

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON PROSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Anthropological studies and recent evidence from cross-cultural psychology suggest considerable variations in the way prosocial behavior is conceptualized and embedded in social interactions across cultures. Important questions are which aspects of different ecosocial contexts might explain these variations and how these aspects influence prosocial development throughout ontogeny. Here, building on the ecosocial model of culturally informed development (Keller, 2007), we hypothesize two prototypical developmental pathways towards prosocial behavior. In relational contexts, i.e., rural areas of non-Western countries, social interactions and the concept of prosociality is guided by interpersonal responsibilities. Conversely, in autonomous contexts, i.e. urban middle-class settings in Western countries, social interactions and the concept of prosociality is guided by an emphasis on personal choice. Furthermore, we point out three perspectives for future cross-cultural research on prosocial development. It is essential (1) to further investigate the cultural influences on prosocial development, (2) to understand the mechanisms of cultural transmission in different contexts, and (3) to identify the motivational processes underlying early prosocial behavior. We conclude that prosocial development can only be fully understood also taking into account a cultural perspective. In particular, future cross-cultural research may lead to a better understanding of the complex interplay between phylogenetic and ontogenetic factors underlying prosocial development.

Keywords: *Prosocial behavior, cultural transmission, child development, autonomous and relational ecosocial contexts*

INTRODUCTION

Ochs and Izquierdo (2009) anecdotally describe the different realities of children from Matsigenka, a traditional, egalitarian community in the Amazon, and urban Los Angeles: While Matsigenka children readily acquire and competently fulfill daily routine tasks such as helping on a fishing boat or caring for younger siblings from their preschool years on, parents in Los Angeles have a hard time to make their rebellious school-age children fulfill simple requests such as taking out the garbage or getting their jacket from the wardrobe.

In the same vein, other anthropological studies draw a rather consistent picture (Whiting & Edwards, 1992; Graves & Graves, 1983; Nsamenang, 1992): in rural, non-Western subsistence-based ecologies children engage in daily routines from early childhood on and virtues of helpfulness and interpersonal responsibilities are highly emphasized in child education and development. These reports do not only illustrate cultural differences in early prosocial development, but also draw attention to cultural differences in the meaning of prosocial behavior. Parents in these cultural contexts would very likely describe these behaviors as prosocial (e.g., Graves & Graves, 1983) and many anthropologists see a clear conceptual link between compliant and prosocial behavior, such that the early assignment of responsibility is seen as the cradle of later prosocial behavior (e.g., Whiting & Whiting, 1975; Lancy, 2012).

Many psychologists, however, would not consider the described behaviors as prosocial, as they are requested by their parents and thus not voluntary. Eisenberg (2006) for example defines prosocial behavior as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another”. Similarly, older children and adults in Western contexts discounted the prosociality of an action that benefits another individual as soon as the behavior is requested (e.g., Miller & Bersoff, 1994). Further evidence for the differences in the meaning of prosocial behavior between two urban cultural contexts comes from studies, investigating the judgment of different scenarios in which an individual requires help (e.g., Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990): While Hindu Indians tended to frame help towards another person as a social responsibility, also in less severe, non life-threatening situations, Euro-Americans tended to interpret helping in these situations as an issue of personal choice. Taken together, these observations indicate clear differences in the way prosocial behavior is interpreted and embedded in social interactions across cultures. So far, much less is known regarding the ontogenetic development of these differences in prosocial behavior and the culture-specific socialization experiences that give rise to culturally informed developmental trajectories.

