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Trajectories of prosocial behavior from adolescence to early adulthood: Associations with personality change[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to identify heterogenic longitudinal patterns of change in prosocial behavior from adolescence to early adulthood and their association with change in Big Five Factor (BFF) personality traits from adolescence until early adulthood. Participants were 573 Italian adolescents aged approximately 13 at the first assessment and 21 at the last assessment. Using growth mixture modeling, low increasing (LI; 18%), medium quadratic (MQ; 26%), and high quadratic (HQ; 54%) trajectories of prosocial behavior were distinguished. Generally, the LI trajectory group predicted an increase in Conscientiousness over time, whereas the HQ trajectory group predicted greater change in Agreeableness and Openness. In addition, positive changes in Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness between ages 13 and 21 predicted a higher probability of belonging to the HQ prosocial group. Findings support a malleable perspective on personality and identify longterm positive pathways for youths' prosocial development.

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Recently, numerous scholars have argued that age-related changes in prosocial behaviors (i.e., voluntary actions aimed to benefit others, such as sharing, donating, caring, comforting, and helping; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006) should consider heterogeneity in developmental patterns by examining groups of individuals exhibiting different trajectories of prosocial behavior over time (e.g., Caplan, 1993; Cotè, Tremblay, Nagin, Zoccolillo, & Vitaro, 2002). Moreover, the study of the relation between prosocial behaviors and personal dispositions continues to be characterized by various conceptual models (e.g., Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005). In contrast to the past, personality psychologists are currently more inclined to endorse a fluid conception of personality (see Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012); therefore, there is a growing interest in the study of developmental pathways and the role of transitions in personality (Lewis, 2001; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). The present study extends prior findings (Carlo, Crockett, Randall, & Roesch, 2007; Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006; Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara,

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2013) by exploring the heterogeneity of age-related changes in prosocial development from adolescence until early adulthood and the association of patterns of change with co-occurring change in personality traits.

The development of prosocial behaviors from adolescence to early adulthood

The issue of individual differences in the development of prosocial behavior has produced numerous empirical studies in past decades (see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), most of them focusing on childhood and the transition to adolescence. In one of the few studies that analyzed age-related change in prosocial behavior during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, and Shepard (2005) found a general decline from late adolescence to the early 20s, followed by an increase in early adulthood. Furthermore, in a recent study, Luengo Kanacri et al. (2013) examined overall level of change in prosociality with an Italian sample across 9 years and found that prosociality declined from age 13 until approximately age 17 with a subsequent slight rebound until age 21. In that study, females showed higher levels of prosociality over time than males, but the developmental trend was the same.

However, as noted by several contemporary developmental researchers, considering only the mean-level change (i.e., a growth curve model) of a variable could miss important information because it assumes that the observed population is homogeneous (e.g., Duncan, Duncan, Stryker, Li, & Alpert, 2006; Kreuter & Muthén, 2008). Indeed, differentiating subgroups with different trajectories may offer a more realistic picture regarding not only the patterns of development over time, but also the different variables that might account for the developmental heterogeneity. However, the few studies that have analyzed age-related change in prosocial behaviors for subpopulations focused either on the transition from childhood to early adolescence (Barker, Oliver, & Maughan, 2010; Cotè et al., 2002; Kokko et al., 2006) or on change during adolescence (Nantel-Vivier et al., 2009). For example, Cotè et al. (2002) identified three stable groups of Canadian children in terms of their helpfulness from age 6 to 12, whereas low and moderately declining trajectories were found using a sample of Canadian males in the same developmental phase (Kokko et al., 2006). Going forward across development, the study of Nantel-Vivier et al. (2009), by using a multi-informant (i.e., teacher-, mother-, and self-reports) and a cross-cultural perspective (i.e., Italian and Canadian samples), identified three trajectory groups (low declining, high declining, high-steep declining) of prosociality for teachers' reports, whereas five trajectories (low stable, low declining, moderate stable, high declining, and high/stable) were identified for mothers' ratings of prosociality for Canadian 10–15 year olds. In contrast, in the Italian sample, three stable trajectory groups (high, medium, and low) were identified from self-reports, whereas four trajectory groups (low stable, moderate declining, high declining, and increasing) were identified from teachers' reports. In a recent study conducted on a UK sample ranging in age from 4 to 13, Barker et al. (2010) found four trajectory groups of mother-rated prosocial behavior. Three of these trajectories followed a quadratic trend over time, with a positive linear pattern of change until age 10 and then a slight decrease until age 13; only one of these four trajectories followed a linear increasing pattern of change over time. All of these empirical findings highlight that heterogeneity exists in the development of prosocial behaviors from childhood to adolescence and that these patterns may be dependent, for instance, on the length of the developmental phase considered, the cultures involved, and the informants used to assess prosocial behaviors.

Personality traits and prosocial behaviors

Whereas the issue of situational determinants of prosocial behavior has been the focus of investigation for decades (see Eisenberg et al., 2006), recently there has been increasing interest in examining how dispositional variables relate to social development (see Caspi et al., 2005) and, more specifically, to prosocial behavior (e.g., Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2012; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Krueger, Hicks, & McGue, 2001). Scholars examining dispositional predictors often examine personality traits, defined as “individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions” (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23). Over the years, personality psychologists have developed ways to categorize the range of consistent individual differences in personality. Currently, cross-cultural and multi-method empirical research tends to support the five-factor structure in explaining those variations in personality (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1997). Within this framework, the five common traits identified as universally representative of personality are *Agreeableness*, *Energy/Extraversion*, *Openness*, *Emotional Stability/Neuroticism*, and *Conscientiousness* (Caprara & Cervone, 2000; Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1990).

Much of the literature on associations between personality traits and prosocial development has focused on the role of specific traits in the performance of prosocial behaviors. However, as noted by some scholars, prosocial behavior is too complex to be adequately predicted just by a single personality characteristic (e.g., Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Indeed, whereas Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are arguably the traits most correlated with prosocial behaviors (see Eisenberg et al., 2006; Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007; Pursell, Laursen, Rubin, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2008), we may assume that other personality traits are also linked with the tendency to act in a manner that benefits others (e.g., Bekkers, 2005).

Agreeableness is the personality dimension most intrinsically related with interpersonal relationships and with individual differences in the motivation to maintain positive relationships with others (e.g., Graziano & Tobin, 2002). Being an agreeable individual means being trusting, gentle, softhearted, humble, and compliant (McCrae & Costa, 1997). A good amount of empirical findings highlighted that individuals with high levels of Agreeableness are likely to sacrifice for others' well-being and cooperate on social tasks (e.g., Carlo et al., 2005; Graziano et al., 2007). Caprara, Alessandri, Di Giunta, Panerai, and

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