The Life Course Development of Prosocial Behavior: Evidence from a Major Qualitative Study in the United States

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Research problem: The third sector depends upon the charitable donations, volunteer labor, and paid service of individuals who are motivated to help others, but the sources of the motivation to serve society are not well understood. One particularly overlooked area in the research literature is the life course development of prosocial motivation and action. This study uses data taken from life history interviews with a large, nationally representative random sample of U.S. adults to generate new theories of prosocial motivation.

Research questions:

1. Does prosocial motivation develop early in life, or during the adult portion of the life course?
2. How do parents, mentors, and social institutions encourage the development of prosocial motivation?
3. What kinds of life experiences promote prosocial behavior?

Theories and concepts: While many scholars have developed personality traits, motivations, and other psychological constructs that correlate with prosocial behavior, and others have studied the development of prosocial behavior in children, few have explored how prosocial motivation and action develop through the adult life course. Exceptions include McAdams’ and de St. Aubin’s work on generativity (1998), Oliner and Oliner’s study of Holocaust rescuers (1988), and Colby and Damon’s qualitative study of “moral exemplars” (1992). There also exist quantitative studies of persistence in volunteer work and charitable giving over time, explained through socioemotional selectivity theory (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004) and role identity theory (Lee, Piliavin, and Call, 1999). This paper builds upon existing theories, but its primary role is to provide new theories of prosocial motivation.

Methodology and design: This study analyzes qualitative data collected by Ann Colby as a module of the 1995 Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) survey, a nationally representative survey of the United States population with over 5,000 respondents. Colby interviewed a representative subsample of 94 respondents, collecting life history narratives and then asking specific questions about social responsibility at work, in the family, through charitable giving and volunteer work, and in political action. The transcribed interviews comprise over 2,500 single-spaced pages of data, making this an unparalleled source of qualitative data on prosocial motivation and action. To date, only one paper (Colby et al. 2001) has been published using these interviews.

The current paper employed open coding to search for patterns in the life histories of highly prosocial individuals. Using data from the MIDUS survey on volunteering and charitable giving, the top 10% of donors and volunteers were compared with the rest of the sample to see where their life histories differed, and how they explained their development of prosocial motivation.
Key findings: The development of prosocial motivation was complex, and respondents’ childhood experiences and adult development interacted in unexpected ways. I found four main themes in the narratives of the most prosocial respondents:

1. **Altruists from childhood:** While many psychologists have searched for early life roots of altruistic behavior, only two respondents traced their motivation to help others back to positive early life experiences. These two respondents grew up in close families, experienced love at home, and then extended that love to others. They also reported being motivated from childhood to pursue helping careers.

2. **Family helpers:** Six respondents traced their prosocial motivation to childhood, but in an unusual way. They grew up in dysfunctional families, in which parents suffered from alcoholism and mental illness, and/or siblings suffered debilitating diseases. Their difficult family circumstances forced them to take on the role of mature helper early in life. In their adult lives, they continued to help others through prosocial paid employment, charitable giving, and volunteering.

3. **Accidental altruists:** Four respondents began working in helping careers for non-altruistic reasons, and the emotional rewards of helping others led them to pursue prosocial activities outside of work. For example, one man pursued a career as a veterinarian because he grew up on a farm and enjoyed working with animals, and a woman became a nurse because it was one of the few jobs open to women of her generation. Once having entered these helping careers, they discovered that helping others was emotionally rewarding, and pursued opportunities to help others further during their free time through volunteering and charitable giving.

4. **Redemption stories:** Scholars of generativity (McAdams and de St. Aubin, 1998) have proposed redemption stories as a source of prosocial motivation, and that theme was present in four respondents’ narratives. These respondents led anti-social lives as young men, engaging in selfish or even criminal behavior, and many struggled with drug abuse and alcoholism. In mid-adulthood, they reformed their behavior and obtained happiness through productive work, sobriety, and satisfying family life. Grateful to a society that gave them a second chance, they attempt to pay back society through charitable giving, volunteer work, and employment in helping careers.

The full paper provides detailed examples and quotations from respondents to demonstrate the four themes. This paper develops new theories of prosocial motivation, moves forward our understanding of how prosociality develops through the life course, and provides theoretical ideas for quantitative testing in future research. It also provides insights for practitioners wishing to cultivate donors and volunteers.

References:


