The relation between prosociality and self-esteem from middle-adolescence to young adulthood

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the longitudinal relations between prosociality and self-esteem. Participants were 386 (50.3% males) middle adolescents (M_{age} = 15.6) assessed over a 10-year period until they entered into young adulthood (M_{age} = 25.7). First, multivariate latent curve analysis indicated that the developmental increase of prosociality was positively related to the parallel increase of self-esteem. Second, an autoregressive cross-lagged model revealed that the direct effect of prosociality on self-esteem was statistically significant but essentially negligible. These findings corroborated from a long-term longitudinal perspective previous studies highlighting the positive correlation between the development of prosociality and self-esteem, and pointed out to the need for further investigating the relation between the two constructs. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Prosociality refers to an individual's enduring tendencies to enact behaviors such as sharing, helping, and caring (Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2012; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Interestingly, research on prosociality highlighted that the benefits of helping others are not limited to the recipient of the "good action" but also extend to the actor. Indeed, prosociality has been posited among the more important factors fostering psychological adjustment, in particular during adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Caprara & Steca, 2005; Eisenberg & Morris, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2006). Findings demonstrated that prosocial adolescents perform better at school (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000), are less at risk of internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999), and have better peer relationships compared with less prosocial adolescents (e.g., Markiewicz, Doyle, & Brendgen, 2001).

Among the array of beneficial effects of behaving prosocially for the actor, some scholars focused their attention on self-esteem (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004; Leary & MacDonald, 2003).

This is particularly relevant, since self-esteem (i.e., the degree to which people judge themselves as worthy of value, Rosenberg 1965) has been widely recognized as one of the most relevant indicators of well-adjustment in adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Erol & Orth, 2011; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008). Possessing a robust self-esteem in these developmental periods has been related to lower levels of aggressive behavior (e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005), depression (e.g., Orth et al., 2008), drug and alcohol consumption (Baumeister, Campbell, Kruegger, & Vohs, 2003; Leary & MacDonald, 2003), and better physical health (e.g., Trzesniewski et al., 2006) and relationship satisfaction (Harter, 2003). Thus, due to its relevance, considerable attention has been devoted to an analysis of the determinants of self-worth (e.g., Erol & Orth, 2011; Harter, 2003). In the present study, we focused on prosociality (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006; Laible et al., 2004) and analyzed its relation with self-esteem during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood in light of the relevance for individuals' well-adjustment of possessing a positive self-esteem during this developmental phase (e.g., Harter, 2003; Orth et al., 2008; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). In order to offer a more compelling picture of the association between prosociality and self-esteem, we employed two types of analyses which helped us to understand (1) to which extent the developmental trajectories of both variables are correlated (i.e., latent curve model, LCM) and (2) the likely direction of influences between constructs (i.e., autoregressive cross-lagged model, ARC).

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1.1. Prosociality and self-esteem

Interestingly, the positive link between prosociality and self-esteem has mainly been highlighted by studies investigating the effect of volunteerism on youths' self-regard (e.g., Johnson et al., 1998; Yates & Youniss, 1996). The common result of these studies was that young volunteers reported a high level of self-esteem. As discussed by Browne, Hoyle, and Nicholson (2012), it is likely that volunteers experience high self-regard because helping others enhances their perception of being competent and helpful as well as their sense of social connectedness, which in turn can enhance their self-regard. Moreover, it is likely that the high social skills of prosocial individuals can facilitate prosocial people to be involved in positive and rewarding social relationships by eliciting closeness, warmth, and supportiveness (Caprara & Steca, 2005). Having high quality relationships, in turn, can contribute to individuals' self-worth by enhancing their perception of being accepted and valued by others (e.g., Harter, 2003; Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Yet, since greater attention has mainly been paid to investigating volunteerism (i.e., a specific prosocial behavior enacted in an organized context), the relation between self-esteem and the individuals' general tendency to behave prosocially during daily life deserves further investigation (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Indeed, it is important to note that although all volunteers are likely to be prosocial individuals, not all prosocial individuals volunteer. Therefore, it seems necessary to replicate these findings in a sample of youths and adolescents by using measures of prosociality that are not uniquely limited to volunteerism. In this regard, most of the available studies used cross-sectional research designs to empirically ascertain the conceptual links between prosociality and self-esteem (e.g., Laible et al., 2004).