Coming from a different perspective, developmental and evolutionary psychologists have developed numerous standardized tasks, in order to investigate the development in different domains of prosocial behavior, such as informing (Liszkowski, Carpenter, Striano, & Tomasello, 2006), helping (e.g., Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), comforting (e.g., Bischof-Köhler, 1989), sharing (e.g., House et al., 2013), and cooperating (e.g. Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, & Tomasello, 2011). The development in these domains has been intensely investigated in children from urban contexts in Western societies, and also in chimpanzees

(Warneken & Tomasello, 2006; Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, & Tomasello, 2011). In particular, Tomasello and colleagues (e.g. Tomasello, 2005; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009a; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009b) point out the prosocial and collaborative traits of the human species in relation to other primates. One focus of this line of research are the universal mechanisms underlying the phylogeny and ontogeny of human prosociality and collaboration and it has advanced our understanding of the early development of these behaviors. Regarding cultural influences, the authors assume that children start as indiscriminate altruists and are influenced by socialization experiences rather late in ontogeny, around the third year (e.g. Tomasello, 2005; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009a).

However, only recently experimental or quasi-experimental behavioral methods have been applied in cross-cultural approaches to systematically investigate these influences (Callaghan et al., 2012; House et al., 2013; Köster, Kärtner, Cavalcante, Carvalho, & Resende, under review; Kärtner, Keller, & Chaudhary, 2010; Rochat et al., 2009; Schäfer, Haun, & Tomasello, 2013). For example, contrary to the late-emergence perspective outlined above, a recent study indicates that toddlers' helping behavior between 18 and 36 months is influenced by culture-specific scaffolding styles during task assignment (Köster et al., under review). Noteworthy, the absolute level of toddlers' help did not differ between cultural contexts in this and a former study (Callaghan et al., 2012) and cultural differences in toddlers' helping were only visible in the relation to culture-specific socialization practices of the mothers. This is in line with our general idea, that culture-specific socialization experiences build on toddlers' biologically prepared prosocial tendencies from early on (see also Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2010; Hay, 2009; Kärtner, Keller, & Chaudhary, 2010).

In the present theoretical paper we discuss current findings from cross-cultural psychology in the light of the ecosocial model of child development (Keller & Kärtner, 2013) and thereby provide a theoretical framework for a culturally informed investigation of early prosocial development. Furthermore, we outline three perspectives for future cross-cultural research on prosocial behavior, namely, understanding (1) the influence of cultural contexts on prosocial development, (2) the mechanisms of cultural transmission in different contexts and (3) the motivational processes underlying early prosocial behavior.

CULTURE-SPECIFIC PATHWAYS TOWARDS PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Building on the ecosocial model of child development (Keller & Kärtner, 2013) we propose two prototypical pathways for the development of prosocial behavior, a relational and an autonomous pathway. According to Keller and Kärtner (2013) culture may be understood as shared meanings (cultural interpretations) and shared activities (cultural practices), which meet the ecological demands and the social structure of the environment. This theoretical framework builds on the idea that humans possess universal needs and encounter universal developmental tasks, which can flexibly adapt to the ecological and

social conditions within diverse ecosocial contexts. Regarding child development, variations in the ecosocial contexts guide caregivers' ethnotheories and socialization practices, which act as proximate mechanisms of cultural transmission and influence toddlers' motivation and behavior from early on (Keller, 2007). Keller (2007) describes two prototypical contexts with fundamentally different ecological and social characteristics (e.g., family structure, settlement patterns, level of formal education, economic system) giving rise to relational or autonomous cultural models (see below). Variations along these two dimensions have been shown to influence the development in various domains, such as the 2-month shift (Kärtner, 2014), attachment (Keller, 2013), and self-recognition (Kärtner, Keller, Chaudhary, & Yovsi, 2012). Here, we will indicate how differences in these prototypical ecosocial contexts may also account for cultural differences in prosocial behavior and the concept of prosociality. More specifically, we will outline a relational pathway towards interpersonal responsibility and an autonomous pathway towards personal choice and relate these pathways to cultural variations reported in anthropological studies and recent findings from cross-cultural psychology. Thereby we want to suggest a theoretical framework for the assessment of cultural differences in prosocial behavior.

It is important to note that beyond the two prototypical ecosocial contexts described here, there are certainly many other ecosocial contexts that afford very different cultural models. For example, one other often-studied context is educated urban middle-class families from a non-Western society. In these contexts, cultural models are often composed of elements of both prototypes described above and thus referred to as autonomous-relational (Kağitçibaşı, 2007; Keller, 2007).

