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Reducing Youth In-Group Favoritism to Address Social Injustice

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Abstract
Social injustices toward minority groups are pervasive around the world, and further exacerbated by global threats such as COVID-19 and climate change. Prosocial tendencies, such as empathy, moral reasoning, and helping behaviors directed only toward members of one's own social groups, discriminate against outgroups, and can perpetuate an unjust *status quo*. Yet, recent meta-analyses point to effective intervention programs that can foster prosocial responses across group lines. Developmental science has identified evidence-based interventions, policies, and programs to foster *inclusive* prosocial tendencies (toward both in-group and out-group members) to redress social injustices and inequities, and ultimately, lead to more just and peaceful societies. The recent developmental science informs five policy principles (e.g., developmental science, resilience, culture, collaboration, and sustainability) that can advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) around inclusion and peace.

Tweet

Children's and youth's prosocial tendencies not only help others, but can address social injustice and inequity, if they are inclusive. Policy principles derive from developmental science, resilience, culture, collaboration, and sustainability.

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Key Points

- Developmental, social, and peace psychology agree on the importance of prosociality to address inequity.
- According to basic research with children and youth from majority/minority backgrounds in peaceful and conflict-affected countries, prosociality grows from increase in moral cognitions, emotions, and values,

socialization and contextual influences, and community engagement.
- Key interventions among diverse samples in established democracies and non-WEIRD samples reveal the need for the development of programs that are age-sensitive and culturally adapted.
- Future research should focus on the *target* of the different *forms* prosocial acts, as well as the longer-term or broader implications, such as different *types* of social change.
- Fitting UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) #4 on inclusive education and #16 on peace, security, and strong institutions: Policy principles derive from developmental science, resilience, culture, collaboration, and sustainability.

Global challenges, such as COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, have exposed and exacerbated structural inequities related to poverty, war, mass migration, and discrimination. A survey of 12,000 youth across 112 countries, for example, found the negative impact of COVID-19 on education, employment, well-being, and rights disproportionately affected women, younger adults, and those living in lower-income countries

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(DJFY, 2020). The multiple burdens of climate change, from extreme weather to food insecurity, are intensified for younger children and marginalized communities in lower-income countries (Sanson et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges and threats requires a greater understanding of risk and resilience mechanisms (e.g., Masten, 2014). However, work on resiliency is not enough to protect youth from maladjustment, or to disrupt the cycles of compounding risks, such as poverty, violence, and social inequity. Additional work must focus on understanding positive social development and well-being, and the factors that enhance such outcomes.

Prosocial behaviors (i.e., actions that benefit others) directly addresses the gap in understanding positive social development and well-being. Typical forms of prosocial behaviors include sharing, donating, volunteering, helping, and comforting others in distress. Such actions also span acts of heroism and rescue, defending victims of bullying, whistleblowing, and long-term, committed charity and activism. Such costly and risky forms of prosocial actions are characteristic of moral and care-based exemplars (Do et al., 2017). Prosocial behaviors are the building blocks of developing and sustaining positive and harmonious interpersonal relationships (Taylor & Christie, 2015), and often trigger reciprocated prosociality. Thus, investigations on youth prosocial behaviors can directly inform efforts to redress the social inequities and injustices, particularly considering the targets of prosocial behaviors. That is, prosocial behavior, while benefiting others, is biased to benefit members of the in-group, often excluding out-group members. Understanding how to address in-group favoritism can lead to the development of (early) prevention interventions that can break the cycles of risk and maladjustment and promote social harmony.

Building upon prior theories and empirical research, we summarize relevant contemporary scholarship on youth prosocial development with a focus on discriminatory prosocial behaviors (e.g., in-group vs. out-group helping). Highlighting work on associated mechanisms (such as empathy-related processes, generosity, moral reasoning, forgiveness, and gratitude) can inform interventions aimed at reducing discriminatory prosocial tendencies, fostering intergroup prosociality, and reducing intergroup conflict. Synthesizing across this literature in developmental science motivates five policy principles moving forward.

Theoretical Perspectives

Two cultural developmental perspectives outline how inclusive prosociality from childhood to young adulthood can address social injustice (Carlo & Padilla-Walker, 2020). First, the *Developmental Peacebuilding Model* (DPM; Taylor, 2020) explores youth prosociality's *targets* (i.e., recipient of the prosocial act) and the *type* (i.e., level of social change or benefit). The DPM, developed primarily for children growing up in contexts of intergroup conflict,

focuses on prosocial acts toward (former) conflict rivals (e.g., Shamoa-Nir et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021).

Complementing this focus on the intergroup conflict and building upon cultural developmental work (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Super & Harkness, 1997), the *Ecocultural Model of Latino Youth Development* (EMLYD; Carlo & de Guzman, 2009; Raffaelli et al., 2005) highlights the interplay of various influences on the U.S. Latino/a youth development: culture-related (e.g., systemic racism, discrimination, ethnic identity, and cultural values), social-ecological (e.g., characteristics of schools and neighborhoods), and socialization (e.g., family, peers, and media). Although the model initially focused on the U.S. Latino/a youth, it applies to other minoritized youth (Davis & Carlo, 2019; Davis et al., in press). Recently, the model has delineated the impact of cultural stressors, such as discrimination (Davis & Carlo, 2019), and the cyclical links of social inequities and injustices, on ethnic/racial minority youth development (Davis et al., in press).

Linking the DPM and EMLYD, children and youth can engage in *inclusive* prosociality that benefits out-group members, even in the face of intergroup violence and structural inequality (Moran & Taylor, 2022). More specifically, inclusive prosocial behaviors can occur at different levels of the social ecology (Davis et al., in press; Taylor, 2020). For example, at an interpersonal/microsystem level, children may comfort, help, or share with an out-group member (Carlo, 2014). At a collective/mesosystem level, prosociality can include civic engagement (Taylor et al., 2019) and collective action (van Zomeren & Louis, 2017). Finally, prosociality can promote macrosystem benefits, such as or national or global cultural change (Taylor, 2020; Taylor & McKeown, 2021). Recent headlines from #COP26 demonstrate how children and young people actively take part in social media campaigns, signing petitions, solidarity and allyship, and other symbolic acts that signal a shift in cultural norms that benefit others (Taylor, 2020).

Recognizing children's agentic power, the DPM and EMLYD highlight how inclusive prosociality can benefit those in their immediate contexts, as well as dismantle structural inequities, to ultimately lead to more just and peaceful societies (Davis & Carlo, 2019; McKeown & Taylor, 2017). Toward this end, the following section reviews recent literature on the different types and forms of youth prosocial behavior, with implications for early and sustained interventions, tailored to cultural contexts.

Inclusive Prosocial Behaviors in Childhood and Adolescence

Prosocial behaviors reflect individual predispositions toward persons, of course, but also toward groups. Individual-level factors such as moral cognitions, emotions, and values are salient predictors of prosocial behaviors (see Carlo, 2014; Eisenberg, 2002). Empathic concern (i.e., feelings of sorrow or concern for others; see Carlo, 2014) and

perspective taking (i.e., understanding the thoughts, feelings, and social situations of others), for example, might motivate youth to engage in helping behaviors differentially applied to specific targets (O'Driscoll et al., 2021; Sierksma et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2020). Perceptions of out-group members, such as racial bias also predict lower levels of empathy and help out-group members (Pashak et al., 2018; Yi et al., 2020). Socialization agents (e.g., parents, family members, media, peers) are key developmental influences who have also been shown to impact prosocial tendencies (Carlo & Conejo, 2019).

Experiences with societal level oppression might also shape discriminatory prosocial behaviors. Youth developing in contexts of political and contextual violence might develop context-influenced tendencies to engage in discriminatory prosocial behaviors. For example, out-group prosocial behaviors are less when perceived threat from out-group members is high (Abrams et al., 2015). Yet, in-group threat was linked with out-group prosocial behaviors over time among adolescents in a conflict setting (Taylor et al., 2014).

In terms of social integration, prosociality is linked to community connections and social engagement among the U.S. Latino/a youth (Frisco et al., 2004). Youth who frequently express prosocial behaviors are more involved in civic engagement and more likely to vote than youth who express less prosocial behaviors (Frisco et al., 2004). Community connection has been linked to a deeper trust and respect for teachers, concern for others, and prosocial motivation (Watson et al., 1998), which might translate into better academic outcomes for youth. This work demonstrates that prosocial behaviors, including civic engagement and community-oriented prosocial behaviors, reflect a connection with others and with the broader community.

Interventions: What Works? What Have We Learned?

A recent meta-analysis of school-based interventions to reduce prejudice in children aged 3–11 years old found significant effects across five types of interventions (Keenan et al., in press); social learning approaches were the most effective for improving intergroup relations, often through cooperative learning. There is also evidence that implicit racial biases, which might be reflected in color-blind racial attitudes, lead to avoidance of ethnic/racial minority individuals and a lack of positive social interactions (see Huebner, 2016), perpetuating group separation and a lack of social harmony. Therefore, working to reduce bias and promote out-group prosocial behaviors toward minoritized populations might be one important point of intervention to ultimately increase harmony and peace among diverse groups. The findings from the meta-analysis also point to one of the policy insights, programs should be (5) *sustained and systematic*, and ideally link across levels of the social ecology.

