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The protective role of prosocial behaviors on antisocial behaviors: The mediating effects of deviant peer affiliation



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ABSTRACT

Prosocial behaviors, actions intended to help others, may serve a protective function against association with deviant peers and subsequent delinquent and antisocial behaviors. The present study examined the relations among specific types of prosocial behaviors, deviant peer affiliation, and delinquent and aggressive behaviors. Six hundred and sixty-six adolescents (46% girls; M age = 15.33, SD = .47) from Valencia, Spain completed questionnaires of prosocial behaviors, affiliation with deviant peers, antisocial behaviors, and aggression. Results showed that antisocial behaviors were negatively related only to specific forms of prosocial behaviors. Further analyses showed that deviant peer affiliation mediated the relations between compliant prosocial behavior and delinquency and aggression. Although altruism was not directly related to delinquency and aggression, it was indirectly linked to the behaviors via deviant peer affiliation. Discussion focuses on the relevance of specific forms of prosocial behaviors to antisocial behaviors and the risk of deviant peers for prosocial youth.

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Interest in understanding the factors that reduce violence and antisocial behaviors among adolescents remains an important area of research among scholars. A growing recent trend is the examination of links between prosocial behaviors (i.e., actions intended to benefit others) and problem behaviors (such as aggression, delinquency) in youth (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Carlo, Crockett, Wilkinson, & Beal, 2011; Dodge, 1983; Eccles & Barber, 1999). In general, such research suggests that youth who engage in high levels of prosocial behaviors (such as volunteerism, sharing, donating) are less likely to exhibit a number of social problem behaviors. These findings may have important implications for the development of intervention programs aimed at reducing violence and problem behaviors in adolescence. However, little is known regarding the mechanisms that may explain the links between prosocial and antisocial behaviors. The present study was designed to address that gap by examining the role of deviant peer group affiliation in the relations between prosocial and antisocial behaviors.

Among other theories, symbolic interaction and social cognitive theories suggest that individuals strive for behavioral consistency (Bandura, 1986; Carlo & Randall, 2001; Mead, 1934) such that one might expect that youth are motivated to behave in ways that promote and maintain such behaviors. For example, youth who engage in high levels of prosocial

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behaviors may be more apt to behave prosocially, and less likely to engage antisocially, in the future to maintain consistency in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Such youth may be more apt to interact with peers who endorse and reinforce prosocial behaviors and may avoid peers with contradicting beliefs, attitudes, and actions. A sustained pattern of peer interactions may therefore result in relatively stable individual differences in prosocial and antisocial behaviors over time.

Indeed, research demonstrates that prosocial youth are more prone to endorse prosocial values and mores that foster compassion and consideration of others (Carlo et al., 2011; Johnston & Krettenauer, 2011; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2007), which may promote moral beliefs and sense of self that may be incompatible with antisocial behaviors. Consistent with these notions, there is evidence that youth who exhibit high levels of prosocial behaviors tend to be highly sympathetic (i.e., feelings of sorrow or concern for others), exhibit high levels of moral reasoning (i.e., thinking about dilemmas of justice and welfare) and perspective taking (i.e., understanding the thoughts, feelings, and social situation of others), relatively socially skilled and popular, and are more likely to deem themselves as a caring, moral persons (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Moreover, there is ample evidence that there are relatively stable individual differences in prosocial behaviors across childhood and adolescence (see Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2006). These personal and interpersonal, prosocial and socially competent characteristics may serve to prevent individuals with relatively high levels of prosocial tendencies from manifesting relatively high levels of aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

With regards to the relations between prosocial and antisocial behaviors, one might expect a general, inverse association between such behaviors. Although some youth may be apt to engage in both forms of social behaviors (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Dodge, 1983; Hawley, Card, & Little, 2007; Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006; Veenstra et al., 2008), there are conceptual reasons to expect a general inverse link. Conceptually, antisocial behaviors (e.g., aggression, delinquency) would be expected to be less desirable among youth who have prosocial tendencies, especially if their prosocial tendencies are characterized by internalized social mores and norms, a strong sensitivity towards others, and/or a low expectation of rewards from engaging in antisocial behaviors. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that aggression and prosocial behaviors are inversely related (Crick, 1996; Eron & Huesmann, 1984; McGinley & Carlo, 2007; Persson, 2005). Moreover, youth who engage in relatively high levels of prosocial behaviors score lower on delinquency (e.g., Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Lacourse et al., 2006; Mahoney, 2000; Mason, Hitchings, McMahan, & Spoth, 2007; see Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2006). In contrast to youth who exhibit relatively high levels of prosocial behaviors, delinquent youth tend to show relatively low levels of perspective taking, sympathy, and moral reasoning (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Stams et al., 2006). Taken together, the accumulating evidence suggests that understanding the relations between prosocial and antisocial behaviors might help us understand ways to prevent delinquent and aggressive behaviors.

Recently, however, developmental scholars have begun to examine the correlates of specific forms of prosocial behaviors (Boxer, Tisak, & Goldstein, 2004; Hawley et al., 2007). Carlo and his colleagues (Carlo, Knight, McGinley, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2010; Carlo & Randall, 2002), for example, identified six types of prosocial behaviors. These types include the tendency to help when requested (compliant), in emotionally evocative contexts (emotional), in crisis situations (dire), in front of others (public), without others' awareness (anonymous), and without expectation of self reward (altruistic). Thus far, research findings suggest distinct factors that correspond to each prosocial behavior type (Carlo et al., 2010). More importantly, investigators also have shown significant heterogeneity in the correlates of these prosocial tendencies (e.g., Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2009; McGinley & Carlo, 2007). These findings suggest that there may be differential relations between specific forms of prosocial behaviors and specific problem behaviors.

Based primarily on prosocial development theories and research (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2006), of the different forms of prosocial behaviors, one might expect youth who engage in relatively high levels of altruistic behaviors to be least likely to engage in antisocial behaviors, including aggression and delinquency. This is because altruistic behaviors reflect an orientation towards the needs of others, low expectancies of self reward from antisocial behaviors, and internalized moral norms (e.g., caring and concern for others) consistent with altruistic behaviors that contradict antisocial norms. Similarly, compliant forms of prosocial behaviors require a willingness to socially conform and to engage in normative social behaviors. Given the tendency for problem youth to defy authority figures and social norms and conventions (see Rowe, Costello, Angold, Copeland, & Maughan, 2010 for a review), one might expect an inverse link between compliant prosocial behaviors and both aggression and delinquency.

Despite the expected inverse relations between both compliant and altruistic prosocial behaviors and antisocial behaviors, sparse research currently exists on this issue. McGinley and Carlo (2007) showed that physical aggression was significantly negatively related to altruistic and compliant forms of helping among young adults (i.e., college students). In a study of preschoolers, Persson (2005) found that altruistic motivated but not requested (compliant) behaviors were significantly, negatively related to aggression (see also Boxer et al., 2004). These findings provide suggestive evidence that specific forms of prosocial behavior are linked to aggressive behaviors. However, no other direct research exists and researchers have not directly examined the relations between specific types of prosocial behaviors and delinquency in adolescents. Thus, primarily on the basis of theory, inverse relations were expected between compliant and altruistic prosocial behaviors and both aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

Although the evidence demonstrates links between prosocial and antisocial behaviors, research is needed on possible mediating mechanisms that can explain such relations. Developmental scholars have identified affiliation with deviant peers as a risk variable that is associated with both aggressive and delinquent behaviors in youth (Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000). Deviant peers may encourage and reinforce social behaviors and beliefs that contradict prosocial norms and

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