

# Cross-cultural differences in moral development and prosocial helping tendencies

[Sociology](#), [Moral Development](#)



## Cross-cultural Differences in Moral Development and Prosocial/helping Tendencies in Toddlerhood

### Abstract.

The proposed study will examine whether children, especially toddler can connect moral reasoning to prosocial behavior and the difference among Vietnamese toddler and American toddler in helping tendencies. Helping behavior is a positive trait that has an essential role in children's development. Children also unconsciously develop moral reasoning while interacting with people in their culture. Be able to understand the cross-culture difference in the effect of moral behavior in toddlers' responsiveness in others' need can help us understand children's development in a different culture other than America. Also, Vietnamese toddlers may help the actor who produces harmful behavior equally to the actor who produces helpful behavior, while American toddlers will be more likely to help " helpful" actor than " harmful" actor.

Keywords: Moral development, prosocial behavior, helping, toddler, culture, Viet Nam.

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Altruism and helping are common among toddler in both America and Viet Nam. Helpfulness is often seen as maturation and prosocial behavior that develop along with children's life. Children will develop and become more likely to engage in prosocial behavior as they grow older and be able to

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detect cues if someone near them needs help (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

Evidence shows that children's moral expectation does not emerge until toddler years (Boyd & Richerson, 2005) and they expect an individual to act positively toward others rather than negatively.

In Kohlberg's six stage of moral reasoning has assumed to be universal across culture (Kohlber, 1976). However, many researchers have suggested that prosocial act is a function, in part, of individual's cognition related to the norms and customs of individual's culture (Fisher, Nadler, & Witcher – Alagnon, 1983). With that being said, it is important to consider cultural influences when studying about prosocial and moral behavior in toddlers. Skinner (1971) suggested that children develop a moral sense as their behaviors are reinforced or punished by value judgments that based on their social standards, which mean that toddler's moral reasoning strongly depends on the culture they grew up in. Moreover, each culture has its ranking and elaboration of the universal moral norm (Dupoux & Jacob, 2007) that children have to learn and implement in their social life.

Helpfulness across culture:

Studies have shown that humans are select the beneficiaries of our prosocial acts among other people (Krebs, 2008). For example, people help and provide prosocial acts with considerate individuals and punish harmful individuals. Many studies have suggested that toddlers readily and spontaneously help others in a variety of tasks and begin helping others early in their life (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006)

More recently, the study by López et al. (2014) illustrates how Mexican Indigenous-heritage children provide significantly more spontaneous helping than European- American children. Their study also found that Mexican Indigenous-heritage children participate in household work willingly without any contingent rewards for doing household work. While European-American children's household works are more about self-care and often includes rewards (López et al., 2014). Moreover, children show an interest in taking part in everyday activities, sharing goals and help others without needing to be asked (López et al., 2014). A study by Levine et al. (2001) also suggests that countries such as Brazil, India, Malawi, and Vienna provided more help to a stranger than most America and European countries.

A study by Gilligan et al., (1982) found that the morality of caring in the U. S population is more contingent help than unconditional help. In another hand, J. G. Miller (2006) suggested that in the Indian population, in both children and adults perceived helping behavior as a social regulation that one must provide to another.

However, very few studies have been conducted concerning children's development in Viet Nam. While there have been numerous studies conducted in Europe, the United States and other industrialized countries on children's development, prosocial behavior and moral reasoning, there are far fewer studies on developing and transitioning economies (Heymann, Fischer, & Engelman, 2003). No studies focused particularly on prosocial/helping behavior or moral development in Viet Nam. That is the reason why this study will focus on toddlers' moral development and prosocial/helping

tendencies in Viet Nam and the comparison between American and Viet Nam.

The connection between moral reasoning and prosocial:

Not many works have examined whether children, especially toddler can connect moral reasoning to prosocial behavior. The study by Olson et al. (2008) suggested that children can consider others' moral behaviors in deciding whom to share toys with. In the study, Olson et al. (2008) asked preschooler participants to help the protagonist doll decide how to share her resources, 3. 5-year-old decided to give more resources to the doll who was generous and give fewer resources to the non-generous doll. Vaish et al. (2010) also said that children's prosocial behavior could be determined by others' moral behavior. In the study, the authors found that 3-year-olds helped the harmful actor significantly less than neutral actor and helpful actor.

In another study by Dunfield & Kuhlmeirr (2010) suggest that children tend to act positively in response to another individual's positive actions. They found that children at the age of 21 months intentionally help experimenter who has shown a willingness to provide help to other. A similar study by Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom (2007) suggests that children understand and prefer individuals who shown positive actions (such as help or care) more than individual who produce negative responses (such as hit or break).

As the research on prosocial and moral reasoning in children, it's essential to address the cross-culture variation, because being able to understand the

role of culture in children's development is crucial and essential. Because prosocial behavior such as helping has emerged in children shortly after their first birthday (Dunfield et al., 2011) and in some culture respond to a request for help is a requirement (López et al., 2014). Connecting moral development and prosocial/helping tendencies under the view of cultural psychology may expand and embraces the concept of toddler's development.