To our knowledge, the few works focusing on prosociality and self-esteem from a longitudinal perspective mainly rested on a short time span (e.g., Le, Impett, Kogan, Webster, & Cheng, 2012; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). For instance, Le et al. (2012) reported that communally oriented people (i.e., people assigning great value to the welfare of others) tended to experience a greater sense of self-worth over the course of 4 weeks through the activation of positive emotions related to caring for others. Weinstein and Ryan (2010) found that autonomous motivation to help (i.e., the tendency to enact those prosocial acts that are experienced as free and self-initiated) predicted increased self-esteem over 14 days through the satisfaction of participants' needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. However, the age group of the two samples (participants were mainly university students 18 years or older) and the daily diary method used in both studies (well suited to investigate short-term effects) did not allow these results to be completely generalized to adolescents' transition into adulthood, or to analyze the long-term effects of prosociality on self-esteem.

Based on the above arguments, the main scopes of the present study were (a) to expand previous studies on volunteerism by using a general measure of prosociality and (b) to investigate the longitudinal relations between prosociality and self-esteem by adopting a long-term longitudinal perspective such as the transition from middle adolescence to young adulthood. In line with the aforementioned theoretical arguments, we expected prosociality to significantly predict self-esteem, and a significant positive association between change rates of prosociality and self-esteem. With regard to the shape of latent trajectories, recent studies have shown that both prosociality (e.g., Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara, 2013) and self-esteem (e.g., Erol & Orth, 2011) tend to increase from middle/late adolescence to early adulthood. Accordingly, we expected that both constructs should increase in this period. Although, to the best of our knowledge,

no previous studies have investigated the joint development of prosociality and self-esteem, we presumed that the two developments are positively correlated. Indeed, as stated earlier, one could hypothesize that prosociality may promote supportive social environments in which individuals feel valued and accepted, thereby sustaining a positive self-esteem development (Harter, 2003).

Although our focus was on the effect of prosociality on self-esteem, we did not exclude the reverse path in our analysis. Indeed, in accordance with Eisenberg et al. (2006) and Leary and MacDonald (2003), just like any other social conduct, prosocial behavior needs adequate motivational resources to be acted properly, and high level of self-esteem could lead individuals to feel more "motivationally equipped" to help others. Finally, in order to control for the possible moderation effect of gender (e.g., Laible et al., 2004), we conducted our analyses by using a multi-group approach for sex.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and design

The current study included 386 participants (50.3% males) from Genzano, a community near Rome, who were from families involved in an ongoing longitudinal study that started in 1989. The families of Genzano matched the national socio-economic profile of Italian society across the years in which the study was performed (ISTAT, 2002). Approximately 14% of the families were in professional or managerial ranks, 25% were merchants or operators of other businesses, 31% were skilled workers, 29% were unskilled workers, and 1% were retired. We used five time-points (over a 10-year period) to model the relations between prosociality and self-esteem: Time 1 (T1) was in 1998, Time 2 (T2) was in 2000, Time 3 (T3) was in 2002, Time 4 (T4) was in 2004, and Time 5 (T5) was in 2008. Participants' mean age was 15.6 ($SD = 0.58$) at T1 and 25.7 at T5 ($SD = 0.57$).

2.2. Missing data analyses

Participation rate was high from T1 to T2 (79%), and from T1 to T3 (77%), but decreased from T1 to T4 (55%), and from T1 to T5 (38%). The attrition was mainly due to the unavailability of individuals to take part in the later phases of the study or, in some cases, their relocation from the area of Genzano. Analyses of variance reported that the missing participants at T5 did not significantly differ from their counterparts on self-esteem and prosociality level in the previous assessment, nor did the groups differ in the covariance matrices as indicated by the *Box-M* test for homogeneity of covariance matrices. Of note, our data met the strict assumption of missing completely at random (MCAR) as the Little's test (1988) was not statistically significant $\chi^2(78) = 93.99$, $p = .11$ (i.e. the missingness on one variable was unrelated to the other measured or unmeasured variables, Enders, 2010). The assumption of MCAR allowed unbiased full information maximum-likelihood estimates of missing data in the analyses (Enders, 2010). LCMs and ARCs were implemented in M*plus* 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012).

2.3. Procedures

Self-esteem and prosociality measures were collected in the classroom from T1 to T3. In this phase, parental informed consent and approval from school councils were obtained for the participants. At T4 and at T5, participants received the questionnaire after being contacted by phone. They also received a small payment. The participants returned the questionnaires and informed consent