



Longitudinal relations between adolescents' self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends and family



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined age-trends and longitudinal bidirectional relations in self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends, and family over a four-year time period (age 11 to 14). A total of 681 adolescents were recruited in the United States (51% girls, 28% single parent families). A longitudinal panel model was conducted and the results showed that adolescent self-esteem was associated longitudinally with subsequent prosocial behavior toward strangers, and earlier prosocial behavior toward strangers promoted subsequent self-esteem. There were no such bidirectional relations between self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward friends and family. Findings also highlight the complexity of adolescent development of self-esteem and the multidimensional nature of prosocial behavior. Discussion focuses on understanding the dynamic interplay between adolescent self-esteem and prosocial behavior.

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Prosocial development during adolescence is becoming increasingly acknowledged as important by parents, educators, and psychologists (e.g., Knight, Carlo, Basilio, & Jacobson, 2015). Prosocial behavior, defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit another (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006), is positively correlated with psychosocial adjustment in adolescents, such as warding off aggression (Sebanc, 2003), reducing mental health problems like anxiety and depression (Haroz, Murray, Bolton, Betancourt, & Bass, 2013), and promoting academic achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Despite substantial research on the antecedents (e.g., parenting style; Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2011) and consequences (e.g., well-being; Akinin et al., 2013) of prosocial behavior, a significant gap in research remains in understanding the relation between adolescents' self-evaluation and prosocial behavior. Given the socio-emotional changes during adolescence that influence prosocial behavior (Carlo, 2014) and the salience of self-esteem during adolescence (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, & Wold, 2012), there is utility in examining the relations between adolescents' self-esteem and prosocial behavior.

1. Prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends, and family

Although many studies to date have treated prosocial behavior as a global construct, recent research has highlighted the multidimensional nature of prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). Multidimensionality can be represented in

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many different ways (e.g., forms of prosocial behavior such as helping, sharing, and comforting; Dunfield, 2014), but the current study focused on multidimensionality regarding targets (strangers, friends, and family) toward whom prosocial behavior is directed (e.g., Padilla-Walker, Dyer, Yorgason, Fraser, & Coyne, 2015). Existing research has shown that the antecedents and consequences of prosocial behavior vary as a function of target. Theoretically, individuals who help strangers are more likely to do so because of dispositional traits (such as sympathy or self-regulation) and other-oriented considerations like getting others out of trouble or promoting others' welfare, whereas helping friends or family is more often a function of relationship norms and is motivated by an effort to preserve or maintain the relationship (Eberly & Montemayor, 1998; Lewis, 2014). In practice, adolescents feel it is more satisfying and important to help when there is a close relationship between the receiver and giver of prosocial behavior (Killen & Turiel, 1998), but prosocial behavior toward strangers has been found to be more directly protective (e.g., against delinquency, aggression) than is prosocial behavior toward friends and family (Padilla-Walker, Carlo, & Nielson, 2015). Therefore, distinguishing prosocial behavior as a function of target is important, and in the current study we focused on how adolescents' self-esteem was associated with prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends, and family.

2. Longitudinal trajectories and gender differences of self-esteem and prosocial behavior during adolescence

There are relatively few studies that have examined changes in self-esteem or prosocial behavior longitudinally during adolescence, and those that have do not consider the two behaviors together and reveal somewhat inconsistent results. Evidence show increases (O'Malley & Bachman, 1983), decreases (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005), or no changes (Birkeland et al., 2012) in self-esteem across adolescence. Studies on adolescent prosocial development show decreases until approximately age 17 (Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara, 2013), no changes (Flynn, Ehrenreich, Beron, & Underwood, 2014), or different trajectories for prosocial behavior toward different targets (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015). Thus, in the present study we examined how both self-esteem and prosocial behavior changed over time.

In addition, research suggests that developmental changes of self-esteem vary as a function of adolescent gender, but reveals somewhat inconsistent results. Some researchers found that males tend to increase and females tend to decrease in self-esteem from early adolescence through late adolescence to early adulthood (Block & Robins, 1993), whereas others found that both genders drop in self-esteem during adolescence, but females do so to a much greater extent (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). Studies also provide evidence that girls have higher levels of prosocial behavior than do boys (e.g., Carlo, Crockett, Randall, & Roesch, 2007), and suggest that the difference may increase throughout adolescence due to girls' greater societal pressures to be helpful and kind compared to boys (Nielson, Padilla-Walker, & Holmes, 2017). Therefore, we explored gender differences in trajectories of adolescent self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward strangers, friends, and family, and also examined gender as a moderator of the links between self-esteem and prosocial behaviors.

3. The role of self-esteem on prosocial behavior

Individuals with high global self-esteem are generally confident of their abilities, whereas those with low self-esteem doubt their capacities in many areas (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988). The difference between adolescents with high and low self-esteem may shape different levels of competence in coping with prosocial emergency and emotional situations (Zuffianò et al., 2014). Because inferential evidence suggests a link between feelings of competence and prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, VanSchyndel, & Spinrad, 2016), it is logical to assume that adolescents with higher levels of self-esteem would engage in more prosocial behavior. Indeed, there is empirical evidence suggesting that adults who had higher self-esteem invested more hours in volunteer service (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), and we expected this association to be similar for adolescents.

There is no research of which we are aware that distinguishes between self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward different targets, but given the somewhat higher cost of prosocial behavior toward strangers and the potential added level of discomfort interacting with strangers (Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014), self-esteem, as a fundamental, global, and stable manifestation of self-evaluation (Judge & Bono, 2001), might be particularly important for prosocial behavior toward strangers. In contrast, prosocial behavior toward friends and family are differentially motivated, with relationship quality and relationship roles playing more significant roles as predictors (Lewis, 2014; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014; Rusbult & Agnew, 2010). A relational approach to prosocial development also highlights different aspects of relationships (e.g., parent-child or friend connectedness) as the most important predictors of prosocial behavior within that relationship (Amato, 1990; Eberly & Montemayor, 1998; Lewis, 2014), while dispositional traits (such as self-esteem) seem to be less salient. Therefore, self-esteem might not as consistently predict prosocial behavior toward friends and family as toward strangers.

Taken together, we expected to see a positive relation between self-esteem and prosocial behavior, and expected a more consistent link with self-esteem and prosocial behavior toward strangers than toward friends and family.

4. The role of prosocial behavior on self-esteem

While self-esteem might be associated with prosocial behavior, prosocial behavior might also be associated with future self-esteem. Empirical evidence has shown that the direct effect of prosociality on self-esteem was statistically significant during the transition from middle adolescence to young adulthood (Zuffianò et al., 2014). In addition to direct evidence,

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