Programs designed to foster empathy and prosocial behaviors are wide ranging and are often focused on promoting generalized prosocial tendencies rather than specifying types or targets of such actions. Although there is a long and varied history of such programs (e.g., Battistich et al., 1991; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004), including character and moral education programs, a few programs that have demonstrated effectiveness are highlighted. In particular, a shift from general to out-group-specific prosociality requires (4) *cultural adaption*, one of the key policy insights.

The *Roots of Empathy* program (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012) centers on fostering empathy in young children by increasing sociocognitive and socioemotional skills (including executive functioning, challenging cruelty, and injustice). Researchers have reported effectiveness in reducing aggression and increasing prosocial behaviors (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). Two other school-wide implemented programs that have demonstrated effectiveness are Caring Schools (Noddings, 2010) and Japan's empathy preschool curriculum (Hayashi et al., 2009). These programs structure classroom environments to nurture empathy and prosocial behaviors. Finally, a recently developed online video game formatted program shows promising efficacy in fostering prosocial tendencies (Mesurado et al., 2020). *Project Hero* and *Little Hero*, respectively, present five prosocial-themed challenges. Of particular interest are the ability to adapt the video game in different ways to focus on fostering prosocial tendencies to specific targets (e.g., out-group persons) and the flexible and cost-effective application of the program (as long as there is Internet access). In addition to best practices, such as evaluation of school-wide interventions and use of innovative technologies, these programs are underpinned by a key policy principle: they use a (2) *resilience and strengths-based* approach that recognizes children as constructive agents of change.

A number of interventions promoting different types of prosociality have been carried out in conflict-affected societies. A recent set of interventions have demonstrated how interventions, some based on ECD centers and others on community supports for new mothers, across diverse contexts (i.e., Mali, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) can promote peacebuilding and social cohesion (Dunne et al., 2021). Another school-based intervention carried out the ProCiviCo program for adolescents in Chile and Colombia (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2020). Across multiple reporters (e.g., self, peer, and teachers), the pre–post-RCT found support across contexts for promoting prosocial behaviors with peers. These two programs inform two other policy insights, the need for (1) a *developmental approach* across childhood and (4) *collaboration and co-production* with local stakeholders to adapt designs across cultural contexts.

Global Policy Frameworks

The interventions covered here point to the important role that schools can play, relevant to the *United Nations*

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and target *SDG 4.5* to eliminate discrimination in education. From early childcare through primary and secondary schooling, these findings also highlight the essential role that schools play for target *SDG 4.7* on promoting global citizenship integrating human rights, gender equality, and a culture of nonviolence (McKeown & Taylor, in press), with an appreciation of culture diversity (*SDG 4*). Further, understanding prosocial behaviors also has implications for *SDG 16* on peace; and in particular, how youth can advance nondiscriminatory laws and policies (*SDG 16.A*) and inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making (*SDG 16.7*). Thus, developmental scientists are encouraged to link their important empirical findings to these global policy frameworks.

Five Policy Insights

Based on the review of the evidence, five policy insights are outlined. Governmental agencies working with children and young people, or charged with implementing the SDGs, should consider these insights in their planning and implementation.

1. *Developmental approach:* Prosociality shifts over the life course; trying to pinpoint sensitive periods of development of individual factors (e.g., empathy) that can best promote the different forms and types of prosocial behavior is important.
2. *Resilience and strengths-based:* Identifying risk factors and reducing problem behaviors, in and of itself, does not equate to the development of youth positive social development and well-being. Work in this area necessitates attention to mechanisms that protect youth from maladjustment, as well as, to mechanisms that generate prosocial behaviors and well-being.
3. *Culturally adapted:* The balance of unique/universal and specific/common approaches in developmental science (e.g., Bornstein, 2017) is evident with how prosocial behaviors in childhood can promote social justice. Examples above highlight the importance of adapting to the specific cultural context and challenges.
4. *Collaboration and co-production:* Successful interventions are rooted in the collaboration of developmental scientists and practitioners; the co-production of programs across experts in empirical research and experts on the reality of children's lives is crucial. Those adapting the programs, such as teachers, can shape and influence how the scientific evidence is delivered for maximum impact.
5. *Sustained and systemic:* The evidence suggests that interventions promoting inclusive prosociality need to be sustained. Spelling out the theory of change related to broader societal benefits, and establishing robust measurement and evaluation tools to assess such impact, is an important extension to help sustain positive change.

Conclusion

To dismantle social injustice, the first step is to identify the structural and systemic barriers that entrench inequity and disparity. Going beyond mitigating the potential harm of intergroup violence or discrimination, recognizing the inclusive prosocial actions that young people can take to promote immediate and intergenerational constructive benefits for diverse others is asserted. Informed by two theoretical perspectives, the present paper points to a focus on inclusive prosociality, not only across group lines, but also across levels of the social ecology. This inclusive approach is urgently needed for intergroup harmony and equitable well-being.

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