

Peer influence on prosocial behavior in adolescence

Xueqiao Feng¹, Ziwen Han² and Siyuan Zheng³, *

¹ School of Psychology, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom

² School of Government, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, 201701, China

³School of Psychology, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

* Corresponding Author Email: Siyuan.Zheng@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract. Peer relationships are crucial for the formation and development of prosocial behavior among adolescents. However, most studies have focused on harmful behaviors and risky behaviors of adolescence, and previous verifiable work has often focused on peer relationship influences for antisocial behavior in adolescents. The research on the influence of adolescent peer relationship on prosocial behavior is relatively insufficient, especially the lack of systematic reviewing articles. This article presents peer influence can affect the prosocial behavior by demonstrating social and prosocial behavior in adolescent stage, exploring the importance of peer relationship, decision information of peers and peer intimacy. Moreover, this paper reviews recent experiential studies to explain the mechanism of peer influence on adolescent prosocial behavior from the perspectives of social learning and conformity theory and gender differences. This paper builds a higher study basement for future prosocial behavior field. Limitations of differences between different prosocial behaviors, and the influence level from peers are also worth investigating in the future.

Keywords: Prosocial behavior; Peer relationship; Adolescence.

1. Introduction

Children will have more social skills and ability in the adolescent stage. It is well established that helping and sharing behaviors emerge early in development. Examining children's resource allocation to themselves and others under different conditions is a common approach to the study of sharing. Preschool-aged children will soon seek to establish equitable distributions of valuable resources among themselves. Although preschoolers will share, but the mechanisms underlying this prosocial behavior is still unclear. By comprehending these mechanisms, it should be possible to foster and promote the development of these highly valued and crucially important social behaviors.

The definition of prosocial behavior is "the behavior which is voluntary and beneficial to others". And encompasses a vast array of behaviors including helping which is beneficial to others, sharing and cooperating with others [1]. In the areas of sharing and donating, adolescents have more prosocial behavior than children (7–12 years old), according to studies [2].

Prosocial behavior can be affected by many factors, such as gender differences, friends' relationship and so on. The research demonstrated that teenagers may be able to participate in more diverse prosocial behaviors because of their physical maturity and rising autonomy. Also, perspective-taking advancements may promote advanced moral reasoning, which should encourage prosocial conduct. In addition, the connection with peers frequently and interest in love and deep relationships increase simultaneously with the development of social competence [3]. However, apart from these studies, research on the impact of peer influence is very rare. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate how peers affect prosocial behavior. Friends and acquaintances can directly or indirectly influence prosocial behavior. Recent research utilizing social network analyses to examine socialization within 10-year-old children's friendships provided evidence that friendships influence prosocial behavior [4]. Other research that focused on the peer group's influence on prosocial behavior revealed that peer group in a large size also influences prosocial conduct of children [5]. These findings suggested that the concept that pairs of peers and groups of peers can impact adolescents' prosocial behavior.

This article will investigate whether peer influence can affect the prosocial behavior and demonstrate social and prosocial behavior in adolescent stage first. Then, exploring the importance of peer relationship and peer intimacy whether peer influence will affect prosocial behavior based on the social learning and conformity theory. Finally, whether gender can be a moderating factor which can affect the prosocial behavior.

2. Social Behavior of Adolescent

2.1 Characteristics of the Adolescent Stage

Burke et al. [6] stated that human social preferences are visible from an incredibly young age. Infants grin more when they face to their caregiver and other people than at unanimated thing, showing that people can distinguish social from non-social individuals. Infants start to purposefully engage and refocus their caregiver's attention at the age of one by pointing or vocalizing. Children start using sophisticated social skills around the age of 2.5, including teasing, lying, and face-saving. Over the following few years, people develop the ability to apply these social strategies flexibly in many social contexts. Teenagers are beginning to openly consider the emotions of others when reacting emotionally, which is suggested by their growing grasp of subconscious feelings, especially humiliation. By middle childhood, a child's sense of justice and fairness shows up in a growing desire to share resources in a fair way. In the adolescence stage, it is a delicate developmental stage marked by heightened sensation seeking, and moodiness. During this stage of life, feelings of rejection become more common in humans and psychopathology emerges. People need to spend more time with their peers, the quality of their social interactions will improve [7]. Furthermore, during adolescence, adolescents become more reliant on their peers for social support, and they become more sensitive to treatment by their peers. They are more concerned about what people think of them.

