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Introduction to the Special Section: Prosocial Development in Risky and Vulnerable Contexts

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Introduction to Special Section: Prosocial Development in Risky and Vulnerable Contexts

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Abstract

The introduction highlights a developmental perspective on children's and youth prosocial behavior in risky and vulnerable contexts. The six empirical papers published in this Special Section are considered within a multilevel, multidimensional framework and reflect a diversity of methodological approaches. The studies each provide foundational work that informs theory, builds our knowledge base, and has important intervention implications. We highlight the contributions of each study and present recommendations for future developmental research on prosocial behaviors.

Keywords

Risk factors, prosocial, social ecological model, cross-cultural developmental psychology, risky and vulnerable contexts, methodology

Prosocial behaviors, or voluntary acts aimed primarily to benefit another person (Eisenberg et al., 2015), are correlated with a host of health and well-being outcomes (Johnson et al., 1998; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010), are important markers of moral development, and are foundational for understanding intergroup cooperation and conflict (Bowman et al., 2010; Carlo, 2014). The vast majority of this research, however, has focused the development of prosocial behaviors in normative environments. Relatively less attention has been paid to prosocial behaviors in risky and adverse contexts and to marginalized populations. To address this gap, this Special Section highlights work by leading scholars on *Prosocial Development in Risky and Vulnerable Contexts*.

Psychological research within the context of adversity and risk often adopts a pathology, deficit, or maladaptation-oriented approach. Although such research is necessary, there are high costs associated with an overemphasis on pathology and the relative neglect of positive development. This skewed focus can be particularly troubling because oftentimes the study populations are minorities, which can promote stigma and further marginalize such groups. Shifting the focus away from pathological and negative outcomes and toward prosocial behaviors emphasizes children's abilities to actively and positively transform their own trajectories and provides important insights on resiliency and promotive factors (Davis & Carlo, 2019; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Taylor et al., 2019). Thus, a developmental approach to the study of prosocial behaviors may inform scholars, practitioners, and policymakers about avenues to promote prosociality among at-risk groups in the face of adversity and threat.

Several recent advances in this field have accompanied the growing interest in prosocial development. Some scholars have advocated for more sophisticated conceptualizations of prosocial behaviors that emphasize the unique correlates and trajectories of specific types and targets of prosocial behaviors (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2015; Taylor et al., 2020). This approach allows us to identify specific types of prosocial behaviors that might promote distinct benefits across different levels of children's social ecology

(Taylor, 2020; Taylor et al., 2014, 2018). A second recent advancement is the renewed focus on studying diverse cultural groups. Although research on prosocial behaviors has existed for decades, relatively little attention has been paid to the study of prosocial development in groups from diverse nationalities and in diverse minority groups within societies (Bähr et al., in press; Carlo, 2006; Carlo & de Guzman, 2009). These kinds of studies are necessary to examine the generalizability of models across cultures and to understand normative social development within specific cultural contexts. A third major trend is the proliferation of more sophisticated study designs (e.g., longitudinal, experimental) and measures (e.g., multi-informants, multidimensional scales) (e.g., Taylor et al., 2018). These advancements facilitate the discovery of age-related trends, allow us to better discern the direction of relations, provide valuable convergent evidence, and strengthen the internal validity of studies. The papers in the Special Section showcase these advancements and positively position the future of the study of prosocial development.

Specific Contributions of the Special Section

In this Special Section, different levels of children's and youth's social ecology are reflected in the studies. As in the wider literature, the majority of research in this Special Section focuses on the microsystemic structure of the family. Distinguishing among

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family relationships, Rum, Zachor, and Dromi examine prosociality between siblings, while Samper, Llorca, Malonda, and Mestre focus on the role of parents, and Bradshaw, Creaven, and Muldoon investigate the influence of incarcerated primary caregivers. Davis et al. (in press) take a holistic approach through measuring family cohesion among Latino families in the U.S. Within the microsystem, but beyond the family, Shi, Ettekal, Liew, and Woltering examine the quality of the interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers. In contrast, the consideration of exosystemic and macrosystemic influences is relatively less common in the existing literature. Reflecting these contextual aspects of adversity, Shamo-Nir et al. (2020), situated in Israel, examines intergroup relations related to the ongoing conflict, with potential cultural and political implications. Shi et al. (2020) examine the impact of risks associated with socioeconomic status, shaped by parental workplace/income, on children's prosocial behavior.

Although most of the papers in the Special Section examine prosocial behaviors aiming to benefit an individual or an unspecified target, some of the papers study specific targets of prosocial behaviors. For example, Rum et al. (2020) focuses on prosociality in sibling dyads, particularly between a typically developing older sibling and a younger sibling with autism spectrum disorders. The Rum et al. (2020) study provides important insights on prosocial development in an understudied and unique family relationship context. The Shamo-Nir et al. (2020) study measures sharing with outgroup members. This latter study highlights one of the important implications of the study of prosocial behaviors, namely the relevance of such actions for understanding prejudice and discrimination.

