



Prosocial behaviors in context: A study of the Gikuyu children of Ngecha, Kenya

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Abstract

This study examines children's prosocial behaviors in everyday contexts that represent varying degrees of strength of situational demands. Behavioral observations of children ($N = 89$) ages 2 to 10 years ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 2.23$), collected in Ngecha, Kenya were coded for 3 types of prosocial behaviors (nurturant, responsible and prosocial dominant) and the contexts in which these behaviors emerged (childcare, self care, labor/chores, play, idle/social). Mixed factorial ANOVAs showed age differences in prosocial behaviors favoring older children as well as context effects. Prosocial behaviors occurred more frequently than in labor/chores than in play, idle/social or self-care contexts; and prosocial behaviors occurred more frequently during play and idle/social contexts than in self-care contexts. Most nurturant behaviors were performed during childcare. Most responsible behaviors were performed during labor/chores. The contextual differences for responsible and nurturant behaviors were found mostly for the older age groups. Lastly, older children exhibited prosocial dominant behaviors more often than did younger children. Results suggest that both individual level and contextual variables are important in studying different types of prosocial behaviors. Implications for parents and educators are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Prosocial behaviors (i.e., behaviors intended to benefit others; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998) and their development in children are issues that have drawn increased interest in recent years. Many researchers have investigated various facets of these positive behaviors, including their developmental and socialization underpinnings, and both personal and social context variables to predict individual differences (for reviews, see Batson, 1998 and Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). However, although psychological studies have clearly documented social-personality differences that predict individual differences in prosocial behaviors and development (e.g., Carlo, Knight, Eisenberg, & Rotenberg, 1991), fewer studies highlight the influence of situational or social context variables. The present study was designed to examine children's prosocial behaviors across their everyday settings, representing varying degrees of "weak" and "strong" contexts.

Snyder and Ickes (1985) proposed one manner by which dispositions and contexts work together to influence behavior. They suggested that the manifestation of individual variability depends in large part on the strength of situational variables. That is, given a particular category of individuals, some situational variables are "strong" or potent in their eliciting power and tend to limit or constrain the range of behaviors that individuals exhibit, thus muting individual variability. In contrast, other situational variables are "weak" in their eliciting power and tend to have minimal influence on behaviors, thus amplifying the expression of individual variability.

The potential of contexts to elicit or inhibit particular behaviors is likewise recognized by cultural psychologists and anthropologists who propose socialization models that focus on what they variously refer to as the "learning environment" (Whiting, 1980), "activity settings" (Farver, 1999; Tudge et al., 1999; Weisner, 2002), or the "developmental niche" (Super & Harkness, 1986, 1999). These researchers agree in emphasizing the importance of routine, everyday settings in shaping children's behavior, learning, and development and setting the course for particular developmental outcomes.

Following Whiting (1980), we operationally defined the child's context as "characterized by an activity in progress, a physically defined space, a characteristic group of people, and norms of behavior" (p. 7). Anthropologists and psychologists have presented strong evidence of how children's lives vary worldwide in their routine activities, settings, and social companions in ways relevant to prosocial development, and consistent with parental belief systems and child characteristics (Bloch & Adler, 1994; Larson & Verma, 1999; Munroe, Munroe, & Shimmin, 1984; Munroe & Munroe, 1977; Rogoff, Newcombe, Fox, & Ellis, 1980; Rogoff, Sellers, Pirrotta, Fox, & White, 1975; Weisner & Gallimore, 1977; Whiting & Edwards, 1988; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

Moreover, the regularities within the settings organize children's developmental experiences and provide the information from which children construct the rules of their culture (Super & Harkness, 1986). The context of child work, for instance, can be considered an essential component of child training, "the core process by which children learn roles and skills" (Nsamenang, 1992, p. 156). For example, Grusec, Goodnow, and Cohen (1997) found that American children who performed household tasks benefiting others were also more likely to spontaneously exhibit concern for others.

The strongest evidence may exist for socialization to nurturance through frequent interaction with infants and toddlers (Edwards, 1993). American children's interest in infants has been studied by a number of investigators with an emphasis on children's responses to unfamiliar infants, outside of a family context (Fogel & Melson, 1986). Berman and associates (Berman & Goodman, 1984; Reid, Tate, & Berman, 1989) found that during both early and middle childhood boys and girls approach and

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