

Relationship between sympathy, helping others could provide clues to development of altruism

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Developmental psychologists long have debated whether individuals volunteer and help others because they are sympathetic or whether they are sympathetic because they are prosocial. Now, new research from the University of Missouri helps clarify some of the confusion, which could lead to better interventions to promote positive behaviors in adolescents and clues as to what makes some individuals altruistic.

"As researchers, we've known about the link between sympathy and prosocial [behavior](#), such as volunteering and helping others, for a long time, but we didn't have much evidence about the nature of the relationship," said Gustavo Carlo, Millsap Professor of Diversity in MU's College of Human Environmental Sciences. "We demonstrated that a reciprocal relationship existed between prosocial behaviors and sympathy for adolescents from ages 12 to 16. Sympathy predicted prosocial behaviors, but also engaging in earlier prosocial behaviors positively predicted later sympathy."

Engaging in prosocial behaviors has a self-reinforcing quality that eventually may become incorporated into how adolescents view their moral selves; this may help explain how some [individuals](#), over time, become more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors and become more sympathetic, Carlo said.

"This research has tremendous implications for understanding those

individuals who we think of as moral exemplars, individuals who commit themselves to certain causes or other forms of generosity - people such as Mahatma Ghandi, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr. and others," Carlo said. "We want to know which developmental processes led these individuals to eventually manifest altruistic behaviors that set them apart from other individuals. For every one of those individuals who became famous, thousands of others exist who are doing fantastic work and helping to improve our society on a day-to-day basis."

For the study, the researchers recruited 500 12-year-olds to answer questions about sympathy and prosocial behaviors. The researchers questioned the adolescents four more times, each about a year apart, to observe changes in the adolescents' behavior and sympathy over time. The researchers observed a decline in sympathy among boys in early adolescence, but a steady increase followed the dip as the boys matured. Girls had higher levels of [sympathy](#) and prosocial behaviors at all ages.

To increase prosocial behaviors among adolescents, and among boys in particular, attention should focus on changing the societal environment so it encourages boys and girls to express their prosociality, Carlo said.

"Unfortunately, in our society, the pressures for boys to act tough and to not express what's seen as a sign of weakness is suppressing [prosocial behaviors](#)," Carlo said. "We need to pay attention to adolescents' contexts and their socialization groups. Prosocial behaviors clearly are natural tendencies, and unfortunately, some cultural contexts make it difficult for [adolescents](#) to express those tendencies, which should be signs of strength and not weakness. We need to get that message across and make it easier for kids to express what's innately inside of them."

More information: Carlo co-authored the study, "Longitudinal Bidirectional Relations between Adolescents' Sympathy and Prosocial Behavior," with Laura M. Padilla-Walker and Matthew G. Nielson from

Brigham Young University. The article is in press in Developmental Psychology. Carlo's book, "Prosocial Development: A Multidimensional Approach," was published last year by Oxford University Press and received an award from the American Educational Research Association.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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