family dynamics during the transition to adulthood, we relied on the theoretical arguments proposed by scholars (e.g., Collins & Laursen, 2006; Kuczynski, 2003) who argue for the importance of assessing the agentic role youth may have in parent–child relationships, as well as the role of parent–child support. Accordingly, in the current study, family dynamics were studied through two main dimensions: the youths' active role in promoting balanced power and emotional relationships with parents—i.e., filial self-efficacy (Caprara, Pastorelli, Regalia, Scabini, & Bandura, 2005)—and mutual youth–parent perceived acceptance, responsiveness, and involvement (e.g., Scabini, Lanz, & Marta, 1999).

Emerging adulthood in Italy: the role of family

There is now abundant literature exploring how young adults face emerging adulthood, a phase of human development that occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 (see Arnett, 2000) in which they postpone the acquisition of traditional adult roles such as full-time jobs, marriage, and parenting. When compared to other European countries, Italy presents a distinctive pattern, defined as “the Italian latest-late” (Billari & Tabellini, 2010), even in comparison to other Mediterranean countries that share a similar pattern. Recently, Italian young adults have married on average at around age 35 (men) and 31 (women) (Istituto Italiano di Statistica, 2012) whereas the mean age to become a parent is 31–32 for motherhood (Ammaniti, 2013) and 35 for fatherhood (Santamaria, 2011). Italy has the highest percentage of youths (age 15–24) who are financially dependent on their parents (74%) compared to Greece, Spain, and Portugal (71%, 67%, and 54%, respectively) as well as northern European countries (e.g., 19% in Denmark and 39% in Sweden) (Billari & Tabellini, 2010).

Despite these economic constraints, parental attitudes in Italy seem to encourage grown children staying at home, and parent–child co-residence is positively associated with parental happiness in Italy (the highest), Spain, and Portugal while it is negatively associated in other European countries (Billari & Rosina, 2005). Moreover, Italian youths exhibited the highest rate of happiness in terms of living with their parents (Billari & Tabellini, 2010). Because several studies have stressed that satisfaction with family contributes to youth adjustment (e.g., Scabini et al., 1999), the positive side of the Italian situation should be viewed in light of this family satisfaction of parents and youth.

Italian families' support and care of children may also foster the transmission of values associated with civic involvement. Italian 14-year-olds are more civically competent in regard to beliefs about democratic institutions and have more positive attitudes toward civic participation than adolescents in other European countries (Hoskins, Villalba, & Saisana, 2012). In older data (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012) detailing the participation rates of young people (age 15–29) doing volunteer work, Italy was slightly below the international average of 30.4%. However, Italian youths reported higher percentages in terms of active affiliation in sports and cultural (51%) and humanitarian or charitable organizations (18%) compared to the total average from around the world. Thus, values of solidarity, cooperation, and civic participation are prominent for Italian youths.

Developmental trends of prosocial behavior during the transition to adulthood

The benefits of helping others extend throughout development by bringing long-term positive outcomes into adulthood (Barry, Padilla-Walker, Madsen, & Nelson, 2008; see Carlo, Crockett, Randall, & Roesch, 2007). For example, adolescents who perform prosocial behaviors are inclined to develop a sense of belonging to a community as young adults (e.g., Keyes, 1998; Van Willigen, 2000; Young & Glasgow, 1998). Despite its importance, few researchers have analyzed the prototypical enactment of prosocial behaviors during the transition to adulthood. Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, and Shepard (2005), with a small, homogenous sample (mostly upper middle-class Euro-Americans), followed participants from age 15–16 to age 25–26. They found a cubic trend for helping, with a general decline from late adolescence to the early 20s, followed by an increase in early adulthood. A recent Italian longitudinal study of overall change in the tendency to enact prosocial behaviors across 9 years found similar results: Prosocial behavior declined from age 13 until approximately age 17, with a subsequent slight rebound until age 21 (Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara, 2013).

Although these researchers considered mean-level change in prosocial behavior during the transition to adulthood, others have analyzed age-related changes by identifying subpopulations, focusing on childhood to early adolescence (Côté, Tremblay, Nagin, Zoccolillo, & Vitaro, 2002; Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006) or adolescence itself (Nantel-Vivier et al., 2009). However, the heterogenic change in prosocial behavior during the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood has not been studied. In the current study, we investigated the presence of different developmental groups that could represent a more realistic picture regarding stability and change in prosocial behavior over time. Moreover, trajectories may allow for more accurate analysis of which predictors are associated with specific patterns of prosocial development as well as subsequent positive outcomes, such as civic engagement.

Filial self-efficacy and relational parent–child support as antecedents of prosocial behavior

The quality of child–parent interactions has been viewed as a contributor to individual differences in prosocial behavior during childhood (e.g., Knafo & Plomin, 2006; see Eisenberg et al., 2006); less attention has been paid to the role of family

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