


# A systemic, multiple socialization approach to the study of prosocial development

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Prosocial behaviors, Family or Families, Friendship

Prosocial development includes tendencies, such as empathy, sympathy, helping behaviors, prosocial values, prosocial moral reasoning, and forgiveness, that reflect a concern for, and benevolence towards, others (Carlo, 2014). Prosocial tendencies form the foundations of positive interpersonal relationships, group cooperation, moral exemplary behaviors, and social justice (Carlo, 2014). These tendencies are deemed markers of healthy and normative social functioning and can also be manifested under conditions of adversity. Indeed, there is also accumulating evidence that prosocial development can mitigate maladaptive and antisocial outcomes and enhance other adaptive behaviors and outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, anxiety, depression; Carlo et al., 2018).

Most traditional theories of prosocial development acknowledge the central socializing influence of family, peers, and media in children's prosociality (Carlo and Conejo, 2019; Carlo and de Guzman, 2009; Eisenberg, 1986). However, despite demonstrated links between these distinct socializing influences, few studies examine the more ecologically valid notion that such influences are likely to interactively and jointly influence children's prosocial development. Utilizing this approach would acknowledge the dynamic systems that shape children's lives. Further, adopting a systemic socializing influence perspective would likely prompt the use of relatively sophisticated and innovative methodologies to account these multiple influences.

The aim of the present special issue is to highlight the manner in which two or more socialization agents (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, schools, youth organizations,

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communities) are concomitantly linked to prosocial development. Through this more comprehensive lens of socialization, we hope to spur new theories and research that can provide a more holistic understanding of the development of prosocial tendencies. In the following sections, we present examples of prior work in select areas of socializing agents of prosocial development, summarize and highlight the research presented in this special issue, and propose ideas for future investigations in this area.

## **Socialization agents of prosocial development**

### *Family*

Much of the existing work on the development of prosocial behaviors has been guided by socialization theorists that have emphasized the roles of parents and caregivers (mostly biological mothers) in socializing these behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Hoffman, 2000). Although there is substantial evidence to support this assertion (see Padilla-Walker, 2014, for a review), this literature has largely focused on parenting styles (i.e., support and control), parenting practices (e.g., the use of rewards and discipline), and the quality of caregiver-child relationships (e.g., the level of secure attachment). Despite theorists positing that all families function within a dynamic system whereby members influence each other (Cox and Paley, 1997), there is notably little extant work that considers the simultaneous role of multiple family socialization agents in predicting children's prosocial development. There is accumulating, though scant, evidence that fathers and siblings may play an important influential role in adolescents' prosocial behaviors (Harper et al., 2016; Streit et al., 2018). However, there are few or no studies focused on how fathers, siblings, extended family members, and other types of households (e.g., stepfamilies, single parents, cohabitating caregivers) individually or simultaneously influence prosocial development.

### *Peers*

Peer relationships, including within the content of relationships and within structured learning activities, are also an emerging area of interest in the socialization of prosocial behaviors. Based on social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the most immediate social contexts, including the family and peers, likely have the most direct and salient roles in youth development. Therefore, family and peer processes are worthwhile avenues to explore prosocial development during adolescence. Scholars have also noted that there are likely bidirectional relations between peers and prosocial behaviors (Wentzel, 2014). For example, positive peer relationships may encourage prosocial behaviors, and prosocial behaviors can also facilitate the formation of positive relationships with peers

### *Media*

Societal and community agents (e.g., organizations, peers, mass media) can also exert their influence on children's prosocial behaviors directly via observational learning and

media exposure and interactions (e.g., social media, film, internet, videogames; Bandura, 1986, Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2015). Meta analyses, for example, have shown that observing prosocial content (e.g., on television) has a moderately positive effect on prosocial outcomes, though this influence depends upon individual factors (e.g., age) and the specific form of prosociality assessed (Coyne et al., 2018; Mares & Woodard, 2005). Coyne et al. (2018) found that *active* forms of media (e.g., playing video games) weakened the association between prosocial media and outcome measures, possibly due to relatively more muted or less consistent prosocial content when compared to passive forms of exposure. In contrast, assessing the *interactive* nature of some media activities may be fruitful in advancing our current understanding prosocial development (Fitzpatrick & Boers, 2022). Another experimental study found that, when compared to playing individually, cooperation among players can lead to subsequent prosocial behavior in the laboratory (e.g., donation, assistance) via the satisfaction of psychological needs (Shoshani & Krauskopf, 2021). Indeed, scholars have posited that online interactions via social media can not only help youth organize around prosocial causes (i.e., advocating for social justice), but may also fulfill needs that are especially pertinent during adolescence (e.g., belongingness, identity development; Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021). Thus, online interactions defined by shared purpose may encourage prosocial actions through both basic psychological needs attainment and by the nature of the shared activity itself. Given the ubiquitous nature of digital media in the lives of today's youth and the need for more research (e.g., Lobel et al., 2017), scholars must make strides in unpacking the distinct contributions of interactive forms of media on prosocial development.

