

What often engage in  
co-operative acts that  
elicit



What are the strengths and weaknesses of observational and experimental studies of children's prosocial behaviour? Prosocial behaviour and correlates of this type of behaviour are areas that have been widely researched in Psychological literature. The idea of prosociality goes against traditional theories that state human behaviour is motivated by self-interest, as people do often engage in co-operative acts that elicit a cost to the individual themselves but benefits to another person (Aknin, Hamlin, & Dunn, 2012). Many theories have previously referred to the rewards of prosocial behaviour in relation to evolutionary fitness (Hamilton, 1963; Bénabou & Tirole, 2006) but on the other hand, the explanation that prosociality just 'feels good' and is emotionally rewarding has also been supported, in adults (Borgonovi, 2008) and in children (Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello 2012). With regards to young children, behaviours such as comforting another in times of distress and helping another individual achieve their personal goals have been observed, even when this brings about a cost to the individual (Zahn-Waxler, 1992; Warneken, 2008). Even in toddlers and children, it has been found that giving to others increases their happiness more so compared to if they receive a treat, for example, themselves.

More happiness is apparent when children sacrifice their own resources for others and experience some cost. This also tells us about pro-social behaviour to non-kin (Aknin, Hamlin, & Dunn, 2012), as evolutionary approaches favour prosociality to kin because it correlates to survival, however, the idea of emotions being a drive for helping, self-sacrificial behaviour gives light to costly pro-social behaviour to non-relatives and peers. There is evidence of pro-social behaviour being measured through

observational methods as well as experiments. Experimental studies attempt to manipulate the chosen and theoretically appropriate variables (independent variables) systematically and test the effects of manipulation on an outcome (dependent variables). Experiments involve intervention of the researcher and a high degree of control in the environment, they are often conducted in a laboratory. This high level of control in the setting is to eliminate any confounding variables which are variables that will unintentionally vary and influence the dependent measure.

A major strength of experimental studies is that you can establish causation and make certain causal inferences that the manipulated variable had a direct effect on the dependent measure, because of the high degree of control (Haslam & McGarty, 2014). On the other hand, observational studies are concerned with observing naturally occurring behaviour in naturalistic contexts. Relevant and target behaviours are defined before the observation takes place (behavioural coding) and then observers record behaviour that corresponds to the established codes.

A problem with observational studies is inter-observer reliability. This refers to ensuring that all observers produce the same result, seeing that they have witnessed the same stream of behaviour. This shows that the definitions and codes for target behaviour (the measuring tools for observational studies) are extremely significant for a valid observation (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997). Observations can use time sampling, which is recording behaviour through intervals (ie Parten, 1932 who studied social participation in children through naturalistic observation), however this sampling is arguably not

representative of all time, or event sampling which refers to counting the number of times a specific behaviour is witnessed.

In the context of pro-social behaviour this could include counting the number of times a child offers helps another child, for example. This essay will address the strengths and weaknesses of different methods for studying behaviour with reference to pro-social behaviour in children. It will critically discuss the methods used concerning validity, reliability, ethics and general methodological issues, before concluding whether there is a best way to study children's prosociality.

The first example of an observational study is Denham (1986), who aimed to examine prosocial behaviour in children in response to peer emotions and the effect of this on the children's own emotions. Event sampling took place in unmanipulated free play situations to measure the prosocial behaviours of children on a day-to-day basis in their natural environment. The use of event sampling in this method is a strength of the study as it produces quantitative, numerical data that is easy to analyse.

The emotions of the focal child and the reactions of the target children who were nearby were recorded, for example happy, sad, angry or hurt. Each child was observed as a focal child for 37.5 minutes on average. Emotion displays were operationalised in terms of facial, vocal and motor indicators. A coding system for the reactions of peers to the emotion of the focal child was devised outlining specific behaviours showing a certain response. For example, verbal or physical reinforcement through touching, hugging or maintaining proximity and expressing care/concern through questioning,

physical comforting and reassuring. Two raters observed the video recordings. Overall, this is a credible observational method.

Event recording is generally more valid than time sampling as time sampling can cause significant behaviours to not be recorded and it is not certain that the restricted periods of observation are representative of all time. It was also a covert naturalistic observation with no experimenter effects, so it has mundane realism as the behaviours observed are completely natural and genuine. Lastly the behavioural coding in this study is a significant strength as behaviours were operationalised and defined extremely clearly, for example, attention was coded by a sustained length of neutral attention being paid for more than 3 seconds. The use of facial, vocal and motor indicators to measure emotions is a significant strength as this provides precise, rich and empirical evidence that gives strong evidence that cannot be argued for the emotions being observed.