The Special Section also reflects a multiplicity of research designs and methodological approaches. Observational data (Rum et al., 2020), experimental tasks (Shamo-Nir et al., 2020), self-report (Bradshaw et al., 2020; Davis et al., in press; Samper et al., 2021; Shamo-Nir et al., 2020), and multi-informant (Shi et al., 2020) surveys were used. Four papers are longitudinal studies (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Davis et al., in press; Shi et al., 2020) spanning 3–12 years. Longitudinal designs are especially useful since they enable researchers to test the direction of effects and assess within-person change in risk or protective variables. Such process-oriented research is also emphasized in the person–process–context model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and in the triadic-reciprocal determinism model (Bandura, 1986). Two other studies are comparative and focus on potential group differences between offender and non-offender populations (Samper et al., 2021) and Jewish and Arab-Muslim children (Shamo-Nir et al., 2020), respectively.

Beyond the Special Section

The papers in the Special Section represent important advancements in the study of prosocial development. The diverse samples and methodologies in the context of risk and vulnerability fill a much-needed gap in the field. The papers highlight the resilient nature of children and youth in the face of adversity and risk. The studies also complement existing work on these at-risk populations that examines pathology and maladjustment. Taken together, the accumulation of data from studies on prosocial behaviors and maladjustment can better inform policymakers and program developers. Such interventions should aim not only to reduce maladjustment but also to promote positive health and well-being.

There are, of course, additional future studies on prosocial development needed. First, given the substantial existence of work on microsystem influences, there is a need for more research that captures exo- and macrosystem influences on the development of prosocial behavior (Taylor et al., 2018). Second, the Special Section covers several adversity and risk contexts but there are many other contexts of adversity to explore such as chronic illness, poverty and homelessness, mass migration, collective traumatic experiences (such as the global pandemic of COVID-19), natural disasters, war and violence (e.g., gangs).

Third, more studies on bidirectional effects between children's prosocial behavior and their environment are also needed. Prior work has demonstrated, for example, a positive feedback loop between maternal warmth and prosociality (Carlo et al., 2011). A mutual influence has also been identified for neighborhood factors; sense of community can be understood as both a cause and effect of neighborhood activism (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Relatedly, greater theoretical and empirical clarity on how children's prosocial behavior influences various systems is equally important. For example, a multilevel orientation can further investigate the links between interpersonal prosocial behavior to civic engagement and collective action in children and youth (Taylor et al., 2018). These types of studies that focus on children residing in risk and vulnerable contexts could ultimately inform intervention efforts that consider children's agency.

And fourth, although the Special Section papers present a wide array of methodologies, future research can benefit from additional methodological diversity. Research utilizing multiple methods can provide convergent evidence. Self-report measures (including daily diaries) can be complemented with observational, other informants, and psychophysiological indices. While increasingly being used with adults, bio-psychological, neurobiological, and neuroanatomical markers with children and young people should also be explored (e.g., Decety et al., 2016). Moreover, well-designed, ecologically valid experiments (e.g., manipulating scenarios to observe and measure actual behaviors) and interventions are needed to test causality and also lend greater transferability to real-world actions. Finally, building on the Special Section's global and diverse coverage (Spain [Samper et al., 2021]; U.S. [Davis et al., in press; Shi et al., 2020]; Israel [Rum et al., 2020; Shamo-Nir et al., 2020]; and Ireland [Bradshaw et al., 2021]), more cross-cultural research that extends beyond WEIRD-populations (Henrich et al., 2010) are needed.

Conclusion

Millions of children are born into and raised in risky and adverse environments, which shape their developmental trajectories. The work presented here provides evidence on the powerful agency of children in the face of adversity and informs intervention efforts that can trigger positive health and well-being outcomes and buffer against risk. Indeed, all of the Special Section papers present crucial information for the creation and improvement of targeted interventions. For instance, Bradshaw et al. (2021) suggest interventions focus on the primary caregivers of a child in the context of parental incarceration. Shi et al. (2020) highlight ego-resilience as a protective factor for youth in conflict with teachers and peers.

Although these studies focus on the benefits of prosocial behaviors for fostering well-being and positive interpersonal relationships, it is important to note that prosocial behaviors are also the basic building block of cooperation, peace, and harmony. Given the

many current global challenges and problems, more research that links individual-level prosocial behaviors to group-level outcomes (e.g., cooperation, reduced conflict, efforts to combat poverty) is needed to address these global challenges. Each of the papers in this Special Section offer provocative evidence that can contribute to such efforts. Importantly, the Special Section papers also inform the development of integrated models of prosocial development that provide a strong foundation for future investigations in this important area of research.


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