The Development of Prosocial Behavior

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INTRODUCTION

There have been energetic debates throughout time regarding the socio-moral nature of human interaction. Centuries ago, theologians and philosophers framed the issues in terms of stark contrasts (e.g., humans were born with the capacity for good or evil, and these qualities were either innate or learned). Depending upon one's point of view, societal influences could be seen either as corrupting innocent youth or as a means by which aggressive instincts could be subdued over time to produce caring and compassion. Such unidimensional views gradually began to give way, with increased recognition of our multifaceted nature. Research in the last half century has significantly advanced knowledge about biological and environmental contributors to prosocial and antisocial behaviors. Here we review research on prosocial behavior, from a developmental perspective, emphasizing mainly work published in the last decade. By prosocial or altruistic behaviors we mean acts that include provision of comfort or sympathy, helping, sharing, cooperation, rescue, protection, and defense. We also review work on emotions and cognitions that often accompany, and are integral features of, prosocial behaviors. This includes children's empathy or emotional incorporation of the others' emotional experience, as well as their moral reasoning and cognitive comprehension of others' internal states and needs (perspective taking, role taking).
Reviews of two decades of research of moral development provide a comprehensive historical, theoretical, and empirical background for work described in this chapter (Hoffman, 1970; Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman, 1983). Hoffman (1970) reviewed research of the 1960s on moral development. At this time, the emphasis was on the "thou shalt nots," or the ways in which children learned to refrain from wrongdoing. Prevailing constructs included conscience, guilt, internalization, superego, and the like. Freudian theory and learning theory represented the predominant theoretical approaches. By the late 1960s, there was more interest in positive aspects of morality, and prosocial behaviors were studied extensively during the 1970s (see review by Radke-Yarrow et al., 1983). Normative patterns of development and socialization, as well as contexts and mediators of caring behaviors, were emphasized. Research on the development of moral reasoning and its relationship to prosocial, moral actions also assumed prominence (Kohlberg, 1969). This interest in cognitive correlates also was evident in work on perspective taking or role taking, and its relation to positive behaviors.

As we began to review research of the past decade, several shifts in emphasis became apparent. There are now fewer studies of normative patterns of development and socialization of prosocial behavior. There are more studies of conditions of risk both within the child and the environment that may deter adaptive patterns of expression. There has been a shift from conceptualizations of prosocial actions as isolated response patterns to more integrative approaches in which such actions are seen as a part of children's more broadly defined social repertoires. Prosocial behavior is viewed as one dimension of social competence that plays a role in children's developing peer relations. Examination of school-age children's goals and strategies for social interactions, for example, now commonly includes efforts to understand why unpopular children not only engage in aggressive behavior but also show fewer prosocial strategies in problem-solving situations (Renshaw & Asher, 1983).

There has been growing appreciation for the need to study prosocial and antisocial behavior patterns in relation to one another, with entire volumes now devoted to this topic (e.g., Block, Olweus, & Radke-Yarrow, 1986; Zahn-Waxler, Cummings, & Iannotti, 1986). There has been an increase in research on empathy or the vicarious affective arousal experienced in the face of another's distress (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987) as an important mediator or correlate of prosocial behavior patterns (Radke-Yarrow et al., 1983). The issue of sex differences in empathy and prosocial orientations was a dominant theme during the 1980s. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to review and discussion of substantive findings from representative studies during this research era. We begin with work on the development and socialization of prosocial behavior, then shift to research on empathy, sex differences, conditions of risk, and psychopathology.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

When do behaviors reflecting concern for others develop, what forms do they take, and how do they change over time? Many studies have demonstrated that young children show low levels of prosocial behavior and that these behaviors increase during the early and middle elementary-school years. In a review of over 75 naturalistic and experimental studies of children's provision of comfort and