



# How much is it going to cost me? Bidirectional relations between adolescents' moral personality and prosocial behavior



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## ABSTRACT

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Prosocial behavior  
Sympathy  
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Moral identity

The current study examined bidirectional relations between adolescents' moral personality (prosocial values, self-regulation, and sympathy) and low- and high-cost prosocial behavior toward strangers. Participants included 682 adolescents ( $M$  age of child = 14.31,  $SD = 1.07$ , 50% female) who participated at two time points, approximately one year apart. Cross-lag analyses suggested that adolescents' values were associated with both low- and high-cost prosocial behavior one year later, self-regulation was associated with high-cost prosocial behavior, and sympathy was associated with low-cost prosocial behavior. Findings also suggested that low-cost prosocial behavior was associated with sympathy one year later, and high-cost prosocial behavior was associated with values. Discussion focuses on reciprocal relations between moral personality and prosocial behavior, and the need to consider a more multidimensional approach to prosocial development during adolescence. © 2014 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Adolescence is a key time period during which moral identity and prosocial behavior are developed and diversified. Prosocial behavior is defined as voluntary behavior intended to help or benefit another (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinard, 2006) and is considered a central component of one's moral identity. While the definition of prosocial behavior may seem simple and direct, it actually attempts to capture a multifaceted behavioral construct and a dynamic and reciprocal process. For example, helping may be directed at different targets, from a family member, to a friend, to a complete stranger; and both predictors and outcomes vary depending on the target to whom the behavior is directed (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011). Another way that prosocial behavior is conceptually diverse is that the personal cost of prosocial behavior varies greatly, ranging from small one-time favors to consistent volunteering over a number of years. In each of these cases behavior is prosocial, but the context of the behavior is altered in that the amount of time and energy required is vastly different. To further add to the complexity of this process, theory suggests that there are bidirectional or reciprocal relations between adolescents' moral personality and prosocial behavior (or moral identity; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998).

Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that myriad emotional personality traits (e.g., self-regulation, sympathy) and moral judgments and evaluations (e.g., personal values) promote prosocial behavior. Further, numerous theoretical approaches address the roots of moral action, including prosocial behavior. Blasi's (1983, 2004) *self model* and other work on

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moral identity posits that moral behavior may be central to an individual's sense of self and that individuals will naturally want to act in ways that are consistent with their moral ideals. Other researchers have found that moral (or prosocial) individuals often possess a number of personality traits and self-concepts that promote prosocial behavior, such as being communal, sacrificial, and trustworthy (Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Further, Hart et al. (1998) suggest that not only does moral personality interact to influence one's moral identity (which is reflected in prosocial behavior), but that the development of one's moral identity is also reciprocally associated with the development of moral personality. In support of this reciprocal process, a small but growing body of research suggests that prosocial behavior promotes a diversity of positive outcomes (e.g. Haroz, Murray, Bolton, Betancourt, & Bass, 2013; Irshad & Atta, 2013), potentially reinforcing or bolstering moral personality. The current study aligns with this theory of moral identity in which moral personality (values, self-regulation, sympathy) interplays with context and opportunity (potential for helping) in bringing about both high- and low-cost prosocial behavior, which in turn should further promote moral personality. Thus, the current study will examine bidirectional relations between adolescents' moral personality and both low- and high-cost prosocial behavior toward strangers.

### Defining low- and high-cost prosocial behavior toward strangers

Relational theoretical approaches to prosocial behavior suggest that there may be different predictors of prosocial behavior as a function of the nature of the relationship between the giver and the receiver (Amato, 1990; Eberly & Montemayor, 1999; Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011). This theoretical approach suggests that adolescents are more likely to behave prosocially to those with whom they have a relationship (family and friends) because of shared norms or relationship expectations and increased opportunities to serve. Regardless of target, prosocial behavior may further be delineated by low- and high-cost behavior, which have different predictors and outcomes (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014). Some prosocial behavior toward those in relationships may be high-cost because of emotional investment and the complexity of role expectations, but much of prosocial behavior toward strangers may be considered high cost because it is often more challenging to help those not in one's in-group or whom one does not see and interact with regularly.

Although prosocial behavior toward strangers is less commonplace, there may still be a meaningful distinction between low- and high-cost prosocial behavior toward strangers. For example, giving up one's seat on the bus to a stranger does not require interaction or even communication with the stranger, while repeatedly helping those one does not know by volunteering at a soup kitchen takes more time and personal investment. This would suggest that high-cost prosocial behavior toward strangers may be quite different than low-cost prosocial behavior, and may be particularly laudable given that it is both high cost and not in the context of a relationship. In previous literature on civic engagement or volunteering (classic examples of high-cost prosocial behavior), researchers have posited that there must be a cost associated with prosocial behavior. Indeed, Barrett, Dunbar, and Lycett (2002) note that the typical prosocial exchange actually requires the initiator to incur some sort of cost in order for the receiver to benefit from the behavior. However, researchers studying this topic have defined cost differently, with some defining high-cost as the expenditure of more personal resources (time, money, emotional capital, etc.), while others define high-cost as requiring more moral courage or personal burden (Kayser, Greitmeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Zhang & Epley, 2009). For this study, we have defined high-cost as requiring a greater amount of time and commitment. Indeed, while small helpful favors can certainly be beneficial, the extended devotion of time to help needy others or causes (especially when the target is a stranger) is indicative of higher-cost prosocial behavior.

### Predictors of low- and high-cost prosocial behavior

The distinction between low- and high-cost prosocial behaviors is rarely made in the literature, nor is it often clear who the target of prosocial behavior is in most existing measures (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). For example, it is quite common for measures to include items representing low-cost behavior such as giving up one's seat on a bus, high-cost items such as volunteering, and more ambiguous items such as helping (which could be low- or high-cost). It is also common for measures to be ambiguous regarding the target of the behavior, either not distinguishing target, or conflating friends and strangers. Although it is difficult to make conclusions regarding predictors of low-cost prosocial behavior toward strangers from existing research, in general research has found that values (Hardy, Carlo, & Roesch, 2010; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2007), self-regulation, (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011), and sympathy are all aspect of one's moral personality that are consistent predictors of prosocial behavior.

Alternatively, there is a small body of research that focuses specifically on high-cost prosocial behavior. Since high-cost prosocial behavior requires more of the initiator, studies have shown it to be less prevalent among children and young adults (Eisenberg-Berg & Neal, 1981; Salter, Dickey, & Gulas, 1978). Indeed, Eisenberg-Berg and Neal (1981) showed that when children were asked to reason about a high-cost prosocial dilemma, they were more hedonistic and were less likely to say they should help. In two recent studies, empathy, mature moral reasoning, and a prosocial identity were associated with high-cost prosocial behavior among adolescents and emerging adults (Gneezy, Imas, Brown, Nelson, & Norton, 2012; Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013), again showing that both moral personality and judgment interact and contribute to prosocial behavior. Other studies that focus specifically on volunteering and civic engagement during adolescence suggest that both personality and contextual factors facilitate volunteering. Indeed, Atkins, Hart, and Donnelly (2005) found that personality traits (including positive emotionality, emotion regulation, empathy, and internalized prosocial values) earlier in

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