The relational pathway towards interpersonal responsibility

According to Keller (2007) prototypical relational ecosocial contexts are found in traditional, small-scale village communities with close social bonds between village members. In these contexts children grow up with many siblings due to a rather quantitative reproductive strategy. Parents often work in the agricultural sector due to a subsistence-based economy and hold low levels of formal education. Here, children do not only have a psychological, but also an economic value, e.g., participating in community work, caring for younger, weak and old members of the family (*cf.* Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2005). Cultural models in these contexts are often dominated by virtues of hard work, sharing goods and harmonious relations to other people (e.g., Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009). Consequently, parents socialize their children towards interpersonal responsibilities, such as compliance with the commands of elderly and supporting needy individuals (Keller, 2007; Kärtner et al., 2012; Lancy's [2012] chore curriculum; LeVine et al., 1994, Nsamenang, 1992), which is thought to serve the fulfillment of family and communal goals (Keller & Kärtner, 2013).

The concept of relational oriented ecosocial contexts fits well to the reports from rural communities in non-Western societies outlined in the introduction. Here, parents assign responsibilities, such as sibling care (Whiting & Edwards, 1992) and domestic work (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009), and involve their children in routine activities from early on

(Nsamenang, 1992). High levels of compliance with parental commands in these contexts (e.g., Keller et al., 2004) possibly index the internalization of social-norms (Ogunnaike & Houser, 2002). In turn, the internalization of norms of interpersonal responsibility is thought to foster prosocial development from early childhood on (see Introduction).

In line with these assumptions, a study by Kärtner, Keller, and Chaudhary (2010) indicates that caregivers' relational socialization goals, i.e., emphasis of obedience, are associated with higher levels of empathically motivated prosocial behavior in the second year of age, although this relation was found in a Western and a non-Western context. Recently, assessing maternal socialization during task assignment, Köster and colleagues (under review) were able to substantiate the idea that mothers from a relational cultural context socialize their children by assigning tasks straightforwardly, that is, requesting their toddlers in a serious and insistent manner, not tolerating hesitant or task-irrelevant behavior. This assertive scaffolding style was higher in the rural Amazon region as compared to an urban German context and furthermore predicted toddlers' help in a classical out-of-reach task. Taken together, we assume that the ecosocial constituents in relational contexts give rise to dense social networks and virtues of interpersonal responsibilities, which, in turn, guide the meaning and motivation underlying prosocial behavior. By a culturally informed socialization, e.g., assertive scaffolding, these values may influence toddlers' natural prosocial tendencies from early childhood on.

The autonomous pathway towards personal choice

Prototypical autonomous ecosocial contexts are urban large-scale societies in Western, postindustrial economies, with generally high levels of formal education (Keller, 2007). Parents in these contexts follow a qualitative reproductive strategy and family sizes are rather small. The value of children is rather psychological than economical (*cf.* Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2005), for example, due to small family sizes and social systems with retirement plans. Thus, social role obligations are less substantial for the survival of the family. In these environments, cultural practices revolve around independence and self-actualization which may be functional for later professional competences. Caregivers' in these contexts socialize their toddlers towards autonomy, individuality and personal choice, concepts of human behavior that are all deeply grounded in Western philosophical tradition (Keller, 2007; Keller & Kärtner, 2013).

These parenting strategies usually lead to customs of negotiation between parents and children and tolerance towards rebellion against parental requests (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000). As outlined in the introduction, studies from Miller and colleagues (e.g., Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990) indicated that in these contexts helping is interpreted as an issue of personal choice in most situations. However, as in relational cultural contexts, the fulfillment of daily routines likewise seems to be an important context for prosocial learning in autonomous contexts (Rheingold, 1982; Hammond & Carpendale, 2015).