### *Multiple socializing influences*

Although work that directly examines multiple socializing influences of prosocial development is limited, some evidence for this approach exists. In line with social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), some scholars have advocated for the consideration of the joint effects of socialization agents, rather than considering these influences as completely independent contributors to prosociality (Brown & Bakken, 2011; Streit & Carlo, 2020). Indeed, there might be substantial benefits to considering the joint familial and peer contributions to prosocial behaviors as positive relations with both friends and family members facilitate a more positive emotional climate that may foster youth's prosocial tendencies (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). For example, work has shown that secure attachment to parents may facilitate secure attachment to peers, which in turn is linked to increased prosocial behaviors in youth and emerging adults (McGinley & Evans, 2020; Oldfield et al., 2016). We further note that there might be salient overlap in the nature of sibling and peer relationships, such that these egalitarian relationships both may provide opportunities for children to learn and practice cognitive skills that promote positive social outcomes (White et al., 2014). Similarly, there might be significant overlap in the socialization of prosocial behaviors via peers and educational agents. Scholars have noted that teachers' expectations and school contexts (e.g., extracurricular activities) may facilitate and maintain positive peer relationships and prosocial behaviors (Bergin, 2014).

Peer and positive school relationships have been found to concurrently be linked to the prosocial behaviors across diverse groups of adolescents (Oldfield et al., 2016; Venta et al., 2019). Relationship quality with parents (i.e., secure attachment) may also direct youth to engage in media use linked to downstream empathy and prosocial behaviors (Shoshani & Krauskopf, 2021). Given the sparse evidence for the salient role of these individual socialization agents, more work is needed that considers simultaneous or joint socialization processes to better capture the true nature of youth's prosocial development.

## **Articles in this special issue**

In soliciting articles, we encouraged submissions that included a range of innovative methods and statistical analytic techniques, including longitudinal or panel designs, cross-national and cross-cultural studies, and person-centered approaches, that illuminated the dynamics among multiple sources of influence. Further, we were interested in papers that investigated intervening (i.e., mediating) or moderating mechanisms (e.g., cultural values, self-regulation, dispositional traits) that may help explain these relations and the conditions under which these influences operate. Several themes emerged across the Special Issue papers in the specific socialization agents examined and the analytic techniques employed.

### *Papers focused on kin and non-kin influences*

In their article "Parents' and Older Siblings' Socialization of Younger Siblings' Empathy: A Sample Case in China," Su-Russell and Russell examined how the parent-child, marital, co-parenting, and sibling subsystems predicted younger sibling's empathy in Chinese families. The authors found evidence of spillover effects across subsystems, such that in addition to the direct effects of co-parent conflict and positive sibling relationships on younger siblings' empathy, marital quality and co-parent support were indirectly associated with younger siblings' empathy via the aspects of the sibling relationships. This work is particularly salient, and adds to the literature, as it provides a unique perspective on multiple sibling families in China, which have experienced a resurgence after almost four decades as a result of shifting Chinese government policies.

The next article, "Direct and Indirect Effects of Maternal and Sibling Intimacy on Adolescents' Volunteering via Social Responsibility Values: A Longitudinal Study", by Maiya et al., also focused on the joint socialization role of parents and siblings. In this short-term longitudinal study, Maiya et al. found that maternal and sibling intimacy were indirectly related to adolescents' volunteering through their social responsibility values. They also found evidence that mothers and siblings had unique and complimentary contributions to youths' prosocial and civic values and behaviors, such that mothers socialized greater volunteering and sibling relationships promoted more social responsibility values. Importantly, this study addresses a key gap in the existing socialization research by examining the relative strengths of multiple familial socialization agents in predicting values that foster adolescents' prosocial behaviors across time.

In the article “The Mediating Role of Empathy in the Links between Relationships with Three Socialization Agents and Adolescents’ Prosocial Behaviours” Carrizales, Gulseven, and Lannegrand highlighted the importance of considering familial and nonfamilial (e.g., peers) socialization agents of French adolescents’ prosocial behaviors. The authors found direct associations between parents, peers in class, and peers in extracurricular activities and adolescents’ prosocial behaviors and indirect associations via adolescents’ empathy. These findings revealed that a combination of socialization influences (i.e., supportive and poor relationships with three socialization agents) and adolescents’ individual characteristics (i.e., empathy) influence adolescents’ helping and caring behaviors. By examining these relations through a comprehensive lens, Carrizales, Gulseven, and Lannegrand captured the complementary and nuanced contributions that parents and various groups of peers make to adolescents’ prosocial development.

