



The roles of parenting practices, sociocognitive/emotive traits, and prosocial behaviors in low-income adolescents

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Parenting practices
Sociocognitive traits
Empathic concern
Prosocial behaviors

ABSTRACT

The goal of the current study was to examine the links among parenting practices (i.e., use of social and material rewards), sociocognitive and socioemotive traits (i.e., perspective taking, prosocial moral reasoning, and empathic concern), and prosocial behaviors among adolescents in a low-income, Midwestern community. Participants were 311 adolescents (*M* age = 16.10 years; range = 14–19 years; 58.7% girls; 82.7% White; 13.6% Latino). The results demonstrated that social rewards were positively associated with perspective taking, empathic concern, and prosocial moral reasoning, which were each associated with multiple forms of prosocial behaviors. Material rewards were negatively associated with prosocial moral reasoning and empathic concern. There were also direct links between material and social rewards and prosocial behaviors. Discussion will focus on the intervening role of social cognitions and emotions in explaining links between parenting practices and low-income adolescents' prosocial behaviors.

Understanding the role of parents in adolescents' social development has long been an interest among scholars. The accumulation of research suggests that there are aspects of positive parenting that promote healthy adolescent adjustment, such as parental warmth, inductive discipline practices (orienting children to the impact of the child's behaviors on others), and authoritative/democratic parenting (see Eisenberg & Valiente, 2002; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996). When examining the links between parenting behaviors and adolescent development, one important developmental outcome to consider is prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors, defined as actions intended to benefit others (Carlo & Randall, 2002; Eisenberg, 2002), are of particular interest among social scientists because of the benefits to the individual as well as broader society. Prosocial behaviors include a multitude of socially-desirable actions, such as volunteering, donating time or resources, and comforting others.

There is growing research that demonstrates that these socially-desirable actions are associated with mental and physical health, lower aggression and delinquency, good self-regulation, higher self-esteem, better academic outcomes, and improved interpersonal relationships (Carlo, 2014). As such, prosocial behaviors are indicators of behavioral health and social well-being and are also important for a flourishing society because of the focus on promoting the well-being of others in the community (see Randall & Wenner, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand parenting practices that promote prosocial behaviors among adolescents. The goal of the current study was to examine the links between specific parenting practices (use of material and social rewards) and adolescents' prosocial behaviors. The current study also aimed to extend the existing literature by examining potential mediating mechanisms (sociocognitive/emotive processes).

Despite the importance of understanding the relations between the family context and prosocial behaviors, the majority of the existing studies on parenting behaviors and adolescents' prosocial behaviors have been conducted with middle to upper class,

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European American adolescents and undergraduate college students (e.g., Carlo, McGinley, Hayes, Batenhorst, & Wilkinson, 2007; Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011; Padilla-Walker, Carlo, Christensen, & Yorgason, 2012; Roth, 2008). There is growing interest among scholars of the need to examine the correlates of prosocial behaviors among culturally diverse groups of adolescents (see Carlo, Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, 1999). While there are a few studies that have examined the links between parenting practices and prosocial behaviors among Latino adolescents and in international samples (e.g., Knight & Carlo, 2012), research on prosocial development in other cultural contexts is still limited. Specifically, studies examining parenting practices and prosocial behaviors among low-income adolescents, including low-income European American adolescents, are scarce. This population may be at risk for experiencing high levels of stress (e.g., unemployment, reduced wages, poor housing quality) and limited resources, as well as limited access to social supports, particularly in rural and semi-rural communities (Conger & Elder, 1994). These factors might mitigate positive parenting practices and positive adolescent adjustment because of the reduced cognitive and emotional resources that families may have when under conditions of stress (see McLeod & Shanahan, 1993). Scholars have also called for more studies examining parenting under conditions of economic disadvantage in order to better understand parenting in this specific cultural context (see McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013).

Additionally, theoretical models suggest that economic conditions are related to parenting practices and ultimately youth outcomes, also highlighting the pervasive nature of stressors associated with limited economic resources (Conger & Elder, 1994). Therefore, the current study was designed to examine the links among parenting practices, adolescents' sociocognitive/emotive traits, and prosocial behaviors in order to better understand how family and individual processes may promote positive social behaviors among low-income adolescents from a small, Midwestern community.

Traditionally, most parenting researchers have examined broad dimensions of parenting, such as warmth and control and general parenting styles (e.g., authoritative, authoritarian) created from these two dimensions (see Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Spera, 2005). While many investigators have demonstrated the developmental consequences of these parenting styles, other scholars have advocated for the study of more specific parenting practices and how such practices are associated with adolescents' social behaviors (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman, 2000). Moral socialization scholars, for example, have often emphasized disciplining practices as salient in influencing and shaping children's moral behaviors (Hoffman, 2000; Kochanska, Aksan, & Nichols, 2003). However, other scholars have noted that parents also commonly use rewards to encourage positive moral behaviors (Carlo, 2014; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). It is important to understand how specific parenting practices that aim to reinforce positive behaviors are linked with desirable social behaviors of adolescents in order to better understand the nuances of parenting. Two sets of prosocial parenting practices commonly used by parents to foster desired behaviors in their children are material (e.g., money, prizes) and social (e.g., praise) rewards. The current study explored the links between parents' use of material and social rewards and adolescents' prosocial behaviors.

Although there is much interest in understanding the parenting antecedents of such actions, relatively sparse research has focused on the possible intervening mechanisms of the links between prosocial parenting practices (use of social and material rewards) and adolescents' prosocial behaviors. Cognitive-developmental and social cognitive theorists have identified several important mechanisms that could account for the relations between parenting practices and prosocial behaviors including perspective taking (i.e., understanding the thoughts, feelings, and social situations of others), empathic concern (i.e., feelings of sorrow or concern for others; Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014), and prosocial moral reasoning (reasoning about moral issues when the needs of another is in contrast to the needs of the self; Eisenberg, 1986). Therefore, the current study examined the mediating roles of perspective taking, empathic concern, and prosocial moral reasoning in the links between parents' use of material and social rewards and prosocial behaviors in a sample of adolescents from a low-income community.

1. Multidimensionality of prosocial behaviors

Recently, researchers have suggested that prosocial behaviors are complex and multidimensional and should not be examined as a unidimensional or global construct (see Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). Five forms of prosocial behaviors that are common among adolescents and young adults are emotional, dire, compliant, public, and altruistic (Carlo & Randall, 2002). These five forms of helping tap into contextual differences in opportunities to engage in prosocial behaviors and motivations behind such helping behaviors. Emotional, dire, and compliant prosocial behaviors tap into the contexts of such helping because individuals may be more likely to help in certain situations than others. Specifically, emotional prosocial behaviors are helping behaviors expressed in emotionally evocative situations, such as comforting another. Dire prosocial behaviors refer to helping in crisis situations. Compliant prosocial behaviors include helping when directed, such as helping when asked. Interestingly, public and altruistic prosocial behaviors are thought to tap into motivations for helping. Public prosocial behaviors are helping behaviors done in the presence of others. Finally, altruistic prosocial behaviors include helping with no expected benefit to the self (Carlo & Randall, 2002). Because public helping is done with the knowledge that others are watching, it is thought to be relatively more self-serving and more highly related to approval orientations. Altruistic helping, on the other hand, is a relatively selfless form of helping because there is no expected benefit to the helper. Research has consistently supported these forms of helping as distinct constructs (see McGinley, Opal, Richaud, & Mesurado, 2014). Therefore, an additional purpose of the present study was to examine whether parental rewards and adolescents' perspective taking, empathic concern, and prosocial moral reasoning were differentially related to these specific forms of prosocial behaviors.

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