Conceptualizing prosocial behavior as an issue of personal choice, parents from autonomous contexts should emphasize toddlers' personal choice to help, for example, by giving explanations for requests and asking or pleading their children to engage in routine tasks. Results from a recent study (Köster et al., under review) support this idea: In a standardized task mothers from an urban context (a German city) used many more explanations, pleas and questions when assigning a task to their child, as compared to Brazilian mothers. This deliberate scaffolding style furthermore predicted toddlers' helping behavior in an out-of-reach task. In consequence, it might be toddlers' personal commitment that motives helping others in situations affording spontaneous help. Taken together, we assume that contexts which emphasize autonomy give rise to virtues of personal choice, which in turn may influence toddlers' natural tendencies and the meaning and motivation underlying prosocial behavior in these contexts.

PERSPECTIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Understanding the cultural influences on prosocial development

Due to the complexity of the topic and the small number of standardized research in this field, we certainly need a deeper understanding on the relation between prosocial development and the ecosocial environment in which it occurs. In line with a long-standing tradition in anthropological research, describing the relation between environment, culture, and prosocial development (de Guzman, Carlo, & Pope Edwards, 2008; Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009; Whiting & Whiting, 1975; Nsamenang, 1992), this can only be achieved by taking into account ecosocial, cultural, and behavioral variables. However, many anthropological studies have looked at broad age ranges and often used participatory observation that was not designed to differentiate between different domains of prosocial behavior or the fact, whether behavior was requested or shown spontaneously.

Current advances in experimental developmental psychology allow more precise conclusions concerning age of emergence and specific domains of prosocial behavior, but data are typically limited to Western cultural contexts. The focus of these studies lies on standardized experimental scenarios to investigate children's prosocial behaviors at a certain age, for example, using various instrumental helping tasks and simultaneously assessed control groups (e.g., Warneken & Tomasello, 2006; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009).

Although experimental research has recently begun to investigate the development of prosocial behavior across cultural contexts (see Introduction for references), many of these studies compare absolute levels of prosocial behaviors in different cultural contexts, without a standardized assessment of the cultural background or embedding findings into a theoretical framework (e.g., Callaghan et al., 2012; House et al., 2013; Schäfer, Haun, & Tomasello, 2013). It is thus difficult to interpret the similarities or differences between cultures, reported in these studies.

Importantly, studies from Experimental Psychology have shown that the development in different domains of prosocial behavior (i.e., helping, comforting, sharing, and collaborating) is largely uncorrelated (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O’Connell, & Kelley, 2011). We also expect cultural differences in the capitalization on different domains of prosocial behavior throughout development. For example, comforting an older individual (*cf.* Bischof-Köhler, 2012) may not be expected from children in contexts in which negative emotions such as sadness are rarely expressed, in particular from parents in front of their children. On the other hand, helpfulness towards older individuals may be expected and highly encouraged in the same ecosocial context.

Understanding the cultural influences on prosocial behavior requires further studies, combining standardized assessments of both contextual and behavioral variables. A major challenge includes a theory-guided selection of the cultural contexts, which allows to test specific hypothesis on similarities and differences in prosocial development. More specifically, identifying universal and culture-specific developments can advance our understanding about phylogenetic and ontogenetic factors underlying human prosocial behavior. In the previous section we outlined a relational and an autonomous developmental pathway towards prosocial behavior. This theoretical framework can be assessed with standardized instruments (e.g., the socialization goals scale by Keller, 2007) and may provide a good starting point for future cross-cultural research on prosocial development. Another important task for future research is the identification of relevant contextual factors that may explain the differences in prosocial behavior found between cultures as well as the development and validation of instruments to reliably assess these factors.

Understanding the mechanisms of cultural transmission

Conceptualizations of prosocial behavior as well as the developmental trajectories of prosocial behavior vary markedly between cultural contexts. This raises the intriguing question for the mediating mechanisms between cultural beliefs and the ontogeny of prosocial behavior. Future research should thus focus on the mechanisms of cultural transmission and investigate how cultural influences unfold over time.

Regarding the mechanisms of cultural transmission a specific focus lies on parental socialization goals and strategies (e.g., Keller, 2007). Recent findings highlight the role of maternal scaffolding during task assignment for early helping behavior (Hammond & Carpendale, 2015, Köster et al., under review). However, a full variety of parenting behaviors and socialization experiences may influence the development in different domains of prosocial behavior, including praise and acknowledgement as well as punishment. Ochs & Izquierdo (2009), for example, describe how children are bathed in hot water or rubbed with itchy plants as a punishment for disobedient behavior.

