

Prosocial Behaviour and Altruism: A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Prosocial behaviour encompasses voluntary actions that are intended to improve the welfare of other people, groups, or communities. Altruism is a narrower psychological concept because it concerns the motive behind such behaviour, particularly situations in which the welfare of another person becomes an end in itself. The two concepts overlap, but they should not be treated as identical: the same act of helping may be guided by empathy, moral duty, reciprocity, social approval, guilt reduction, reputation, emotional relief, or genuine concern for another person. This theoretical paper reviews major psychological accounts of prosocial behaviour and altruism, including the empathy-altruism hypothesis, negative-state relief theory, social-exchange and cost-reward explanations, social norms, developmental and social-learning perspectives, evolutionary approaches, personality factors, situational influences, and research on intuitive cooperation. It also considers the long-standing question of whether apparently selfless action can reflect genuinely other-oriented motivation. Taken together, the literature indicates that no single theory can explain the diversity of helping behaviour. Prosocial action emerges from the combined influence of emotion, personal values, developmental history, social expectations, individual differences, and immediate situational demands. Altruism remains psychologically plausible when another person's welfare functions as the primary motivational goal, even if the act also produces secondary benefits for the helper.

Keywords: prosocial behaviour, altruism, empathy, helping behaviour, social exchange, cooperation, social responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Human social life depends heavily on the willingness of people to cooperate, share resources, provide care, respond to distress, and contribute to collective goals. Such behaviour is visible in ordinary settings such as families, friendships, classrooms, workplaces, healthcare environments, and communities. Examples include comforting a distressed friend, helping an injured stranger, donating time or money, volunteering, caring for dependent family members, and working with others for a common purpose.

Within psychology, prosocial behaviour is commonly understood as a broad category of voluntary action intended to benefit another individual or group. Penner et al. (2005) treated prosociality as a multilevel domain that can be examined in terms of individual tendencies, interpersonal encounters, and wider social processes. Altruism is more specific because it refers not merely to what a person does, but to why the person does it. Batson (2010) proposed that altruistic motivation is present when improving another person's welfare is itself the ultimate goal of action.

This distinction between observable behaviour and underlying motive is essential. Two people may perform the same helpful act for very different reasons. A donation, for example, may arise from compassion, a sense of duty, a wish to be admired, an attempt to reduce guilt, or an expectation of future reciprocity. Consequently, outward behaviour alone cannot fully reveal the psychological process that produced it.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine major psychological explanations of prosocial behaviour and altruism without assuming that one model can account for every form of helping. The review therefore considers emotional, cognitive, moral, developmental, social, personality-based, evolutionary, and situational pathways to prosocial action.

Rationale and Objectives

Prosocial behaviour merits sustained theoretical attention because it supports cooperation, caregiving, social trust, community functioning, and psychological well-being. At the same time, helping is highly variable. People may respond quickly to the needs of family members while remaining uncertain about strangers; they may help when personal costs are small but hesitate when the situation involves danger, effort, or substantial sacrifice. This variability suggests that helping cannot be reduced to a single universal motive.

A further conceptual difficulty concerns the relationship between altruism and self-interest. If every pleasant feeling that follows helping is interpreted as proof of selfish motivation, genuine altruism becomes impossible by definition. A more useful analysis separates the consequences of helping from the goal that initially motivated the act. A person can experience satisfaction after helping without that satisfaction being the reason the help was offered.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to clarify the concepts of prosocial behaviour and altruism, compare major psychological explanations of helping, examine the egoism-altruism debate, identify developmental and situational influences, and present an integrated account of prosocial motivation.

Method of the Theoretical Review

The paper adopts a narrative theoretical-review approach. Classical and contemporary psychological writings on altruism, empathy, mood regulation, social exchange, socialization, development, cooperation, personality, and helping were brought together for conceptual comparison. Particular emphasis was placed on Batson's empathy-altruism framework, the negative-state relief interpretation associated with Cialdini and colleagues, Penner et al.'s multilevel account, Eisenberg et al.'s work on prosocial development, and Rand's research on intuitive cooperation.

