



# Longitudinal relations between adolescents' materialism and prosocial behavior toward family, friends, and strangers

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines the short-term changes and longitudinal relations between adolescents' materialism and prosocial behavior toward family, friends, and strangers over a year. A total of 434 Chinese adolescents (mean age at Time 1 = 11.27; 54% girls) participated in the two time points. From 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 7<sup>th</sup> grade, boys' and girls' materialism increased, whereas their prosocial behavior toward family, friends, and strangers declined, despite the stable trend in boys' prosocial behavior toward strangers. Furthermore, a cross-lagged model was conducted and the results showed that, adolescent materialism was associated longitudinally with decreased prosocial behavior toward friends and strangers, but not toward family. However, earlier prosocial behavior toward family, friends, and strangers were not associated with subsequent adolescent materialism. The findings point toward an understanding of materialism as a precursor rather than an outcome or byproduct to prosocial behavior.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial time period during which personal values and prosocial behavior are developing. Prosocial behavior, defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit another (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinard, 2006), has been demonstrated to interrelate with personal values, such as prosocial values (Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014) and self-transcendence values (Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2012). Research even found that earlier prosocial values augmented subsequent prosocial behavior, and vice versa (Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014). However, the relations of prosocial behavior with other prevailing values, such as materialism, has received relatively limited attention, and longitudinal associations between adolescents' materialism and prosocial behavior remain unclear.

Materialism, defined as a set of values and goals focused on wealth, possessions, image, and status (Kasser, 2016, p. 489), is one of the most prevailing values among today's global adolescents (e.g., Fu, Kou, & Yang, 2015; Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Although there has been evidence indicating a negative association between materialism and prosocial behavior (Bauer, Wilkie, Kim, & Bodenhausen, 2012; Briggs, Landry, & Wood, 2007; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), the studies were mostly correlational, and used only adult samples. Therefore, we aimed to further investigate longitudinal and bidirectional relations between materialism and prosocial behavior among early adolescents. We also examined the short-term changes (a one-year period) in adolescents' materialism and prosocial behavior.

Although many studies have treated prosocial behavior as a unidimensional construct, more recent research highlights the multidimensional nature of prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). This multidimensionality can be represented by many

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ways, such as varying types of prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014; Yang & Xin, 2016), and different targets of prosocial behavior (Carlo, Crockett, Randall, & Roesch, 2007; Fu, Padilla-Walker, & Brown, 2017; Padilla-Walker, Dyer, Yorgason, Fraser, & Coyne, 2015). Specifically, targets (family, friends, and strangers) of prosocial behavior were the focus of the present study, as a key issue of multidimensional prosocial research is whether one's helping behavior varies as a function of his/her relationship with the recipient. Thus, we attempted to distinguish prosocial behavior toward different targets when testing the linkage between materialism and prosocial behavior, as well as the short-term changes of these variables.

### 1.1. Short-term changes and gender differences in materialism and prosocial behavior during early adolescence

Prior studies have found that girls reported lower materialism than boys in western samples (e.g., Flouri, 2004), whereas this gender difference was not observed in Chinese adolescents (Chan, Zhang, & Wang, 2006; Fu, Kou, et al., 2015). The findings among western adolescents are consistent with the explanation that men use goods to exhibit power, while women perceive possessions as a part of social relations (Rudmin, 1990). Males usually hold higher levels of power motivation than females (Schuh et al., 2014), and thus boys reported higher materialism than girls in western samples. By comparison, the lack of gender difference among Chinese adolescents may lie in the one-child policy in China whereby Chinese children become the focal point of the whole family; as a result, they can substantially affect household purchases and understand the social meaning of possessions regardless of gender (McNeal & Ji, 1999).

In addition, there exist limited studies on age differences in materialism during adolescence. These studies are mostly cross-sectional designs, demonstrating that Chinese 7<sup>th</sup> graders showed lower materialism than did older adolescents from 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Chan et al., 2006; Fu, Kou, et al., 2015). According to model of consumer socialization (John, 1999), older children in the reflective stage (age 11 to 16) are more likely to value material goods than younger ones, because older ones tend to understand more about the meaning, value, and importance of possessions. Given the controversy on gender difference and scant evidence on longitudinal changes in materialism, the present study tried to investigate the short-term (a one-year period) changes and gender difference in materialism.

At the same time, studies on prosocial development among adolescents showed no changes (Flynn, Ehrenreich, Beron, & Underwood, 2015), decrease (Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara, 2013; Carlo et al., 2007), or distinct trajectories for prosocial behavior toward different targets (Padilla-Walker, Dyer, et al., 2015). The general declining trend can be interpreted by the increasing path in self-focused modes of prosocial moral reasoning from early to middle adolescence (Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005), whereas the distinct prosocial developmental trajectories toward different targets highlight a need for multidimensional approach in examining prosocial development (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014).

To take gender into account, studies have provided evidence that both boys and girls drop in prosocial behavior across early to middle adolescence, but boys drop more rapidly than girls (e.g., Carlo et al., 2007), and suggested that boys have lower levels of societal pressures to be kind and helpful than do girls (Nielson, Padilla-Walker, & Holmes, 2017). By contrast, other evidence did not show such a gender difference in the declining trend of prosocial behavior (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2013). Considering the inconsistent evidence on gender and age differences in adolescent prosocial development, the current study explored the short-term changes and gender differences in prosocial behavior toward different targets among Chinese adolescents.

### 1.2. The role of materialism on prosocial behavior

Theoretically, according to circumplex model of values (Schwartz, 1992), human values are organized in a “circumplex” fashion such that each value is consistent with some values, and incompatible with other values. Compatible values are adjacent to each other, while conflicting values are opposite each other. Specifically, there are two opposite higher-order types of values that express conflicting goals: Self-enhancement values promote personal interest (e.g., wealth, hedonism), whereas self-transcendence values transcend self-interest to benefit others (e.g., prosocial values, universalism). Based on this theory, values conflict theory (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002) proposes that materialism falls within the cluster of self-enhancement values and is opposite to self-transcendence values, such as prosocial values. The ultimate goal of materialistic individuals is to acquire possessions and pursue sensual pleasure (Kasser, 2016), rather than to transcend self-interest to consider the welfare of others. Taking these theories a step further, experimental research demonstrates that salience of a value could: (a) increase behaviors that reflect the values that are consistent with the salient value (the bleed-over effect), and (b) suppress behaviors that reflect the values that are opposite to the salient value (the seesaw effect; Maio, Pakizah, Cheung, & Rees, 2009). Because materialism belongs to self-enhancement values, and prosocial behavior reflects the opposite self-transcendence values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), it can be assumed that materialism and prosocial behavior are on the opposite sides of the value seesaw. As materialism becomes more important to adolescents, self-transcendent concerns and goals could be deprioritized and deactivated, leading one to exhibit less prosocial behavior. Extending these three theories (circumplex model of values, values conflict theory, and the seesaw effect) to the role of materialism on prosocial behavior, we speculated that greater materialism would be predictive of lower levels of prosocial behavior.

Empirically, a few studies have found that highly materialistic individuals engaged in less prosocial behavior, such as helping (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) and volunteering (Briggs et al., 2007). Limited experimental studies also showed that individuals primed with materialism were less likely to help others subsequently (Bauer et al., 2012; Lamy, Guéguen, Fischer-Lokou, & Guegan, 2016). Nevertheless, these studies are mostly cross-sectional designs and conducted in adult samples. Therefore, we aimed to extend the existing research by examining the longitudinal relations between materialism and prosocial behavior in a sample of early adolescents.

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