The fact that there were 2 observers does increase the inter-observer reliability of this study and reduces the possible experimenter bias where experimenters record behaviour that fits their predictions only. Behaviour is also recorded here so the tape can be revisited to confirm reliability.

Ultimately observations are a good way to measure children's pro-social behaviour as there are no ethical issues and the children are put under no type of stress or in danger. This is a strong and valid study of children's prosociality. On the other hand, experimental research into the prosocial behaviour of children has been carried out by Aknin et al. (2012) to investigate giving behaviour in children and how this affects their happiness. Toddlers were introduced to a puppet who they were told liked sweets, a

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limited resource. The child and 'Monkey' were then given treats and there were a range of phases that investigated giving behaviour of the child, such as asking the child to give 'Monkey' a sweet from their own bowl.

The findings showed that giving was not aversive and more happiness was exhibited when giving rather than receiving. One strength of this experimental method is that counterbalancing was used to ensure there were no order effects that would influence the child's happiness.

Experimental studies have a higher level of control compared to observational studies which allows us to make a causal inference from this study that giving something that is a limited resource to another directly increases the happiness of a child. We can do this because the high level of control means that there were no other variables that could have caused this change in the child's happiness. You could argue that the behaviour of a child in a lab is not completely natural as it is a strange environment, so these findings could lack ecological validity.

Another reason why this method is not generalizable to real life is that a child's sharing behaviour to a puppet may not be the same as if they share with another child. The method should ideally be replicated where 2 children are engaging with one another to increase mundane realism. Ultimately, this experimental method is appropriate for studying children's prosocial behaviour. A second observational study examining children's prosocial behaviour was conducted by Bar-Tal et al. (1982) which aimed to examine helping behaviour in preschool children. During unstructured free-play at kindergarten, each child was observed for 10 minutes on 3 separate occasions.

This method is better than where a child is observed one for a prolonged period such as in Denham's observation above as it is more likely that common behaviours of the child will be missed if they are observed once, in possibly one area, around the same peers, for a prolonged length of time. A big strength of this experiment is that teacher interference was minimized as much as possible and it was a covert observation, so the behaviour of the children was genuine, natural and not affected by the knowledge that they were being watched or that a stranger was present. Another experimental study of prosocial behaviour in children is Chernyak & Kushnir's (2013) study on costly and non-costly sharing behaviour.

In this experiment there were 3 clear independent variables, the child being asked to make a costly choice, a non-costly choice, or no choice. The dependent measure was whether, after making the first choice to a puppet 'Doggie', they would share 3 stickers with a second puppet 'Ellie'. Responses were video-taped, and a strength of this experimental method is that they were coded by a condition-blind research assistant, therefore, we can conclude this study involved no researcher bias. Inter-observer reliability was correlated here and found to be 100% so this experiment is extremely reliable. Also, as with Aknin et al.'s study, this commonly used method of puppets to measure prosociality developmentally appropriate as puppets and sweets or stickers are things that will engage a toddler and lead them to pay attention to what is going on, so the method increases the validity of the results. This is a strong experimental study where clear causal inferences can be made because there are 3 clear independent variables.

In comparison to observations which take place in a naturalistic and unmanipulated environment, this method tells us more about the direct relationship between prosocial behaviour and the happiness of children. In summation, the prosocial behaviour of children can be studied in many ways. With both methods, however, there is always a problem of generalization.

In many of the studies addressed, the researcher reported that there were individual differences. To overcome this problem, investigations must be repeated with larger samples so that more general conclusions that apply to all can be made. The methods of experimental studies influence generalization as the use of a puppet may not reflect the way a child would behave around another child. The method may not have experimental realism as the child would possibly not engage with a puppet in the way that they would with a peer.

The main issue with experimental studies is that it is not a naturalistic environment which could affect the child's behaviour by causing them not to behave in the way that they would in a natural setting such as a playground. Observational studies, however, have limitations in that there is no control when the environment is not manipulated in any way, and so no causal inferences can be made about prosocial behaviour. They are arguably better because the child is not affected by the presence of a stranger (the experimenter) or a strange, artificial environment. The method of a naturalistic observation gives rise to issues with reliability as the study can never be exactly replicated, whereas the high level of control in a lab study means the same method can be repeated easily.



To conclude, many studies in the literature tend to use both types of study. They frequently involve a questionnaire or interview with a teacher or parent, as well as an observation of the child in their natural environment, and then bring these qualitative and quantitative data together. Generally, there are more ethical constraints on the method used in experimental studies as the child may be put under mild stress in a strange environment however the presence of the mother here can overcome problem, such as in Akinin's study, and ensures that the child's completely at ease and experiencing no more stress than they would in everyday life. Overall there is no one optimal method to study children's behaviour and in Psychological studies, we should aim for a combination of both methods as this provides us with different types of data.