The aim is theoretical integration rather than statistical meta-analysis. The review therefore compares assumptions, identifies areas of overlap and disagreement, and examines how different explanations illuminate distinct aspects of prosocial behaviour.

Conceptual Foundations

Prosocial behaviour functions as an umbrella term for actions such as helping, sharing, comforting, donating, volunteering, protecting, and cooperating. These behaviours are primarily classified according to their intended benefit for other people rather than according to any single motive.

Helping behaviour refers more specifically to assistance offered in response to another person's need or difficulty. Cooperation involves coordinated activity directed toward a shared or mutually beneficial goal. Altruism differs from both because it concerns the motivational basis of action. In an altruistically motivated act, the welfare of another person is valued as an end rather than merely as a means to some personal benefit.

Table 1. Conceptual Distinctions among Prosocial Constructs

Construct	Primary Focus	Illustrative Example	Personal Benefit
Prosocial behaviour	Action intended to benefit others	Sharing or donating	May occur
Helping behaviour	Assistance in response to need	Helping an injured person	May occur
Cooperation	Coordinated action for shared benefit	Completing a group task	Often present
Altruism	Other-oriented ultimate goal	Helping without expected return	May occur incidentally

The distinction between behaviour and motive is especially important in the study of altruism. A person may feel pleased after helping someone, but the resulting satisfaction does not necessarily mean that personal pleasure was the original purpose of the act.

Empathy, Altruism, and Emotional Motivation

The empathy-altruism hypothesis is one of the most influential attempts to explain genuinely other-oriented helping. Batson (2010) proposed that empathic concern can create a motivational state in which improving another person's welfare becomes the ultimate goal. Empathic concern includes feelings such as compassion, tenderness, and sympathy that are directed toward another person.

This account differs from explanations based on personal distress. Personal distress is self-focused and may involve anxiety, discomfort, or emotional uneasiness when witnessing another person's suffering. If a person helps mainly to reduce that uncomfortable state, the underlying goal remains egoistic. In contrast, if the person acts because the recipient's welfare is intrinsically important, the motivation is altruistic.

Batson's experimental work attempted to separate these motives by examining whether people would continue to help when they could easily avoid further exposure to another person's distress. Persistent helping under conditions of strong empathic concern has been interpreted as evidence that concern for another individual can operate as an independent motivational goal.

The negative-state relief model provides an alternative interpretation. Cialdini et al. (1987) proposed that witnessing another person's suffering can create an unpleasant emotional condition in the observer, and helping may then serve as a strategy for improving the observer's own mood. Schaller and Cialdini (1988) further reported that helping can decline when people expect their negative mood to improve through another source.

The main theoretical difference between the two perspectives concerns the target of motivation. The empathy-altruism view locates the ultimate goal in the other person's welfare, whereas negative-state relief theory places the goal in the helper's own emotional state. Both models are useful because different helping situations may involve different emotional pathways.

Social Exchange, Costs, Rewards, and Responsibility

Social-exchange approaches explain helping partly in terms of perceived costs and rewards. Before acting, a person may evaluate the time, effort, financial expense, danger, inconvenience, or embarrassment associated with helping. Possible benefits may include gratitude, social approval, improved reputation, anticipated reciprocity, greater self-esteem, or relief from guilt.

This perspective helps explain why helping varies across situations. Assistance is generally easier to understand when the personal cost is low and the potential benefit to the recipient is obvious. By contrast, intervention may become less likely when the helper perceives substantial risk, uncertainty, or burden.

Cost-reward approaches also recognize that failing to help can carry psychological costs. Witnessing suffering may produce guilt, discomfort, or a threat to one's self-image. In some circumstances, therefore, helping may become the least costly option among several alternatives.

Even so, a simple cost-benefit account may be insufficient for forms of assistance that involve major sacrifice and little realistic prospect of reward. Anonymous giving, prolonged caregiving, and high-risk rescue behaviour illustrate cases in which prosocial action may exceed straightforward calculations of personal gain.

