



Prosociality from early adolescence to young adulthood: A longitudinal study of individuals with a history of language impairment



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 March 2016

Received in revised form 20 January 2017

Accepted 23 January 2017

Available online 3 February 2017

Number of reviews completed is 2

Keywords:

Prosociality

Language impairment

SDQ

Longitudinal

Early adolescence

Young adulthood

ABSTRACT

Background: Longitudinal research into the development of prosociality contributes vitally to understanding of individual differences in psychosocial outcomes. Most of the research to date has been concerned with prosocial behaviour in typically developing young people; much less has been directed to the course of development in individuals with developmental disorders.

Aims: This study reports a longitudinal investigation of prosocial behaviour in young people with language impairment (LI), and compares trajectories of development to typically developing age-matched peers (AMPs).

Methods and procedures: Participants were followed from age 11 years to young adulthood (age 24 years).

Outcomes and results: Participants with LI perceived themselves as prosocial; their ratings – though lower than those for the AMPs – were well within the normal range and they remained consistently so from 11 to 24 years. Two different developmental trajectories were identified for the LI group, which were stable and differed only in level of prosociality. Approximately one third of participants with LI followed a moderate prosociality trajectory whilst the majority (71%) followed a prosocial trajectory. We found evidence of protective effects of prosociality for social outcomes in young adulthood.

Conclusions and implications: The findings indicate that prosociality is an area of relative strength in LI.

What this paper adds?: To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine developmental changes in levels of prosociality from early adolescence to young adulthood in a cohort of young people with LI. Approximately one third of participants with LI followed a moderate prosociality trajectory whilst the majority (71%) followed a prosocial trajectory. We argue that prosociality is different to other areas of functioning in LI. Prosociality appears to be an area of relative strength and can act as a protective factor in social functioning. Prosociality was associated with better community integration in young adulthood and was significantly protective against friendship difficulties for individuals with LI. This paper

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also raises the thought-provoking issue of potential distal effects of early identification and intensive support for LI. It is important to note that all of the participants with LI in this study had been identified as having language difficulties in childhood and had received intensive intervention for their difficulties in language units attached to mainstream schools across England. The early identification of language difficulties and the context of early, intensive language support received in educational contexts such as language units may have nurtured socialisation processes and the development of emphatic concern, which in turn influence the development of prosociality later in young adulthood. More individual differences in prosociality have been reported for other samples drawn from a variety of schools with different educational provision and levels of language support and younger age groups, such as primary school-aged children with LI.

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1. Introduction

Prosociality involves behaviours that are positively responsive to others' needs and welfare. Examples include being helpful and sharing, showing kindness and consideration, cooperating with others and expressing empathy and sympathy. Why and how prosociality develops is not fully understood but theories and evidence point to a multifactorial process, involving guidance from socialisation agents (such as modelling and reinforcement by parents or teachers, learning social and moral norms), genetic heritability, and emotional and social-cognitive development (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Jensen, Vaish, & Schmidt, 2014). Most of the research to date has been concerned with prosocial behaviour in typically developing young people; much less has been directed to the course of development in individuals with developmental disorders. Young people with disorders are at greater risk of social exclusion and so the extent to which they do manifest prosocial behaviours is an important question, with implications for our theoretical accounts of what factors influence progress in this domain and our understanding of what influences wellbeing in those with disabilities. In the present paper, we report a longitudinal investigation of prosocial behaviour in young people with language impairment (LI), followed through adolescence into early adulthood.

1.1. Prosociality: developmental change and individual differences

Given that multiple factors bear on prosociality, it is to be expected that prosocial behaviour will be subject to both developmental changes and individual differences. Prosocial behaviours are evident from infancy (Liszkowski, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2008; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007) but they become more elaborate – and more nuanced – with development and, at any age, some individuals exhibit them more than others (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

From the toddler years through early childhood, children tend to show an increase in the frequency of prosocial behaviours (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Through middle childhood, the findings are more mixed, with some studies suggesting stability (Cote, Tremblay, Nagin, Zoccolillo, & Vitaro, 2002; Flynn, Ehrenreich, Beron, & Underwood, 2015) but others finding modest declines (Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006). During adolescence, some evidence points to a gradual decline in prosocial behaviours but with a possible rebound in late adolescence/early adulthood (Carlo, Crockett, Randall, & Roesch, 2007; Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffiano, & Caprara, 2013; Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2009). At all of these stages, the overall picture is qualified by considerations including the beneficiaries of the behaviour, normative and situational variables – and individual differences, with different groups of individuals manifesting different trajectories (Nantel-Vivier et al., 2009). Within individuals, research by Eisenberg and colleagues on developmental trajectories has revealed significant, albeit modest, rank-order consistency in prosocial behaviours over time and contexts from the preschool years to early adulthood (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2002).

Longitudinal studies of development from adolescence to adulthood remain sparse. Three main trajectory groups have been identified: prosocial (and increasing from adolescence 16/17 years to young adulthood 22/23 years), moderate prosocial, and low prosocial; the latter two groups having stable trajectories from adolescence to early adulthood (Kanacri, Pastorelli, Zuffiano et al., 2014). In order to distinguish the three trajectories found, Kanacri et al. refer to the prosocial trajectory as “high” prosocial (in relation to what they refer to as moderate and low). However, it is important to note that the scores for the participants they refer to as “high” prosocial are close to the average of the 1–9 point scale they used.

Analyses from the same research group working with a large cohort of Italian children have revealed more variability when trajectories are modelled from early adolescence (age 13 years) to young adulthood (Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg et al., 2014). Taken together, findings suggest that individuals may show some fluctuations in prosocial development from childhood to young adulthood though radical shifts (e.g., from being low prosocial to becoming prosocial) are not common.

Gender differences in prosociality have been consistently observed. Generally, girls score more highly than boys on measures of prosociality (Kanacri et al., 2013) and boys are less likely to follow a high prosociality trajectory (Nantel-Vivier, Pihl, Cote, & Tremblay, 2014).

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