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## Culture-Specific Developmental Pathways to Prosocial Behavior: A Comment on Bischof-Köhler's Universalist Perspective

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### Abstract

In her work, Doris Bischof-Köhler describes how empathically motivated prosocial behavior emerges during the second year of life. From a cross-cultural perspective we argue that this developmental pathway is prototypical for autonomy-oriented sociocultural contexts. Bischof-Köhler's theory should be complemented by a theory of situational helping behavior based on shared intentional relations to provide an alternative developmental pathway for understanding toddlers' prosocial behavior. Because this developmental pathway does not presuppose an understanding of self and others as autonomous intentional agents, it may be more typical for relatedness-oriented sociocultural contexts.

### Keywords

autonomy, culture, empathy, prosocial, self

It is the central contribution of Doris Bischof-Köhler (1991, 1994, 2012) that she has elaborated and specified Hoffman's theoretical ideas (1975) on the relation between the development of the self and that of empathically motivated prosocial behavior. According to her approach, the emergence of "symbolic representation and mental imagery" has important implications for both developments. Concerning the self, toddlers come to understand themselves as object-like autonomous intentional agents. Based on "synchronic identification," toddlers experience their inner states as bound to themselves, that is, as subjective experiences. As a direct consequence, they conceive of others as carriers of their own inner states (self–other differentiation). Doris Bischof-Köhler (1991, 2012) describes convincingly how—based on emotional contagion as an ontogenetic precursor of empathy plus self–other differentiation—emotion-induced empathy becomes possible. Thus, her key argument is that empathy provides a mechanism by which toddlers come to understand the mental states of others.

Doris Bischof-Köhler (2012) argues that prosocial behavior during the second year is motivated by empathic concern

that necessarily presupposes empathy and self–other differentiation. This theoretical assumption was impressively supported by Bischof-Köhler's earlier findings (1991, 1994) that showed a strong correlation between mirror self-recognition (as a measure of self–other differentiation) and prosocial behavior (as a measure of empathy) directed at an experimenter simulating sadness.

From a cross-cultural perspective, empathically motivated prosocial behavior is an interesting phenomenon because there are two central intertwining concepts that are often taken to be opposing concepts: autonomy and interpersonal relatedness. In order to help others, toddlers need a sense of autonomy; they must be able to represent themselves and others as autonomous intentional agents. Toddlers also need a sense of interpersonal relatedness in order to help others; the other person's distress must be relevant to the toddlers themselves. Only once these two conditions are met can toddlers feel empathic concern for a needy other. Recent studies have shown that, on the one hand, an understanding of self and other as autonomous intentional agents as indexed by mirror self-recognition develops earlier in autonomy-supporting (i.e., highly educated urban middle-class families) than in relational sociocultural (i.e., families with a low degree of formal education living in subsistence-based ecologies) contexts (e.g., Kärtner, Keller, Chaudhary, & Yovsi, in press). On the other hand, assuming interpersonal responsibilities and helping others is a focal goal of socialization in relatedness-oriented sociocultural contexts (Miller & Bersoff, 1992).

Given these findings, the question remains whether the model suggested by Bischof-Köhler is universally applicable or whether there are different, possibly culture-specific developmental pathways to prosocial development. In a recent cross-cultural study we found that mirror self-recognition was correlated with toddlers' prosociality (using Bischof-Köhler's teddy bear experiment) only in an autonomous (Berlin) but not in an autonomous-relational (Delhi) sociocultural context

(Kärtner, Keller, & Chaudhary, 2010). Building on these results, we propose that *situational helping* behavior based on shared intentional relations provides an alternative developmental pathway to understanding toddlers' prosocial behavior. Multiple theoretical approaches explain how toddlers may understand the intentionality of an action without attributing mental states to self or to another (e.g., Barresi & Moore, 1996; Gergely & Csibra, 2003). From these theories one could argue that there may be an alternative mechanism underlying early prosocial behavior that is based on emotional contagion instead of empathic concern. According to Barresi and Moore (1996), toddlers come to understand mental states by integrating first-person information (i.e., inner experience) with third-person information (i.e., the agent's observable behavior). Barresi and Moore propose that there is a developmental stage that precedes toddlers' ability to habitually complement others' behavior by ascribing subjective experience to the other person. This developmental stage is referred to as shared intentional relations—toddlers come to understand mental states by matching the intentional activities of the self and other while engaging in the same object-directed activity. Barresi and Moore's basic argument is that toddlers understand intentional actions by joining in an activity and experiencing and sharing the same psychological or mental state as the other person. Hence, different from theory theory or simulation theory approaches to social cognition, toddlers understand the intentionality of an observed action without ascribing independent experience to self or the other person.

This principle can similarly be applied to emotion-related prosocial behavior: When toddlers observe the emotional expression of another person, this induces—via emotional contagion—a similar emotion in themselves. As a result, toddlers experience the situation as sad or painful while the other person's object-directed behavior indicates a possible reason for the distress, which allows toddlers to help the distressed other. Thus, we propose that situational helping behavior is an equal alternative to empathically motivated helping behavior in emotion-laden situations with a needy or distressed other. Common to both pathways is that prosocial behavior is initiated

by emotional contagion while observing another person in distress and requires some form of responsiveness that motivates prosocial behavior. One of the core features of situational helping behavior is that, by definition, it relies on neither empathic concern nor toddlers' sense of themselves as autonomous agents. Situational helping behavior should, therefore, be more prominent in relatedness-oriented sociocultural contexts, in which caretakers focus less on their toddlers' mental states, subjective experience, and inner states. In autonomous sociocultural contexts, however, empathically motivated helping behavior, as described by Doris Bischof-Köhler, should be the prototypical developmental pathway.

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