Social Norms, Moral Responsibility, and Internalized Values

Prosocial behaviour is also shaped by social expectations. Two widely discussed norms are reciprocity and social responsibility. The norm of reciprocity encourages people to return benefits they have previously received and thereby supports stable, cooperative relationships. The social-responsibility norm emphasizes helping those who are dependent, vulnerable, or unable to repay assistance.

Norms become particularly influential when they are internalized. Individuals who view compassion, fairness, or responsibility as part of their identity may act prosocially even when no one is watching and no external reward is available. In such cases, social expectations have been transformed into personal moral standards.

Moral identity therefore links social learning with self-directed motivation. Over time, helping can become less dependent on external pressure and more closely tied to a person's own values and understanding of what kind of person he or she wishes to be.

Development of Prosocial Behaviour

Prosocial behaviour develops through the combined influence of social learning, cognitive growth, emotional development, and self-regulation. Children observe how parents, teachers, siblings, and peers respond to people in need, and these

experiences provide models for later behaviour. Reinforcement, explanation, and participation in cooperative activities also contribute to the development of helping.

Eisenberg et al. (2015) emphasized that prosocial development reflects interactions among temperament, empathy, perspective taking, moral understanding, emotional regulation, and socialization. Young children may initially share or help because adults encourage them to do so. With development, however, such behaviour can become increasingly connected to internalized principles of fairness, responsibility, and concern for others.

Perspective taking is especially important because it allows individuals to understand another person's feelings, intentions, and circumstances with greater accuracy. Emotional regulation is equally important. Intense self-focused distress can interfere with effective helping, whereas the ability to remain emotionally engaged without becoming overwhelmed can support more constructive responses.

Prosocial development can therefore be understood as a gradual movement from behaviour that is strongly guided by external cues toward forms of helping that are increasingly self-regulated, morally organized, and psychologically differentiated.

Evolutionary and Functional Explanations

Evolutionary approaches ask why tendencies toward helping and cooperation might have developed and persisted across generations. Helping close relatives can support the survival of genetically related individuals, reciprocal cooperation can be advantageous in repeated interactions, and a reputation for helpfulness may increase the likelihood of future social support.

These explanations are valuable because they address the broader functional origins of cooperation and caregiving. However, evolutionary function should not be confused with a person's immediate psychological motive. A behavioural tendency may have adaptive value even when individuals are not consciously trying to maximize reproductive or social advantage.

For this reason, evolutionary explanations and psychological altruism are not necessarily contradictory. An evolved capacity for empathy can still produce genuinely other-oriented motivation at the level of immediate psychological experience.

Personality and Situational Influences

People differ in their general readiness to help. Empathy, agreeableness, moral identity, emotional regulation, social responsibility, and personal values can all influence prosocial tendencies. Yet personality does not operate in isolation, and stable dispositions do not guarantee that helping will occur in every situation.

Penner et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of examining both personal characteristics and situational conditions. A person who is usually empathic may fail to act when a situation is ambiguous or dangerous, while strong social expectations may encourage helping from someone who is not generally highly prosocial.

Situational processes often determine whether concern is translated into action. A potential helper must notice what is happening, interpret the event as requiring assistance, accept some degree of responsibility, identify an appropriate response, and decide whether to intervene.

Ambiguity may prevent action because observers are unsure whether help is needed. The presence of other people may also weaken personal responsibility when each individual assumes someone else will respond. Time pressure, perceived danger, competence, social cues, and judgments about deservingness can further shape the decision to help.

These findings support a person-situation perspective in which prosocial behaviour is produced by the interaction between enduring individual characteristics and immediate contextual demands.

Intuitive Cooperation

Research on cooperation has also examined whether prosocial responding is mainly deliberate or whether it can become intuitive. Rand (2016) reviewed evidence suggesting that cooperation may develop into a rapid default response when people repeatedly experience social environments in which cooperative behaviour is generally beneficial.

This social-heuristics account challenges the assumption that selfish responding is always automatic while prosocial behaviour necessarily requires deliberate control. Repeated positive experiences with cooperation can make cooperative responding habitual and relatively spontaneous.

