Emotional and Cognitive Correlates of Different Types of Prosocial Behavior: Investigating the Impact of Gender

Jennifer R. Wenner, B.A. and Brandy A. Randall, Ph.D.
Human Development and Family Science
North Dakota State University

INTRODUCTION

- Emotion and cognition are important factors in prosocial behavior.
- Sympathy (concern for someone else) is associated with higher levels of prosocial behavior throughout life (Laible, Carlo, & Roese, 2004).
- Also referred to as empathic concern
- Women tend to have more empathic concern
- Perspective taking (looking at a situation from another person's point of view) increases empathic concern and, in turn, prosocial behavior (Steff, et al., 1998).
- Personal distress is often related to less prosocial behavior.
- Particularly when situation escape is easy.
- Focused on self
- Self-esteem (feeling about self) theoretically associated with prosocial behavior.
- Empirical evidence is mixed.
- Positive association between self-esteem and prosocial tendencies (Laible, Carlo, & Roese, 2004).
- No relation between self-esteem and prosocial behavior has also been found (Schwartz, Zamborga, & Janis, 2007).
- Positive emotional tone (usually positive affect) has been associated with more prosocial behavior.
- Those in a good mood more likely to act prosocially (George, 1991).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How are different emotional and cognitive factors associated with the different types of prosocial behavior?

What are the gender differences in these patterns?

PARTICIPANTS

A sample of 247 18- to 22-year-old college students (177 women, M age = 19.39) completed an anonymous web-based survey.

MEASURES

Prosocial Behaviors:
Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM): 23 items, range 1 (Does not describe me at all) to 5 (Describes me greatly) (Carlo & Randall, 2007).

- Subscales:
  - Altruism: Voluntary helping behavior with only concern for another in mind
  - Compassion: helping in response to a request
  - Emotion: helping in situations with emotional cues
  - Public help: helping in front of others

- Global Prosocial Behavior: 6 items assessing volunteering, helping, raising or donating money, sharing, and doing favors for others, range 1 (Never happened to me) to 5 (Happens almost every day or more) (Swalcher, Shule, & Aubeau, 1985)

Emotion and Cognition Variables:

- Positive Emotional Tone: 11 items, range 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 6 (Very strongly agree) (Petersen et al., 1984)
- Self-esteem: 10 items, range 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree) (Mussen, 1965).
- Empathic Concern: 7 items, range 1 (Does not describe me at all) to 5 (Describes me very well) (Davis, 1963).
- Perspective Taking: 7 items, range 1 (Describes me at all) to 5 (Describes me very well) (Davis, 1983).
- Personal Distress: 7 items, range 1 (Does not describe me at all) to 5 (Describes me very well) (Davis, 1963).

RESULTS

(See Tables 1 and 2 for correlations)

Perspective Taking: significantly positively related to anonymous, compliant, dire and emotional prosocial behavior (PSB) in both men and women.

- Positive emotional tone: significantly positively related to anonymous PSB in men.
- Personal distress: significantly negatively related to both anonymous and public PSB in men.
- Personal distress: significantly negatively related to anonymous PSB in men.

Empathic Concern: significantly positively related to all measures of PSB except public PSB, which had a significant negative association.

Positive emotional tone: significantly positively associated with compliant and public PSB in women.

- Personal distress: significantly negatively associated with public PSB in women.

Self-esteem: significantly positively correlated with compliant and public PSB in women.

- Personal distress: significantly negatively related to anonymous, public, and global PSB in men.

Note. + p<.10; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001 significant gender differences are underlined.

DISCUSSION

The multidimensionality of prosocial behavior is highlighted by the pattern of relations in this study. Emotional and cognitive variables related differently to different types of prosocial behaviors. There was also substantial variability by gender in the pattern of these relations. Different types of prosocial behavior are engaged in depending on gender and the emotional or cognitive factors in use. This suggests that we should pay careful attention to the precursors of the types of prosocial behavior we want to encourage.

Gender differences are important to consider, despite the fact that only one correlation was significantly different between men and women, possibly due to the small number of men. For men, positive emotional tone was significantly negatively associated with anonymous prosocial behavior whereas they were not significantly related for women. For men, perhaps performing anonymous deeds for which one receives no credit may create negative feelings. Alternatively, perhaps men who experience a negative affective state engage in more anonymous helping in the hopes that doing so will make them feel better. Additional exploration should delve into possible reasons for this pattern, including why it appears applicable only for men.

More extensive research is needed to understand why the pattern of correlations varies by gender. Additionally, looking at young adults who are not attending college would provide a richer understanding of the emotional and cognitive correlates of prosocial behavior for young adults.

Selected References


