Outgroup prosocial behaviour among children and adolescents in conflict settings


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Abstract
More than 420 million children live amid political conflict. In such settings, understanding the development of prosocial behaviours, specifically directed at outgroups, can provide opportunities for peacebuilding. Informed by research on intergroup competition and structural inequality, we focus on outgroup prosocial behaviour targeting conflict rivals. Already from a young age, children are politically socialised and show intergroup biases that dampen helping behaviours towards conflict rivals, which continue into adulthood. We review factors that shape youth's interpersonal helping and broader forms of prosociality, such as civic engagement, across group lines. We conceptualise outgroup prosocial behaviour along a continuum, ranging from interpersonal acts to broader structural and cultural constructive change. We conclude with directions for future research.

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More than 420 million children live in conflict settings [1]. Understanding how to promote prosocial behaviours that are specifically directed at outgroups in such contexts has implications for nurturing intergroup goodwill [2] and peacebuilding [3]. From a young age, children's prosocial behaviours, that is, voluntary acts to benefit another individual [4], are higher towards ingroup than those of outgroup members (e.g. studies reported by Abrams et al. [5] and Killen et al. [6]). Yet, contextual factors such as the target, motive, culture and situation are important considerations in the aetiology of prosocial behaviour in general [7] and outgroup prosocial behaviour more specifically.

This review focuses on children's and adolescents' outgroup prosocial behaviour towards conflict rivals, informed by research on intergroup competition and structural inequality (e.g. systemic racism, separate education systems). Childhood and adolescence are sensitive periods for prosocial development [11], and in conflict settings, children are politically socialised from a young age [8,9]. Although promoting outgroup prosocial behaviour in conflict settings is complex, such acts can provide substantial interpersonal and systemic benefits [4]. Such prosocial acts may support more positive intergroup relations or, more broadly, promote structural and cultural changes that address the root causes of conflict [3].

After briefly noting two theoretical foundations, recent empirical research is reviewed. We focus on different types of outgroup prosociality, such as resource distribution or helping. We then tease apart how threat, power and group status may influence these different types of prosocial behaviour. We further distinguish between outgroup prosocial behaviours at interpersonal (e.g. directed at an individual outgroup member) and collective levels (e.g. aiming to help the outgroup as a whole). We suggest that interpersonal and collective outgroup prosocial behaviours are distinct but related and can be understood on a continuum. We proposed the continuum of outgroup prosociality ranges from helping a single outgroup member to collective action for structural change that addresses historic intergroup inequality. We conclude with proposed mechanisms and methods to study and promote children's and adolescents' prosocial behaviour towards conflict rivals.

Theoretical foundations
Two theoretical foundations inform this review. First, the empathy-attitudes-action model explains outgroup prosocial behaviours among adults (EAA; [12]). As per this model, inducing empathetic concern and perspective taking for an individual outgroup member predicts more positive outgroup attitudes and increases two types of prosocial behaviour: towards the outgroup
individual and the collective outgroup. Extending this to children and adolescents, the EAA model has been incorporated into the developmental peacebuilding model [3] and tested in the context of intergroup threat among conflict rivals (e.g. studies reported by O’Driscoll et al. [10] and Taylor et al. [13]).

Second, the intergroup helping as status relations model (IHSR; [14]) critically examines the motivations underlying giving, receiving or rejecting help in a context of hierarchical, intergroup conflict [15]. Rather than conceptualising helping as inherently prosocial, the IHSR model argues helping can be used strategically to reinforce or challenge a group’s power and status (e.g. Ref. [16]). Together, the EAA and IHSR models emphasise the need to explore the types (i.e. individual, collective) and targets (i.e. outgroup, conflict rival) of prosocial behaviours across development. These theoretical foundations also highlight the need to study across different social contexts, with particular attention to the role of threat, power and status in intergroup relations. The following sections review the recent empirical literature attending to these points.

Resource distribution as prosocial behaviour
Experimental manipulations of competitive group norms and group status can offer insights into how these factors influence resource distribution. Two studies conducted in the United Kingdom shed light on these influences [17,18]. In the first study, competitive group norms were manipulated. Children (but not adolescents or adults) were influenced by a competitive group norm; children gave more to the ingroup than to the outgroup and reasoned less about fairness than did adolescents and adults [17]. In the second study, group status (i.e. higher vs lower resources) was manipulated within a competitive setting [18]. In contrast to the previous study, children gave equally to the ingroup and outgroup, regardless of their experimental group status, as did adolescents assigned to the higher status group. However, adolescents randomly assigned to the lower status group gave more to the ingroup than to the outgroup to rectify the inequality. In sum, except for adolescents in the lower status group, participants maintained the status quo by giving equally to both groups, and thus, perpetuated resource inequality [18]. Further investigation with real-life groups is needed to tease apart developmental differences in how such factors influence resource distribution in childhood and adolescence.

Prosocial behaviour in response to structural inequalities
Structural or systemic inequalities (i.e. where groups have unequal status, opportunities or advantages codified by law or custom) also influence children’s outgroup prosocial behaviour. With age, children in the United States show an increased understanding of resource inequality based on race [19,20] and gender [21]. In the context of African-American and European-American relations in the United States, for example, compared with younger children (aged 5–6), older children (aged 10–11) expressed greater concern for inequalities based on race [20]. Older children were also more likely to rectify inequality when the historically lower status group, African Americans, was also disadvantaged in the experimental paradigm [20]. Overall, these studies demonstrate children’s prosocial resource distribution towards lower status or disadvantaged groups in the context of real-life structural inequality.

Complementing the resource distribution literature, prosociality may also include outgroup helping [22,23]. In the Netherlands, Dutch majority children aged 10–13 who endorsed negative outgroup stereotypes (e.g. immigrants are ‘less smart’) offered more help to ethnic outgroup members than to ingroup members on an academic task; specifically, providing them the answer [24]. Among children in the higher status group, this type of helping was associated with negative outgroup stereotypes about intelligence and work ethics. Children’s resource distribution and prosociality across racial and ethnic lines are relevant to settings of protracted conflict. First, among conflict rivals, a zero-sum mentality is common [25], that is, a benefit to the outgroup is perceived as a loss for the ingroup. Thus, the costs of sharing with [26] or helping an outgroup member [27] may be particularly pronounced. Second, as explored in the next sections, awareness of conflict rivals begins at an early age and is shaped through socialisation [8,9].

Intergroup dynamics in a setting of protracted conflict
In conflict settings, prosocial behaviours towards conflict rivals are shaped by children’s beliefs, conflict-related social identities, preferences and attitudes. Extending the EAA [13], higher essentialist beliefs, or perceiving the conflict rival groups to be both fundamentally distinct and stable related to lower outgroup-specific empathy, which in turn related to more negative outgroup attitudes and less prosocial giving towards a conflict rival [10]. Children with stronger conflict-related social identities also distributed more resources to their ingroup [28]. Moreover, ingroup preference mediated the link from child’s age to prosocial giving towards a conflict rival across three conflict-affected settings (Northern Ireland, Kosovo, the Republic of North Macedonia) [29]. With age, children reported higher ingroup preference, which in turn was linked with less outgroup giving in all three settings. The link from age to prosocial giving towards a conflict rival was also found for both Jewish majority and Muslim
minority children in Israel; with age, children reported greater ingroup preference which linked to more negative outgroup attitudes and, in turn, less prosocial giving towards a conflict rival [30]. Longitudinal studies have also found that bias in intergroup attitudes (i.e. liking the ingroup more than the outgroup) increases across adolescence among conflict rivals [31]. Children’s beliefs, conflict-related identities, preferences and attitudes are further shaped by threat, power and status.

**Threat, power and status**

In settings of protracted conflict, threat, power and status differences, can shape prosociality among children and adolescents. For example, across five conflict-affected settings, children gave significantly more to an ingroup compared with a conflict rival; the difference in giving to an ingroup or conflict rival was more pronounced in settings with higher intergroup threat (i.e. Israel, Kosovo) [26]. In addition to the intensity of threat, the type of threat matters; for example, adolescents who experienced higher levels of outgroup threat engaged in fewer outgroup prosocial behaviours (e.g. cooperation, offering help or comfort when other children are upset), whereas ingroup threat (e.g. antisocial behaviour committed against the ingroup by the ingroup, such as home break-ins and robberies/muggings) predicted higher levels of outgroup prosocial behaviour over time [32]. These studies suggest that the intensity and type of intergroup threat matter when examining children’s prosocial behaviour, particularly towards conflict rivals.

