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How do men and women help? Validation of a multidimensional measure of prosocial behavior

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ABSTRACT

The current study sought to address gender differences in prosocial behavior by creating and validating a multidimensional measure of prosocial behavior that more fully captures the ways that men help others. The new measure is directed toward family, friend, and strangers, and has five factors: defending, emotional support, inclusion, physical helping, and sharing. In Study 1, CFA analyses performed on a sample of 463 emerging adults online (mean age 23.42) revealed good model fit and divergent validity for each of the five factors. Study 2 replicated the analyses on a sample of 453 urban adolescents in the Northwest (mean age 18.37). Results established that all factors had good model fit, construct validity, and convergent validity. The discussion focuses on implications of this measure for future prosocial research including an increased diversity in how people (particularly men) help others and developmental differences toward different targets of prosocial behavior.

In most Western cultures, men are expected to be emotionally reserved and to avoid appearing feminine, which often prohibits showing others that they care about them. One consequence of this culture is that men describe themselves as less helpful than women in most studies despite research that indicates similar levels between boys and girls in the first few years of life (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). Social scientists refer to the ways that people help others as prosocial behavior, or voluntary behavior primarily aimed at benefitting another (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Commenting on this trend, Hastings, McShane, Parker, and Ladha (2007) noted that rather than preschool boys being less prosocial than girls, perhaps they are just prosocial in different ways. They proposed that masculine prosocial behavior might appear more active, agentic, and physical than the ways that girls help each other – more in-line with cultural masculine standards of behavior. Subsequent studies have generated masculine prosocial items in focus groups of middle schoolers (Bergin, Talley, & Hamer, 2003) and explored gender-typing in prosocial behavior (Hine & Leman, 2013), but these new insights have not yet been actualized in an improved measure of prosocial behavior. Are men naturally less prosocial than women, or are those findings based on bias in measurement? Can "masculine prosocial behavior" be measured by these instrumental items, or is masculine behavior structurally different from "feminine prosocial behavior"? Can existing items be rephrased in such a way that they reflect the pressures that men likely feel to avoid feminine presentation? The purpose of this study was to answer these questions by creating and validating a multidimensional measure of prosocial behavior suited to both men and women, to compare it with existing prosocial measures, and to build upon previous ideas about the ways men help others.

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1. Theoretical foundation

Hegemonic masculinity, as proposed by Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985), states that masculine stereotypes of emotional stoicism, avoidance of anything feminine, and physical strength (among others) are intrinsically and extrinsically perpetuated in Western culture. Therefore, although boys and girls may have the same models for prosocial behavior, they are likely being intentionally instructed, and innately developing in intricately different gendered ways (Crouter, Whiteman, McHale, & Osgood, 2007; Hastings et al., 2007). The gender intensification theory explains an increase in the pressure that teens likely feel from hegemonic masculine culture as they proceed through adolescence. This theory posits that as boys and girls age, gender differences in psychological, behavioral, and attitudinal processes increase, and this increase is due to heightened social pressure to conform to established gender stereotypes as their bodies mature into adult forms (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Consequently, the differences in the gendered socialization that boys and girls receive continues to increase throughout adolescence (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Key to this paper, prosocial behavior is a social interaction that is likely affected by pressure to conform to cultural gender stereotypes. Eisenberg, Fabes, and Spinrad (2006) found that when girls from preschool to college-age were aware they were being assessed and they knew what they were being assessed on, they projected a socially desirable image of themselves. That is, the respondents knew that their society valued women who are sweet, helpful, and kind, so they modified their answers accordingly. Unsurprisingly, the same results were not found for male respondents because hegemonic masculine gender roles mandate that men be emotionally aloof rather than empathic (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), thus men would not feel the same pressure to live up to expectations of sweetness and kindness that have been the focus of traditional prosocial measures. A review of the studies on how gender and masculinity affect prosocial behavior depicts how this theoretical foundation is realized in adolescent behavior.

Western masculine culture can be broken down into a set of rules that one must live by in order to access the power and privilege afforded men in patriarchal societies. Important rules in this code of behavior include not showing emotional sensitivity, being physically hard/strong, and displaying obvious heterosexuality (Pleck, 1983). Breaking these rules result in a loss of masculine capital. Individuals it his culture accordingly become gender police to ensure the worthiness of those who are to be called men, and those who fail to live up to the masculine standard are penalized in order to enforce adherence to masculine rules (Pascoe, 2007). The masculine tenet of avoiding emotional sensitivity is particularly important in the current study because the majority of the items comprising current prosocial measures rely on emotional sensitivities that prompt empathic response. Men wishing to strengthen their masculine image and avoid the punishments for breaking it are not likely to want to relate to "feminine" characteristics of concern and sympathy. Indeed, Hine and Leman (2013) found that adolescent boys and girls were particularly unified in defining masculine prosocial behaviors as direct or physical, feminine prosocial behaviors as involving emotion or relationships, and that peers of both gender discourage cross-gendered prosocial behaviors. Differential socialization continues throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood with Carlo and Randall (2002) indicating college-aged men more likely to participate in "heroic" types of prosocial behavior and Kimmel (2008) documenting the very strong pressures that men still face in college to uphold masculine ideals.

2. Gender differences in prosocial behavior

As the amount of prosocial research grows, an increasing number of articles highlight gender differences in the amount of prosocial behavior between men and women, though patterns and replicability are weak. Many studies show that women display more empathy (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992), more kindness (Hastings, Utendale, & Sullivan, 2007) and more desire to help others (Eisenberg et al., 2006), yet Eisenberg et al.'s (2015) most recent meta-analysis of prosocial behavior shows gender differences in prosocial behavior fluctuating over time and across prosocial constructs. Although women were higher on most indicators of prosocial behavior, these results were clearest when self-report measures were used (Chapman et al., 2006). These results are not surprising given the feminine stereotype of care and the masculine stereotype of stoicism. These deeply ingrained stereotypes are difficult to avoid and likely color the measurement taken by impartial observers; observers from within this culture tend to interpret participant actions according to their gendered expectations, with actions of women regarded as more prosocial than actions of men (Shigetomi, Hartmann, & Gelfand, 1981).

Indeed, the early years of life show no gender difference in natal levels of empathic response (Eisenberg et al., 2006). However, the development of children increasingly reflect the ideas of the culture that is socializing them. Gretarsson and Gelfand (1988) found that in the US people see women as intrinsically caring and prosocial, whereas men are prosocial as the result of careful socialization. Physiological data tells a different story: Michalska, Kinzler, and Decety (2013) found that although girls *reported* feeling more upset than boys when viewing others that were hurt, there were no gender differences in physiological response. In a meta-analysis of gendered prosocial behavior, Eagly (2009) claimed that it is incorrect to say women are more helpful. Rather, she found that prosocial behavior research yields patterns of gender specialization with women focused on emotionally supportive behavior and men focused on agentic, social, stranger-oriented behavior.

Several studies have questioned whether or not a potential bias is created when using primarily empathic/feminine items in traditional measurements of prosocial behavior (Bergin et al., 2003; Carlo & Randall, 2002; Zarbatany, Hartmann, Gelfand, & Vinciguerra, 1985). "Feminine" prosocial items measure caring behaviors like tending to another's needs (Skoe, Cumberland, Eisenberg, Hansen, & Perry, 2002), kindness (Söchting, Skoe, & Marcia, 1994), and empathic responses (Gretarsson & Gelfand, 1988); items from which many men are trying to disassociate. Eagly (2009) proposed that masculine