



# Dimensionality in adolescent prosocial tendencies: Individual differences in serving others versus serving the self



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research was to determine whether adolescents prosocial tendencies can be distinguished by serving others versus serving the self, and, further, to support that distinction through their associations with empathic (empathic concern, perspective taking, personal distress) versus egoistic traits (need for approval, narcissism, psychopathy). Empathy was hypothesized to be linked to interpersonal and high-cost prosocial contexts, whereas egoistic traits were hypothesized to be linked to contexts offering self-aggrandizement. High school students ( $n = 272$ ; 15–18 years) completed questionnaires online. Results revealed that empathy and concerns about others' approval associated positively with emotional responsivity, dire, compliancy, and anonymous prosocial tendencies. Concerns about approval also predicted public and opportunistic tendencies. Egoistic traits related to adolescents' public and opportunistic prosocial behavior. Findings demonstrate an individual difference by context variation, supporting the multidimensionality of prosocial behavior and its underlying motives.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent research on adolescent prosocial behavior – voluntary behavior intended to benefit another (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006) – recognizes prosocial behavior as multidimensional rather than unidimensional (Carlo & Randall, 2001, 2002; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). Thus, individual differences predicting prosocial tendencies should vary by the underlying dimensional nature of the prosocial tendency. Some proclivities to act prosocially might be driven by a focus on others' plights through empathic experiences (Batson & Shaw, 1991). Other prosocial situations highlight self-enhancement (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Carlo & Randall, 2001), such that concern about obtaining others' approval, narcissism, and psychopathy are linked to acting prosocially. Understanding this distinction may elucidate why youth are more or less prosocial or why they might act prosocially in some situations but not in others. The purpose of the present research was to determine whether underlying dimensions in adolescents' tendencies to act prosocially can be distinguished as

opportunities to serve others or serve the self, and to further support that distinction through associations with other-oriented versus egoistic individual differences.

Adolescents encounter a variety of situations in which they have opportunities to act prosocially (Carlo, 2006; Carlo et al., 2003). They show gradual improvements in empathy-related abilities, such as, empathic concern, especially for boys (van der Graff et al., 2014), perspective-taking (Miklikowska, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011; van der Graff et al., 2014), and mitigation of personal distress, (Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara, 2013). Adolescents highly value peer evaluations and acceptance (Brown & Larson, 2009), heightening self-consciousness and self-focus often witnessed in pretentious self-concern – qualities akin to narcissism (Barry & Kauten, 2014). Narcissism often is linked with psychopathic qualities, such as callousness, impulsivity, and manipulateness. These traits may prompt some youth to view prosocial contexts as opportunistic situations for self-aggrandizement and validating their superiority over others (Krauten & Barry, 2014; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Taken together, empathy, approval needs, and narcissism provide a basis for distinguishing among tendencies for prosocial behavior.

### 1.1. Predictors of different prosocial behavior tendencies

Empathy is a cognitive and affective response in relation to another's emotional state or circumstance (Eisenberg et al., 2006). It is founded on perspective taking, that is, the ability to

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perceive a situation from another's viewpoint, and empathic concern, defined as an affective reaction where individuals feel "sympathy and concern for unfortunate others" (Davis, 1983, p. 114). Together, they facilitate prosocial behavior with the goal of benefitting or reducing others' distress without expectations for reward (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Carlo, 2006). Empathic concern and perspective-taking are fundamental in other-oriented prosocial tendencies. Personal distress is another empathic response where the actor is emotionally or empathically overwhelmed. It tends to be inversely related or unrelated to prosocial responding in youth (Eisenberg et al., 2006). With age, adolescents are able to mitigate distress, allowing them to act rather than avoid helping (Miklikowska et al., 2011). In the present research, we expected that empathy and perspective-taking would be linked positively to prosocial tendencies that serve others, such as emotional responsiveness, anonymous acts, emergency intervention, and compliancy. Personal distress was hypothesized to be inversely related or unrelated. For prosocial opportunities that are self-serving, empathy, perspective-taking, and personal distress were not expected to be linked.

In contrast to empathy, which requires an other-directed focus, adolescents also are viewed as egocentric. Youth tend to have heightened concerns about the opinions of others for feelings of self worth, especially peers (Brown & Larson, 2009; Rudolf, Caldwell, & Conley, 2005). Behaving prosocially can be an impression management strategy to gain approval or avoid disapproval (Carlo et al., 2003; Rudolf et al., 2005). We speculated that adolescents who were more concerned about disapproval would tend to act prosocially in contexts where they are in direct contact with a beneficiary; that is, where feedback is immediate, inaction would violate norms, or peer rejection is possible. In comparison, youth who focused on gaining positive approval would be more likely to behave prosocially in public and feel entitled to such recognition.