It is also important to investigate how socialization shapes toddlers’ prosocial behavior over time. Here, particular interest lies in the onset of influence of socialization experiences on prosocial behavior. While some scientists propose that toddlers possess an altruistic

prosocial tendency which is not influenced by socialization experiences until the third year of age (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009a; 2009b; Callaghan et al., 2011), recent findings are in strong favor with the idea of an early onset of cultural influences (Kärtner et al., 2012; Köster et al., under review).

In line with these studies, we propose that toddlers' natural prosocial tendencies are shaped by culture-specific socialization right from the beginning. Classical theoretical accounts would then expect a linear culture-specific development towards adult's cultural models (e.g., Miller, 1984; Keller & Kärtner, 2013). However, recent findings by House and colleagues (2013) indicate, that the developmental trajectories of prosocial behavior towards a culture-specific ideal might be non-linear. More specifically, when sharing was costly, prosocial behavior dropped across six societies throughout middle childhood, before sharing behavior developed towards the behavior of adults in the specific cultural context. This indicates an even more complex picture: While prosocial behavior may be influenced by socialization experiences from early on, universal developments may likewise be found later in ontogeny.

To understand the mechanisms of cultural transmission it is essential to identify and assess critical mediating factors such as maternal socialization goals and strategies and to test them with corresponding statistical models. A particular challenge is a theory-guided identification of possible mediating mechanisms and the development of cross-cultural applicable measures for the relevant variables. Importantly, to disentangle the complex relations between parental socialization goals and practices and prosocial development in early and middle childhood, i.e., how natural tendencies and socialization experiences interplay and unfold over time, cross-cultural assessments should also be combined with longitudinal approaches.

Understanding the motivational processes underlying prosocial behavior

More generally, but also in cross-cultural research, it is important to understand the motivation underlying observed prosocial behavior, as the interpretation of present results is difficult (see Paulus, 2014 for a review on the current debate). For example, toddlers' helping in "out-of-reach" situations may be interpreted in different ways: At first glance, these results seem to support the view that toddlers possess an intrinsic prosocial motivation (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009b). However, there are at least two alternative theoretical models that may explain toddlers' early instrumental helping behavior. First, toddlers may simply enjoy contingent social interactions with other individuals and early helping behavior may rather result from a social than from a prosocial motivation (Paulus & Moore, 2012). Alternatively, following the idea of goal-alignment models, children may take over the goal of another person by a contagion process, which allows them to adapt the goal of another person without necessarily understanding the intention of the third person. Contagion in these situations may result from a shared intention (Barresi & Moore, 1996; cf. Kärtner et al., 2010) or a mimicry process (Kenward & Gredebäck, 2013). Latter models do not require a genuine prosocial motivation, i.e., the intention to help another individual in need.

To address this issue, behavioral methods, including naturalist observation, may be combined with methodologies from Experimental Psychology (i.e., Eye-Tracking, EEG, fMRI). First studies have begun to use Eye-Tracking procedures to measure children's concern for other's well-being (e.g., Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012) or to draw conclusions about infants' social evaluation from its gaze behavior (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007). Here, a major challenge regards the development of novel designs that, first, allow identifying different motivational processes underlying prosocial behavior and that, second, can be applied in different cultures.

CONCLUSION

Due to fundamental differences in the conceptualization of prosocial behavior in different cultural contexts and its relevance for early prosocial development, the development of prosocial behavior can only be fully understood also taking into account a cultural perspective. Cross-cultural research on prosocial development has only recently begun to combine and synthesize anthropological approaches with methods from experimental developmental psychology and further research of this sort is needed. Therein lies the potential to broaden our understanding on prosocial development in its ecosocial context and to shed novel light on the long-standing question for the phylogenetic and ontogenetic roots of human prosociality.

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