

Estonian young peoples' motives of prosocial behavior: Descriptive analysis¹

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Abstract

Prosocial behavior as a positive youth identity development construct is an influential part of the development of citizenship identity evoking an urgent need to understand how young people become effective citizens. The aim of the study was to describe motives for prosocial behavior assessed by students aged 12–17 (N=296) in Estonia using self-reported questionnaires. Quantitative content analysis revealed six categories of motives of prosocial behavior: egoistically motivated prosocial behavior (31%), altruistically motivated prosocial behavior (27%), reciprocal prosocial behavior (11%), prosocial personality characteristics (16%), positive attitude towards helping people (8%), and the social norm to behave prosocially (3%). Based on present results we may conclude that adolescents differentiate between altruistic and selfish motives of prosocial behavior giving responses that were connected mostly with emotionally aroused egocentric motives. Additionally, it was revealed that dominant emphatic motivation to help others was conditional altruism and selfless altruism for adolescents. The implication of the findings for the design of educational context in schools is discussed giving emphasis on the importance of pupil's helping behavior to find a balance between other-focused and self-focused motives.

Key words

Prosocial Behavior, Motives of Prosocial Behavior, Young People, Social Education in schools

Introduction

Prosocial behavior covers a broad category of acts that society and/or one's social group considers as generally beneficially actions to other people (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005), such as sharing and donating resources, volunteering, cooperation, comforting others and helping or assisting (Carlo, 2014). Prosocial behavior is a part of helping behavior with all forms of

¹ If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Aia-Utsal, M. & Kõiv, K. (2020) *Estonian young peoples' motives of prosocial behavior: Descriptive analysis*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 526 - 533). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

interpersonal support, and in the case of prosocial behavior helper's aim is to improve the situation of someone in need and action is not motivated by professional obligations (Bierhoff, 2002). Although the aim of prosocial behavior is to improve someone's situation, it is important to consider also helper's intentions when acting, not only the consequences of actions (Smith, Mackie, & Claypool, 2015).

Compared to previous age, adolescents engage in higher levels of prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Fabes & Eisenberg, 1998), as they have new opportunities for engaging in prosocial behavior because of the enhancement of cognitive and emotive skills, interpersonal relationships, including intimate relationships and improved physical abilities (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999). Although there is an increase in reporting moral reasoning, sympathy and social understanding during adolescence (Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992), it cannot be stated that the frequency of prosocial behavior would increase during the adolescence as well. Comparing to the period of early adolescence, during middle-adolescence young people behave less prosocially (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2014). Among most young people aged 10-15 the frequency of prosocial behavior is not increasing, staying rather stable or decreasing (Nantel-Vivier et al., 2009). Prosocial behavior towards friends increases during the period of adolescence (Güroglu, van den Bos, & Crone, 2014) while adolescents' prosocial behavior towards family members was generally stable or decreased over this developmental period (Padilla-Walker, Dyer, Yorgason, Fraser, & Coyne, 2013).

It was revealed that prosocial behavior has been positively associated with different positive outcomes during adolescence. Namely, prosociality has been found to encourage a trusting and positive predisposition (e.g Luengo Kanacri et al., 2014), and engaging in prosocial behavior can be a predictor of better peer interactions and academic achievement in adolescence compared with less prosocial peers (Caprara, Barbanelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Promoting prosocial behavior in a school setting results in higher academic achievement, frequent helping behavior and lower aggressive behavior compared to the control-group (Caprara et al., 2014).

Prosocial behavior can be motivated by different motives which can be defined as aim-targeted psychological force which affects people's behavior in a certain situation, not being a stable disposition (Batson, 2011). There can be more than one motive that directs people's prosocial behavior and motives can conflict or cooperate (Batson, Ahmad, Powell, & Stocks, 2008). Prosocial behavior can include diverse motives as ingratiation, incurring debt, wish to improve other people's welfare or acting according to internalized moral values (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014). Generally, prosocial behavior can be altruistically or egoistically motivated. Altruism can be considered a subtype of prosocial behavior (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014), defined as a "motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare" (Batson, 2011, p 20). Altruistic behaviors are

intrinsically motivated actions which primary intention is to benefit other people (Carlo, 2014). Altruism refers to prosocial behavior where helper is motivated due to perspective taking and empathy (Bierhoff, 2002). Empathic concern as other-oriented emotion arises and is compatible when someone is in need (Batson, 2011).

In case of egoism, behaving prosocially is beneficial to the helper (Wardle, Hunter, & Warden, 2011), whereby the aim of the helper is to increase own welfare or avoid negative emotions which arise when seeing someone in need of help (Batson, 1991).

Prosocial behavior can be considered as a dimension of social competence (Carlo, 2014), being socially accepted behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Engaging in prosocial behavior is negatively related to social exclusion (Lansu & Cillessen, 2012). Therefore, it is important to investigate what motivates young people to behave prosocially to promote their behavior as a part of personal and social education.