Peer influence can be both beneficial and detrimental. Bauman and Ennett [8] conducted research presented that peer influence may be less significant than is typically believed in determining the onset of drug use since selection and projection may make friends and adolescent behavior more closely related. Rarely does the literature make notice of this qualification. However, the evidence also reveals that peer influence only has a minor impact on adolescent drug use, so rather than concluding that more research into peer influence is not necessary, it is suggested to take a more critical look at its influence. On the other hand, You, S. [9] suggested that peers can encourage teenagers to acquire a sense of competence and autonomy, and these self-regulatory processes have a long-term favorable impact on these teenagers' conduct. It's likely that some teenagers will think and behave in a manner congruent with the values of their peers and expect because they want to fit in or be like them. The capacity to occasionally choose to ignore what other people think individual should do (resisting peer pressure) develops during the teenage years. In a sizable study by Steinberg and Monahan [10], 3600 people in different ages replied to a questionnaire in which they were asked if they would be more inclined to participate in certain good, bad, or neutral activities dependent on whether others were also participating. Self-reported peer resistance (RPI) was observed to steadily rise between middle and late adolescence. Steinberg also looked at how promote RPI affected risk-taking behavior in another study. In a lab experiment, young people (aged 13 to 16), teenagers (aged 18 to 22), and adults (aged 24 and over) played a video game about driving either by themselves or with two buddies. It was discovered that teens took more chances when they are driving with friends, such as not coming to a stop at a yellow stop sign. When their colleagues were not present, adult participants' risk-taking did not rise, and when teenagers played alone, they displayed the same amount of risk-taking as did adults. Based on the previous studies have focused on risk-taking behaviors, anti-social behaviors, and some adolescent negative effects. Therefore, this paper will explore the prosocial behaviors and how it develops.

2.2 The Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behaviors include offering consolation, emotional support, and resources to others. And supporting others in achieving their aims. Teenagers in 18 can exhibit cooperative and sharing behaviors as well as soothing someone who appears unhappy [11]. Prosocial activity is commonly seen to be selfless behavior intended to benefit another, such as lending a helping hand, giving resources, or even trying to soothe someone. Prosocial actions may be taken for a variety of reasons, such as concern for another person, desire to adhere to norms or a sense of duty, expectation of approval or rewards, or out of a sense of justice or fairness. An example of altruistic behavior involves consideration for others, objectives, and benefits for self rather than the anticipation of material or obtaining social benefits or avoiding punishment and censure. Altruistic activity is one kind of prosocial behavior.

Prosocial behaviors may be expected to occur more frequently in adolescence for several reasons, including continued development in cognitive domains related to puberty, such as strength, that allow for a wider range (e.g., helping someone move to a new home). In a small sample of people from mid-adolescence through early adulthood, Eisenberg and his colleagues looked at self-reported assistance. Using repeated-measures multivariate analysis, the researchers discovered a cubic increase in self-reported assisting from 15-16 to 25-26 years. From 15-16 to 17-18, there was an increase; from 17-18 to 21-22, there was a reduction; from 21-22 to 23-24, there was stability; and from 23-24 to 25-26 years, there was a decrease. Carlo and his colleagues used growth curve modelling to investigate self-reported prosocial behavior in a sample of low SES youth from a rural location from 7th to 12th grade. Although there was a slight increase in prosocial conduct in the 12th grade, teenagers' overall prosocial behavior drastically decreased (too small to warrant a quadratic trend).

Furthermore, compared to younger kids, teens may be given more opportunities to engage in prosocial activities through school-based (such as peer mentorship programs or mandated service experiences), religious (such as mission trips or Habitat for Humanity), and other groups [12]. Adolescents, however, have greater freedom to socialize with the peers of their choice than children do, and this freedom may help or hurt prosocial conduct. Also, because they are becoming more independent and able to make their own decisions, teenagers may choose whether to accept the values and priorities of their parents, which are important for good behavior.

3. Peer Influence

Peer influence is crucial for an individual during adolescence, as individuals spend plenty of time with peers in teenage years. In general, peer relationships are conducive to teenagers' acquisition of social values, the formation of social abilities, and the development of cognition and healthy personality. It can meet teenagers' needs for belonging, love, and respect. Peer also provides opportunities for teenagers to learn reactions of others. In addition, peers are also a crucial information channel, and they are an important source of emotion for teenagers. One study concluded through an latent class analysis that youths who had been hurt emotionally were more likely to participate in antisocial and risky behavior than friendly ones [13]. Those findings show clearly for the need of a deeper investigation of peer relationships.

3.1 Peer Relationship

Peers are people with the same or similar socio-cognitive abilities that an individual is with. Children of the same or similar age show a cooperative relationship in a common activity, which constitutes the peer relationship of children. The types of peer relationships can be summarized as: children who are welcomed, children who are rejected, contradictory children, children who are neglected, and children in general. In peer relationships, peer acceptance can effectively predict current and future psychological adaptations, and social behavior is the most effective predictor.

Therefore, it would be a great educational advance if peer relationships were able to positively influence adolescents and increase their prosocial behavior.

3.2 Prosocial Behaviors of Peers

The decision information of peers in adolescence are consistent with adolescents' goal of establishing self-identity. Peers provide a frame of reference for adolescents' role orientation. In adolescence, peer influence can be the result of general social network processes, for it is the key core in risky behaviors [14], such as transitivity (preference for friends who become friends with friends). However, peer influence can also bring along learning and prosocial behavior and other positive psychosocial outcomes [15]. It can be seen that the behavior of peers has been subtly affecting the information decision-making of individuals. There is an old saying in China that "closer to cinnabar is red, and close to ink is black", and individuals' decision-making is likely to be different because of peers. For example, if someone is surrounded by hard-working classmates, he/she will also be driven to learn and progress together; if their classmates think that they can solve problems by perfunctory work, they may also be affected by it.