### *Papers using person-centered methodologies*

In the article “The associated effects of parent, peer and teacher attachment and self-regulation on prosocial behaviors: A person- and variable-centered investigation,” Yang and McGinley compared the utility of person- and variable-centered approaches in understanding how secure attachment to parents, peers and teachers, as well as self-control, contribute to Taiwanese adolescents’ prosocial behaviors. The profile defined by the highest levels of attachment across all three socialization agents and self-control was associated with greater mean prosocial behaviors. Further, a profile defined by relatively higher levels of peer attachment offset deficits in the other indicators. In contrast, the variable-centered approach revealed direct relations between peer attachment, teacher attachment, self-control, and prosocial behaviors. Taken together, these findings demonstrate how person-centered approaches can holistically capture key socialization agents and individual correlates of prosocial behaviors, particularly in a collectivistic context.

A person-centered approach was also utilized by Nielson, Jenkins, and Fraser in “Too Hunky to Help: A Person-centered Approach to Masculinity and Prosocial Behavior Beliefs among Adolescent Boys.” Boys’ adherence to traditional masculine norms and indicators of social competence were used to inform social profiles. Differences across the three profiles (i.e., *socially avoidant*, *socially self-confident*, and *socially precarious*) were found for boys’ socialization pressures from parents, friends, and the self, as well as their prosocial behavior beliefs towards other boys. For example, *socially self-confident* boys placed more importance on being prosocial to other boys compared to the *socially precarious* boys and *socially avoidant* boys. This study addresses important gaps in the existing literature by considering the nature of cultural gender norms in fostering or inhibiting prosocial development.

Lastly, in “Young Adults’ Intergroup Prosocial Behavior and its Associations with Social Dominance Orientation, Social Positions, Prosocial Moral Obligation, and Belongingness” Xiao, Shi, and Liew found profiles of intergroup helping (i.e., selfish, altruistic, self-serving, and reverse ethnic racial bias) across four domains: age, gender, race/ethnicity, and department affiliation. These profiles in turn were differentially associated with youth’s social and cognitive processes, such as social dominance

orientation, social positions, moral obligation, and sense of belongingness. Although the majority of young adults exhibited a “self-serving” bias favor those similar to themselves, a unique group emerged that demonstrated a “reverse ethnic racial bias.” This study has important applied applications as understanding the predictors of different intergroup prosocial profiles and potential intergroup biases could contribute to research and practice aimed at promoting individuals’ prosocial behavior toward diverse others.

## **Future directions and implications**

As can be surmised, these papers demonstrate that a systemic multiple socializing agents perspective can provide a rich understanding of the various influences of prosocial development. This approach can advance the field closer to prosocial development models with stronger ecological validity and facilitate the application of both person-centered and variable-centered methodologies. The significant advances in theory and methodology will undoubtedly lead to the development of more effective intervention programs that can simultaneously consider the multiples forces that shape prosocial development.

Nonetheless, the eventual success of a systemic multiple socializing agents approach will necessitate the development of new models of prosocial development and innovations in research methodology (e.g., in vivo assessments, time sampling methods) and statistics (e.g., multilevel longitudinal modeling) to adequately account for multilevel systemic and dynamic mechanisms. Importantly, the greater attention to culture-related mechanisms linked to prosocial development (e.g., Knight & Carlo, 2012) will also need to be incorporated into these models and methodologies. In addition, although some of the papers in the present issue examined different types, motive, and targets of prosocial tendencies and behaviors, greater attention to the unique correlates and individual and group differences in these distinct expressions of prosociality is needed. It is probable, for example, that specific socializing agents are relatively more impactful on certain forms, motives, and targets of prosociality than others. Similarly, some socializing agents might be more instrumental during specific developmental periods and/or in distinct cultural contexts.

Despite these challenges, the need for more research on the multiple socializing agents and influences of children’s prosocial development is great. Such work will significantly facilitate the development of prosocial development theories with greater sensitivity to cultural and environmental mechanisms, novel methodologies and data analytical techniques, and more comprehensive and effective intervention efforts. Given the major challenges (e.g., racism, social injustice, intergroup conflict) facing our societies that require greater prosociality from all and towards all, the time for social and behavioral scientists to significantly expand our understanding of prosocial development is now.

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