The goals of the current research are first to identify cultural differences in toddlers' responsiveness to others' needs. The second goal is to investigate the differences between Vietnamese and American toddlers and their motivation to help after they make their moral judgment. I hypothesize that for Vietnamese toddlers, there will be no differences between " harmful" condition and " helpful" condition. I also hypothesize that for the American toddlers, there will be significant differences between " harmful" condition and " helpful" condition. In another word, American toddlers will tend to help the actor in " helpful" condition more than the actor in " harmful" condition.

Method:

Participants:

Participants will be 30 Vietnamese toddlers and 30 European American toddlers from New York City. Ten participants for each condition. Participants will be match in the term of rang ages (from 12 to 36 months old) and family socioeconomic status. Participants in this experiment will be recruit primarily from school email and social media.

**Materials:**

Toddlers' helping task will adapt from Warneken and Tomasello (2006).

Harmful (bad guy condition) and helpful (good guy condition) actors will adopt from Vaish et al. (2010). The helping task will flow in this order: first, the experimenter will carry boxes with their both hand and come into the room where the child is playing. Suddenly, the experimenter accidentally dropped a pen, which was in their pocket and then unsuccessfully reached for it. Progressively more explicit cues will be given to the child: For the first 20s, the experimenter grasped for the pen without looking at the child, saying, " Mh . . . I cannot reach it" (2 times). If the child does not give response during the next 20 s, the experimenter showed the same behavior as before and additionally alternated gaze between the pen and the child (2 times). In the last 20 s, the experimenter addressed the child directly, saying " Look (child's name), I cannot reach it!" (2 times).

There will be three conditions for each participant: the control condition, the " harmful" condition, and the " helpful" condition. Each condition will happen before the helping task occurs. In the first condition, which is the control condition, the toddler will watch neutral act where two actors normally talk to each other about the clay bird on one of the actor's hand, then one of the experimenters will enter the room and begin to ask for the toddler's help.

In the second condition, which is the " harmful" condition, the toddlers will watch a harmful act where the recipient presents the clay bird to the actor. However, the actor will say in a mildly aggressive tone " I'm going to break

this clay bird now,” smash the clay bird and throw it into a bin. The actor will not display aggression in him/her facial expression (which will be neutral while she/he spoke and during her/his actions), nor in any other way before or during her/his actions. The recipient watched the actor sadly but silently. After 5 minutes, the actor will enter the room and perform the helping test and record the toddler’s response.

In the third condition, which is the “ helpful” condition, the toddlers will watch a helpful act where the recipient presents the clay bird to the actor. The recipient will accidentally damage the clay bird. The actor will say sympathetically, “ I’ll get [or fix] it,” then retrieve or repair the clay bird. The actor will not display any facial expression (which will be neutral while she/he spoke and during her/his actions), nor in any other way before or during her/his actions. The recipient watched the actor sadly but silently. After 5 minutes, the actor will enter the room and perform the helping test and record the toddler’s response.

Procedure:

Each conditions’ scripts, consent form, and videotapes will be back-translated from another person, who will be blind to the condition and hypotheses. The helping task will be coded by three independent people (Vietnamese, American, and bilingual who can speak both Vietnamese and English fluently). The third coder will be blind to condition and hypothesis and will code this measure from random videotapes from experiments. The third coder will be using the cues in the video to code. For example, the



toddlers help the actor pick up the pen or not. The third coder will judge both actor and recipient's facial expression and posture to make sure all cases are the same.

Gender analysis will be conducted. However, there should be no gender effect and will not be included in further investigations. All results will include p-value and two-tailed. Regarding interpretation, I'm planning on doing a binomial test first, to see which variables (helpful, harmful or neutral) affects the toddlers' motivation to help. Afterward, I'm planning on using the chi-square test to reveal whether there is a significant difference between "harmful" condition and control condition. The between-subject factors between the two cultures will also be tested.

Results.

Both the binomial test and chi-square test will assess the differences in the toddler's motivation to help after three conditions among two cultural groups. I expect that American toddlers will provide more help to the "helpful" condition than to the "harmful" condition, "helpful" condition and control condition might be the same. Whereas, I expect there will be no differences between "helpful" condition and harmful condition in Vietnamese participants.

Graphs and p-value for all three conditions in both cultures will be included in to reveal the possible differences between Vietnamese toddler and American toddler's helping behavior. Other's moral behavior and its influence on the toddler's decision to help will be examined qualitatively with chi-square

analyses comparing each condition between two countries. The results will be able to reveal whether other's moral behavior can influence children prosocial behavior.

Discussion.

Based on literature research on cross-culture helping behavior in children, especially in Viet Nam, I believe that helping others is a way to contribute to society. I expect that Vietnamese toddlers will help both " helpful" and " harmful" actor equally, while American toddlers will be more likely to help " helpful" actor than " harmful" actor. I also expect that the result will support the hypothesis, which can suggest that helping behavior in Vietnamese culture is a social practice and helping others is a way to contribute to the society rather than a personal choice. If the finding is significant, then this study will be able to broaden the knowledge of children ' s development from another cultural perspective.

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