Focus on peer approval is normative in adolescence as it reflects a desire to act in socially desirable ways that reward and maintain positive interactions (Brown & Larson, 2009; Rudolf et al., 2005). Over-reliance, however, is consistent with an individual difference perspective of narcissism (Barry & Kauten, 2014; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Thomaes, Bushman, De Castro, & Stegge, 2009). According to this perspective, narcissistic tendencies reflect a dynamic self-regulatory process where individuals organize their social environment to maintain ostentatious and idealized self-views. Individuals reporting higher narcissism engage in self-enhancement strategies to maintain self-importance, superiority, entitlement, and power (Gebauer, Sedikides, Verpanken, & Maio, 2012). Narcissistic individuals believe they are more deserving than others and become caught in a perpetual cycle of seeking recognition, admiration, and self-affirmation (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011). Tactics might include being callous, manipulative, and impulsive in order to ensure their "top dog" self-view. Engaging in prosocial behavior in particular contexts may offer strategic opportunities for narcissistic adolescents to enhance specialness beyond normative concerns about peer approval. In the present study, narcissism and psychopathy were expected to predict prosocial tendencies in contexts that were opportunistic and self-promoting.

## 1.2. Summary of hypotheses

We investigated whether patterns of personality qualities would be linked in different ways to adolescents' prosocial tendencies. Specifically, (H1) Prosocial tendencies was expected to factor into two dimensions – those that serve others and those that serve the self; (H2) empathy and perspective-taking were hypothesized to link positively to other-serving tendencies, but would be

inversely or unassociated with prosocial tendencies that procure self-benefit. Links with personal distress were not hypothesized given extant research. (H3) Avoidance of disapproval was expected to be linked to prosocial tendencies in which disappointing others was immediate and possible, and need for approval was hypothesized to be related positively to self-oriented prosocial proclivities. (H4) Narcissistic tendencies were hypothesized to be linked positively with self-serving prosocial tendencies. Narcissism and psychopathic traits, however, were not expected to be related to prosocial behaviors in contexts that serve others.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

High school students ( $n = 132$  males,  $n = 184$  females) equally distributed across the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades completed questionnaires in-class and via a secure website. Of the in-classroom participants ( $n = 316$ ), 272 adolescents ( $M_{Age} = 16.27$  years; 62% female) completed the online questionnaires used in the present study. The sample was recruited from one high school in a suburban area of the Midwest. Most participants were European American (87%) and from intact families (81%). Approximately 64% of mothers and 73% of fathers had earned college and/or professional degrees; median family annual income category was \$110–\$120K.

### 2.2. Procedure

Data were collected in two parts. First, in a classroom setting, students completed demographic information and one survey, after which they were given an instruction sheet with a unique identification number and login information to a secure survey website. Second, they were asked to complete surveys online within 2 weeks. Extra credit was provided for participation.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Prosocial behavior

Participants' prosocial behavior was measured using the 23-item Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM; Carlo & Randall, 2002) consisting of six subscales, each assessing different prosocial tendencies: *emotional responsivity* – 4 items ("It makes me feel good when I can comfort someone who is very upset."), *dire* – 3 items ("I tend to help people who are in a real crisis or need."), *compliant* – 2 items ("When people ask me to help them, I don't hesitate."); *anonymous* – 5 items ("I tend to help needy others most when they do not know who helped them."), *public* – 4 items ("I can help others best when people are watching me."), and *altruism* (5 – items). Items for the altruism scale were scored in a direction reflecting 'opportunistic' tendencies ("I think that one of the best things about helping others is that it makes me look good"). In several studies, psychometric evaluation of the PTM has shown that six factors best represent its structure. The PTM has demonstrated acceptable test–retest reliability, internal consistency, and validity (McGinley, Opal, Richaud, & Mesurado, 2014). Participants indicated the degree to which each item was like him/her, where "1 = not at all like me" through "5 = just like me." Higher mean scores represent higher prosociality.

#### 2.3.2. Empathy

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) assessed trait-like empathy. Three of the IRI subscales were used in the current study: empathic concern ("I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"), perspective-taking

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