3.3 Peer Intimacy

Peer relationships play an important role in eliminating anxiety, tension and loneliness in adolescents. In one study, children are assigned to observed members of adult groups within or outside the group engaged in prosocial sharing or antisocial theft. According to the study, elder children share more than younger ones, and moral models lead to higher sharing behaviors [16]. Researches from this perspective is not very sufficient. The above discussion has made it clear that peer relationships do affect the cognition and social behavior of adolescent individuals. But peer relationship has strength and intimacy, which involves the issue of peer intimacy. Peer intimacy is also worth exploring. Perhaps future related research can consider starting with peer intimacy and develop more and richer results and discussions.

4. Theoretical Explanation for Peers Influence

4.1 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory suggests that people can learn new behavior by observing and imitating others [17]. This learning process is a cognitive procedure that happens under social background through pure observation and direct instruction, even without motor reproduction [18]. Based on the theory, prosocial behaviors work as highly valued behavior and the basement of positive intergroup relationships in all societies would have commonly been observed and potentially been imitated and learned by individuals. Meanwhile, during this social learning process, individuals tend to imitate people similar to themselves, such as their peers, compared with people in other age groups [19].

Individuals would change their imitative behaviors during observation of reward or punishment that happened to others who have been observed. This process has been called "vicarious reinforcement", which means when individuals observe a specific behavior would be rewarded regularly, they will keep doing it [20]. On the other hand, if they observed that others would be punished for a specific behavior, they would stop doing it [20]. Therefore, to gain reward, individuals tend to behave pro-socially when they observe their peers do it and receive positive feedback [16].

4.2 Conformity Theory

The conformity theory means people in the group tend to change their behavior and follow the group principle to integrate into the group, and conformity can be conscious or unconscious [21]. For example, in a study of adolescents' social network selection, adolescents will adjust their behavior, attitude and value to the same as their peers they want to gather with [22]. This means individuals might choose the same behaviors when their peers do prosocial behaviors.

At the same time, this social theory indicates that individuals behave in conformity when they believe the group have better informed [23]. When this happens in the social context, individuals will behave pro-socially after seeing what their peers did and thought was correct.

5. Moderating Factor

5.1 Gender

There is a gender difference in prosocial behaviors. The prosocial behaviors of males in adolescence are generally lower than that of females [24], which can be considered the result of a social difference from primitive times. In primitive times, men were required to undertake the dangerous activities of foraging and killing animals in the wild, while women took on the safer roles of caring for children and nursing the disabled. Based on this continuing social division of labor, the socialization theory of gender is summarized as follows: in the process of raising the next generation, the female will be tended to socialize to be kind and dedicated because this is in line with female's social role (caring for others); at the same time, men are taught to restrain these prosocial behaviors because they need to reserve all available power to enhance their future social competitiveness (hunting) [25]. Furthermore, given that peer relations in the person's gender cognition have an important influence, peers will encourage behaviors corresponding to the social roles of their biological gender, which can potentially strengthen people's social orientation towards a specific gender role [26]. For example, females would effectively receive positive feedback from peers and society during prosocial behaviors, while men receive relatively few [25]. At the same time, during adolescence, adolescents tend to follow what they perceive as social stereotypes of gender, which will lead them to develop prosocial behaviors in particular tendencies [27]. Therefore, peer demands and influences on gender roles manifest as prosocial behaviors.

5.2 Peers State

Adolescents' prosocial behaviors are also correlated with their peer status. Teenagers follow their high-status peers and imitate their behaviors [28]. During the teenage years, brain development prompts individuals to achieve high status in their group [29]. Therefore, individuals would engage in prosocial activities if prosocial manners are prevalent in high-status peer group because individuals would be thought this manner was one of the high-status requirements.

6. Summary

Based on past research, this review has studied prosocial behaviors from developmental (childhood interaction mode and how it has changed through people's growth), social (adolescents' interaction mode), and cognitive (cognitive transformation during adolescence) perspectives. In addition, it is also considered using theoretical explanations and investigating gender differences to explore the influence of peers on adolescent prosocial behavior. Those plentiful research resources would work as a study basement for future researchers who would like to investigate prosocial behavior through those several psychological areas. Meanwhile, this review explained the potential mechanism of prosocial behaviors, which can help the study that related adolescents and peers in applied psychology. The previous articles referred to in this review have been widely researched; however, they still have some limitations because there are differences between different prosocial behaviors, and the influence level from peers also does not mention. For future research directions, researchers could think about how the existence of peer influence individuals when they need to do different level of prosocial behaviors. Besides, researchers can also consider the depth of peers' influence on adolescents and whether individuals can be the same prosociality as their peers. Moreover, researchers could try to investigate how elderly people express their prosocial behaviors and what is the differences with adolescents'. Furthermore, whether peer influence still exists when

people become older, and what potential mechanism under this existence. Those future research directions can further broaden the research on prosocial behavior and fill the gaps of previous research.

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