The aim of this study was to describe motives for prosocial behavior assessed by Estonian adolescents in two perspectives: adolescents' own motivations of prosocial behavior and adolescents' evaluations to other people's prosocial behavior.

Method

Subjects

Sample consisted of students in Estonia from five schools (N=296). There were 45.6% of boys (N=135) and 54.4% of girls (N=161). Students were aged 12-17 years old, mean age 14.23 years (SD=0.99).

Instrument

Self-reported questionnaire was used to determine the motives of prosocial behavior. Consisting of four open-ended questions which addressed students' own motivation for prosocial behavior and students' assessments of other people's prosocial behavior motives.

To analyse student's motives for prosocial behavior inductive quantitative content analysis was used. Each question was analysed separately, coded and formed into subcategories and categories. Next, the frequency of subcategories and categories were calculated.

Results

Students' assessments for their own prosocial behavior motives consist of 814 coding units, and 865 coding units emerged when students assessed other peoples' motives for prosocial behavior. According to students' assessments for their own and other people's prosocial motives six main categories emerged: egoistically motivated prosocial behavior, altruistically motivated prosocial behavior, reciprocal prosocial behavior, prosocial personality characteristics, positive attitude towards helping people, and the norm to behave prosocially. Though, there were no statistically significant differences measured by χ^2 test between assessments of students' own and for other peoples' motives which are described in (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of self-reported and other people motives for prosocial behavior assessed by students.

Motives for prosocial behavior	Self-reported	Other people
Egoistically motivated	31.33%	33.64%
Altruistically motivated	27.03%	25.78%
Reciprocal prosocial behavior	10.81%	13.99%
Prosocial personality characteristics	15.60%	16.07%
Positive attitude towards helping people	8.48%	4.86%
Social responsibility norms to behave prosocially	3.07%	2.77%
Other	3.68%	2.89%

Therefore, egoistically motivated prosocial behavior was described most frequently by students when assessing their own and other peoples' motives for prosocial behavior. Egoistic motivation consisted several sub-categories: reduction of their own negative emotions and rising of positive emotions; enlargement of contacts and having a higher status among peers; and costs benefit analysis.

Altruistically motivated prosocial behavior was the second to emerge assessed by students consisting of sub-categories: true altruism for benefit of other people; empathy-altruism evoking; and conditional altruism (helping close relatives, helping in emergency situation, helping when helper asks help and when helper is competent). Prosocial personality characteristics (socially responsibility, ability to empathise, high moral values) were described although relatively frequently by youngsters as motivational bases of prosocial behavior.

Social responsibility norms as learned behavior to behave prosocially were described less frequently as motivational basis for their own and other people's motives. In addition, positive attitude towards helping was described relatively more (no statistically significant differences) when students assessed their own motives for prosocial behavior, compared to other peoples' motives.

Discussion

According to students' assessments for prosocial behavior motives, egoistically and altruistically motivated prosocial behaviors were reported most frequently when students assessed their own and other peoples' motives. In case of egoistically motivated prosocial behavior, the aim of the helper is to increase their own welfare, gaining material, social, personal rewards or avoiding negative consequences for the helper (Batson, 1994) and the motivation of the helper is to increase their own welfare (Batson, 2011). The aim of altruistically motivated prosocial behavior is to increase the welfare of the recipient (Batson, 1991) and the helping could cause harm to the helper (Trivers, 1971). Altruistically motivated prosocial behavior can be related to feelings of empathy (Batson, 1991), sympathy and internalized norms (Eisenberg et al., 2006). The most frequent motive in case of altruism according to the young peoples' opinions was to improve the situation of the recipient.

Prosocial personality characteristics, including social responsibility, ability to empathise and high moral values were also presented in students' assessments, which are according to Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp (1991) positively related to the occurrence of prosocial behavior. Reciprocal prosocial behavior as a social norm of helping emerged also in students' assessments in the area of study motives of prosocial behavior, which may describe internalized norms and the moral obligations of recipients to help people who have previously helped them (Gouldner, 1960).

Prosocial behavior is beneficial in terms of group functioning in different social contexts, as well as increasing the welfare of every person (Staub, 1978). Different socialization agents (siblings, parents, peers, media) offer plenty opportunities for young people to develop and practice prosocial tendencies in various social contexts (Carlo, 2014). Therefore, it is significant to teach and promote prosocial behavior in school context as well, providing students with models of prosocial behavior, affirming and reinforcing positive behaviors and creating suitable environment for learning.

In general, study provided evidence of dual differences in motivational basis of prosocial behaviors among adolescents connected with (1) peer group normative behavior (egoistic motives); (2) cognitive factors as attitudes (altruistic motives); and (3) individual determinants like empathy and competence (altruistic motives).

The limitation of the study is connected with the methodology of the study – the sample represents only limited group of adolescents aged 12-17 years old and cannot be generalized to other age groups.

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