Offering and receiving help are shaped by the social hierarchies in conflict settings. For example, in Israel, Jewish adolescents (i.e. higher status/majority) who were motivated to maintain their group’s status offered less help to Israeli-Arab students (i.e. lower status/minority) than to Jewish students. When Jewish adolescents did help Israeli-Arab students, they offered more dependency-oriented help to maintain the power differential between groups [33]; more specifically, dependency-oriented help provides the solution to a problem, rather than providing the tools for the recipient to solve their own problems [14]. Group status also shapes how the receivers perceive help. For example, Israeli-Arab students were less likely to accept help when group status differences were perceived as illegitimate [34] or unstable [35] or when receiving would admit to social inequality (see the study reported by Halabi and Nadler [16] for a review). These findings highlight how power and status frame helping in contexts of threat and conflict, that is, outgroup prosocial behaviour may be used to reinforce an (unjust) status quo.

**A systemic solution for a systemic problem**

Traditionally, prosocial behaviours are assessed at the interpersonal level, targeting an individual outgroup member (e.g. the study reported by McLoughlin and Over [36]). Although interpersonal acts can improve intergroup relationships, different types of prosociality are necessary for constructive social change [37] and to tackle the underlying systemic issues of protracted conflict [3]. Prosocial acts at the interpersonal level should be considered alongside collective action, focused on mobilising individuals to oppose inequality [38] and peacebuilding, such as promoting social cohesion through nonviolent constructive action addressing the immediate and root causes of intergroup conflict [3]. Thus, in addition to prosocial acts at the interpersonal level, systemic problems — such as protracted conflict — necessitate prosocial acts at the structural and cultural levels, such as collective action and peacebuilding [39,51].

Broader types of prosociality such as collective action are typically studied in emerging adulthood. Yet, children and adolescents can engage in collective action behaviours including, but not limited to, civic engagement, volunteering, and signing petitions (e.g. studies reported by Taylor [40,51]). One study found intergroup contact related to greater support for peacebuilding and social and political civic engagement among adolescents from both the majority and minority groups in a conflict setting [40]. Yet, contact has also been found to have a ‘sedative effect’ for minority groups; increased intergroup contact can dampen motivation to engage in social change to benefit the ingroup (e.g. the study reported by Graf and Paolini [41]). A recent study across 69 countries, however, found that intergroup contact was linked with a greater willingness to work in solidarity (i.e. structural change) among both majority and minority group members [42].

**Conclusion and implications**

Synthesising this recent literature suggests four key directions for future research. First, outgroup prosocial behaviour may be conceptualised along a continuum, from interpersonal to structural to cultural prosocial change [3]. For example, sharing with an individual outgroup member may be the first step towards structural reforms that distribute societal resources more justly [46]. The promise of interpersonal strategies and interventions to enhance prosociality across group lines [47], such as through changing attitudes (e.g. studies reported by Bar-Tal and Hameiri [48]), are necessary but not sufficient in conflict settings marked by protracted threat.

Second, the target of prosocial acts should be specified, distinguishing between outgroups, more broadly, and conflict rivals. The developmental psychological literature typically asks about overall prosociality, that is, the identity of the target in measures of prosocial tendencies is ambiguous. The social psychological literature, however, has made recent advances in comparing
multiple outgroups. For example, compared with an ingroup target within the refugee camp, Syrian Sunni Arab adult refugees gave less to a ‘neutral’ outgroup (i.e. Yazidi) and even less to a conflict rival outgroup (i.e. Shia Arabs) [49]. Given the complexity of intergroup relations in conflict settings, understanding how prosociality varies across multiple outgroup targets is an important area for future research.

Third, introducing a developmental perspective into the collective action literature may shed light on the long-term antecedents or predictors of why individuals take part in activism [37,43]. For example, adolescents who had family support after perceived conflict also had higher levels of civic engagement over time [44]. Recent research from Chile suggests this is a promising direction; a longitudinal study found the intergenerational transmission of collective action and political activism through family norms [45].

Finally, the field needs further integration and synthesis. One step could include cross-cultural studies to shed insight into the commonality and specificity of outgroup prosociality targeting conflict rivals (e.g. the study reported by Taylor et al. [29]). The second step could include systematic reviews and meta-analyses. For example, prosocial outcomes should be included in future systematic reviews on the impact of armed conflict [50].

In sum, the recent literature on children’s outgroup prosocial behaviour points to the importance of specifying the type and target, as well as studying the influence of threat, power and group status across contexts. Particularly in conflict settings, outgroup prosocial behaviour towards conflict rivals not only has implications for children’s own development but also for wider structural and cultural change.

**Conflict of interest statement**
Nothing declared.

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**References**
Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

19. Empirical study highlights the influence of group norms and status on outgroup helping behaviours in a minimal competition setting.


