

# Prosocial behaviour essay sample

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



## 1. Introduction

Prosocial behaviour is described as a voluntary behaviour in order to benefit someone else (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). This prosocial behaviour such as sharing, helping, sympathy and empathy form an important part of the social interactions. It has been studied in terms of where these behaviours come from. There are various theories regarding the prosocial behavioural tendencies of individuals. Prosocial behaviour is regarded by Reber (1995), as a “ descriptive label for those social behaviours that are cooperative in nature”. There are various theories regarding the prosocial behavioural tendencies of individuals. The influence of Piaget’s & Kohlberg’s moral development theories plays a significant role in the advances in prosocial behavioural theories. Existing research investigates connections between personality, family dynamics, culture, temperament, peer relations and moral development. To illustrate Eisenberg and Fabes’ quote (1998) that prosocial behaviour is an outcome of a combination of many factors, three of the major factors will be examined in this essay i. e. cultural, socialisation and individual characteristics.

## 2. Cultural factors

Research on cross-cultural affects on prosocial behaviour has been based on cooperation, competition and sharing behavioural tendencies. These studies have found that children from traditionally rural societies are more cooperative than those of urban or westernized cultures (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Different types of research have been performed investigating the role of culture in the development of prosocial behaviour. Some research has shown differences but others have not, such as the experiment done in

assignment 1. This may be due to the fact that there are different cultural values and norms to compare, e. g. certain cultures place importance on different types of prosocial actions such as responding when asked and not asked. Moral reasoning is different across cultures which also making research difficult (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). I have found that in the experiment (assignment 1) it seems that cultural factors has not played a role in the outcome of the results, which , may not always be the case. However when a mother encourages inconsiderate needs in a dominant and aggressive manner, less prosocial behaviour is shown (Braten, 1996).

Whiting, Edwards, Graves and Graves (as cited in Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998) done interesting observational research , which showed that children with more prosocial behaviour tended to come from cultures where the female role was important, work was less specialized and there was a more decentralized government. Thus the children had to do more chores and take more responsibility for the family in terms of care and economic welfare. This early importance on collaboration seems to explain why these children tend to be more prosocial than their western counterparts (Shaffer, 2000). While studies show that children in non-western cultures may be more humane than those in western societies, there is little information that proves that these cultural differences exist.

Studies make known that children “ distinguish moral imperatives, which protect people’s rights and welfare from, two other domains of actions: social conventions, customs determined solely by agreement, and matters of personal choice, which do not violate rights or harm others, are not socially

regulated, and therefore are up to the individual” (Berk, 2013). As children’s ideas about justice progress, they clarify and link moral imperatives and social conventions. The same criteria are used by children in diverse cultures to separate moral concerns from social conventions.” Certain behaviours are classified differently across cultures because of the intentions behind those practices” (Berk, 2013).

There appears to be substantial differences in the influence of culture on prosocial behaviour. These differences cannot be stated since cultural groups differ significantly in the valuing of social actions, e. g. “ in some cultures helpfulness and social responsibilities are emphasized more than individual rights” (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

### 3. Socialization within and outside the family

The majority of the research lies in this area of how parenting effects prosocial behaviour. Family features such as socioeconomic status, family structure and family size may play a role but findings for all of these are inconsistent. Conclusive research shows that siblings tend to be more helpful when their mother is present versus absent (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

There is also significant research with regards to child-rearing practices although these have also been inconsistent at times.

#### 3. 1. The Family environment

The family environment is significant in the development of prosocial behaviour, as the marital relationship and other significant relationships provide the models for caring relationships in the household, as well as for the values of that family (Robinson & Zahn-Waxler, 1994). The quality of

child-rearing and early companionship has been shown to have a profound impact on prosocial behaviour (Braten, 1996). The structure of the family plays a crucial part in “social status differences in prosocial behaviour”. Studies by Rehberg & Richman (cited in Berk, 2013), show that preschool boys whose fathers were absent from home comforted peers more than children from two-parent homes. From this study we see that the presence or absence of parents from a home may have effects on the child’s prosocial development. Other factors of family that affect prosocial development include the social-economic-status of the family, the family size, and the ordinal position of a child within the family. Research findings on how these factors affect prosocial development varies, e. g. some findings show that older siblings are more prosocial compared to younger siblings, while other findings show no relation between ages of siblings and the behaviour (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

### 3. 2. Parental Warmth

Studies showed that although nurturing was not related to helping behaviour, the total effect of these supportive practices was related. Robinson and Zahn-Waxler (1994) showed a significantly positive relationship between maternal style (warmth and control) and prosocial behaviour during the 2nd year of life. On the other end of the scale, mothers who were more negatively controlling or permissive, tended to have a decreasing effect on their children’s prosocial behaviour between the age of 14 and 20 months (Robinson et al, 1994). According to Bar-Tal, Nadler and Blechman (1980), “It appears that supportive behaviour on the part of parents is essential in learning consideration for others, it serves as an

example for the child as to how to attend to the needs of others and how to satisfy them. It has become apparent, that maternal warmth together with directive parenting practices significantly increases empathy (Dekovic & Janssens, 1992).

### 3. Parenting styles

Parenting styles that include power-assertiveness and physical punishment with a deprivation of privileges, have either had no relationship or a negative relationship on the development of prosocial behaviour. Physical abuse is negatively related to the development of prosocial behaviour and empathy (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Parenting control has been linked to an increase in children's empathy. Prosocial behaviour has been shown to be encouraged, from parents who expect and demand social responsibility and moral behaviour (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Authoritative parenting was characterized by demanding and responsive parents, and this was proven to be the most adaptive form of child-rearing. Children reared in this way were happy, self-confident, self-controlled and had high self-esteem. Authoritarian parents valued obedience and control. Children of these parents were found to be nervous, reserved and apprehensive. Permissive parenting is characterized by indecisive, accepting and weak parents, which gives rise to immature, reliant and demanding children.

Uninvolved parents show little interest and give their children freedom to do as they please. This is said to be the most detrimental parenting style leading to problems in all aspects of development (Beck, 2003). Parents who express themselves emotionally have been shown to stimulate more prosocial

behaviour, especially empathy, in their children, The Mothers who showed more empathy, perspective-taking, warmth and reasoning, had a child who were more emotionally responsive and showed more empathy to the ratings. However, this was a small sample of only 2 children (in assignment 1).

### 3. 4. Modelling

Much of the research concerning modelling has been done as laboratory studies, however the real-life studies that have been done correlate with the laboratory results, which show that the prosocial behaviour of parents is modelled by their children (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). This supports the social learning theory and proves that if children are exposed to prosocial, helpful or generous models rather than selfish models, their behaviour is likely to be more prosocial, i. e. more helpful or generous.

### 3. 5. Reinforcements for Prosocial Behaviour

Also supporting the social learning theory is the factor of using concrete reinforcement to increase prosocial behaviour. Research has shown that concrete reinforcement has increased prosocial behaviour in girls more than boys. However, with this method, the intrinsic motivation is undermined and may have a negative effect later in the development of altruism (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Furthermore, research shows that logic and reasoning play a critical part in the development of prosocial behaviour. According to Bar-Tal, et al (1980),“ verbal directions of what the child ought to do in interpersonal interactions and why, may teach the child to be sensitive to other people’s needs and to predict the negative or positive consequences for other people’s need of one’s own behaviour”.

### 3. 6. Learning by doing

Staub (1992, cited in Eisenberg, et al, 1998) maintained that individuals “ must engage in prosocial behaviour to develop an interest in it and to acquire the motivation to enact similar behaviour in future contexts”. Furthermore, the possibility exists that participating in altruistic behaviour offers empathic reactions from the individual. In this way the individual’s feelings of competence to help are increased, thus resulting in social approval.

### 3. 7. Expression of Emotion and Conflict in the home

There appears to be many stances regarding how conflict within the homes affects an individual’s prosocial behaviour. Seeing that it is not realistically possible for children to escape the conflict that exists in their household, they may attempt to ease this conflict by intervening and comforting family members. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that individuals who are exposed to ongoing conflict and anger within his or her home may tend to become “ over-aroused” by these emotions, which would result in “ self-focused personal distress in reaction to others’ negative emotions” (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

### 3. 8. Siblings and peers

Siblings and peers also have an impact on prosocial behaviours in children. The development of perspective taking (which is feeling for or with another) is important with older siblings in particular, as they could be accountable for a degree of modelling or child-rearing depending on age. Peers also serve as an important opportunity for the child to practice prosocial behaviours. Thus



the response the child gets, from being empathic or helping may influence future behaviour (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). The quality of schooling and the relationship between the teacher and child also plays a significant role in the development of prosocial behaviour (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). “ Children who bring kindness and compassion to their friendships strengthen one another’s prosocial tendencies and form more lasting ties” (Berk, 2013).

#### 4. Child’s Individual’s Characteristics

A child’s individual characteristics, e. g. intelligence, perspective taking abilities, temperament, age and gender, have been shown to influence prosocial behaviour. Although there is a lack evidence that intelligence has been linked to prosocial behaviour, it is more likely that intelligence is related to the quality of the child’s prosocial behaviour which is more internally motivated (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Research has shown that achievement tests correlate to empathy levels in children, but other research has shown no connection between intelligence and prosocial behaviour.

##### 4. 1. Perspective taking and cognitive abilities

There are various factors of an individual’s personality that contribute towards his or her behavioural tendencies. The possibility of individuals identifying, understanding and sympathizing with others is increased as their perspective-taking skills are developed. As stated by Hoffman (1982, cited in Eisenberg, et al, 1998), these skills are important to “ children’s abilities to differentiate between their own and others’ distresses and to accurately understand the nature of other’s emotional reactions”. Studies have shown that children with greater perspective-taking skills are more prosocial.

Certain personal aptitudes such as perspective taking (the ability to apprehend another's internal experiences), moral reasoning, and empathy, although external or environmental mediators can alter them, have proven to be related to prosocial behaviours in many children (Robinson, Zahn-Waxler & Emde, 1994).

The cognitive-developmental approach assumes that moral understanding should affect moral motivation. However, although there is a clear link between moral actions and thought, this link is seen to be moderate. “ Researchers have yet to uncover just how moral reasoning combines with other influences to foster moral commitment” (Berk, 2003). However, as with self-conscious emotions, true empathy requires children to understand that the self is distinct from other people. It is only as self-awareness develops that children begin to empathize. As language of children develops, they rely more on words to console others. This change indicates a “ more reflective level of empathy” (Berk, 2003). This type of responding “ increases over the elementary school years because children understand a wider range of emotions and can take multiple cues into account in assessing others’ feelings”(Ricard & Kamberk-Kilicci, cited in Berk, 2003).

#### 4. 2. Sociability & Social Competence

Shy children are less likely to act helpful than those who are socially confident, because they find new people or new situations too intimidating (Stanhope, Bell & Parker-Cohen, 1987), whilst sociable children engage in out-going activities to reduce another child's distress(Robinson, Zahn-Waxler & Emde, 1994). However, it was found that introverts commonly find ways of

helping that do not involve social interactions, thus showing that they are not incapable of altruistic behaviours (Suda & Fouts, cited in Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

#### 4. 3. The age of a child

The age of the child is an important factor that relates to the different stages of moral and altruistic development. Different stages of development of altruistic behaviour progress from basic conformity using threat of punishment or request from authority, to internal initiative where a concrete reward is gained, to normative behaviour which helps gain the approval of society, to generalized reciprocity (“ what comes around, goes around”) and finally unselfishness which is voluntary and benefits another person with no external rewards to the person performing the act of altruism (Bar-Tal et al, 1980). Older children tend towards the higher levels as they have more advanced motives for sharing and are beginning to become more altruistic.

#### 4. 4. The Gender

The gender of the child is a debatable factor in the development of prosocial behaviour, as inconsistent findings have been collected. Females are generally seen to be more empathic, but only research that activates sex-related stereotypes and has high demand characteristics show these results, e. g. when empathy is expected from females they tend to respond better (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998 & Miller et al, 1997). Girls tend to have stronger expressions of interest and concern for others, higher emotional expression and a better sense of self in relation to others as compared to boys (Robinson et al, 1994). According to Eisenberg & Fabes (1998), “ they do

warn that this heightened sensitivity on the part of girls may increase their risk for unhealthy internal guilt. Men show more prosocial behaviours in studies where situations that require loyalty and instrumental assistance are required". According to Eisenberg & Fabes (1998), " Individual differences in the dispositional tendency to experience sympathy versus personal distress vary as a function of dispositional differences in both typical level of emotional intensity and individuals' ability to regulate their emotional reactions".

## Conclusion

Prosocial behaviour is as stated by Eisenberg & Fabes (1998), " the outcome of multiple individual and situational factors". Cultural factors appear to have varying degrees of effect on individuals. To a large extent the individual's behaviour could be influenced by his or her cultural beliefs. While it is true that biological factors affect an individual's behaviour, these factors do not appear to contribute to the altruistic behaviour of an individual as much as the socialisation of the individual, as well as the personal characteristics of the individual. From the research above, it is apparent that there are various factors that together play a causal role in the development of an individual's behaviour. It was found in the study in assignment 1, that there were no conclusive results for cultural differences or age differences as might be expected according to research findings. In some respects, the findings supported previous research, revealing that the authoritative style of parenting promotes prosocial behaviour in children.

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