At the same time, intuitive cooperation depends on prior experience and context. People whose environments reward caution or self-protection may not show the same rapid cooperative tendencies. The approach is therefore particularly useful for understanding recurring social interactions rather than every possible form of altruistic helping.

A Multilevel Perspective on Prosocial Behaviour

Prosocial behaviour can be examined at several levels of analysis. Penner et al. (2005) distinguished micro-level processes involving personality and developmental characteristics, meso-level processes concerning specific helper-recipient interactions, and macro-level processes involving groups, organizations, and communities.

Table 2. Levels of Analysis in Prosocial Behaviour

Level	Main Focus	Illustrative Question
Micro	Personality, empathy, values, developmental history	Why are some people generally more helpful than others?
Meso	Immediate helper-recipient interaction	Why is a particular person helped in this situation?
Macro	Group, organizational, and community processes	Why do people volunteer or cooperate collectively?

This multilevel framework helps explain why theories of prosocial behaviour should not automatically be treated as competing alternatives. Different theories may illuminate different levels or stages of the same social phenomenon.

The Egoism-Altruism Debate

The egoism-altruism debate asks whether another person's welfare can function as a genuinely independent motivational goal or whether helping always serves the helper in some direct or indirect way.

Strong egoistic explanations point to the many benefits that can accompany helping, including emotional relief, social approval, reputation, reciprocity, and maintenance of a positive self-concept. These outcomes are real and can clearly motivate some forms of prosocial behaviour.

However, the presence of personal benefit does not prove that benefit was the ultimate purpose of the action. A person who sincerely wants another individual to recover from suffering may experience satisfaction when recovery occurs. That satisfaction may be a consequence of concern rather than the cause of it.

Batson's distinction between ultimate and instrumental goals is therefore theoretically useful. Prosocial action can produce mixed outcomes while still containing a genuinely other-oriented component. The most plausible interpretation is not that all helping is altruistic or that all helping is egoistic. Human prosocial behaviour appears to follow multiple motivational routes, and many actions may combine self-oriented and other-oriented elements.

Critical Comparison of Major Explanations

Table 3. Major Psychological Explanations of Prosocial Behaviour

Explanation	Central Mechanism	Major Contribution	Key Limitation
Empathy-altruism	Empathic concern produces another-oriented goal	Accounts for the possibility of genuinely altruistic helping	Ultimate motives are difficult to observe directly
Negative-state relief	Helping reduces the observer's own unpleasant emotional state	Explains mood-related assistance	Does not account for all forms of empathic helping
Social exchange	Perceived rewards and costs influence the decision to help	Explains context-sensitive choices	May underestimate anonymous or high-cost helping
Social norms	Reciprocity and responsibility guide behaviour	Explains socially organized helping	Norms do not always translate into action
Developmental/social learning	Modelling, internalization, empathy, and regulation develop over time	Explains the emergence and refinement of prosociality	Development varies considerably across individuals
Evolutionary explanation	Kinship, reciprocity, and reputation have adaptive value	Explains broader functional origins of cooperation	Functional value is not the same as immediate psychological motive
Personality approach	Empathy, values, and moral identity create stable tendencies	Explains individual differences	Behaviour remains strongly context dependent
Situational approach	Ambiguity, responsibility, cost, and opportunity shape action	Explains variability across settings	Does not fully explain stable prosocial tendencies
Social heuristics	Repeated cooperative experience creates intuitive responses	Explains rapid cooperation	Applies more clearly to cooperation than to all helping

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that prosocial behaviour is best treated as a multicausal phenomenon. Different forms of helping can emerge from different psychological mechanisms, and more than one mechanism may be active in the same situation.

DISCUSSION

The psychological literature does not support a single universal explanation of helping. Prosocial behaviour may arise from emotional concern, moral values, social expectations, learned habits, perceived costs and rewards, personality characteristics, or immediate situational demands. In many cases, several of these influences operate together.

Empathy is especially important because it can direct attention toward another person's welfare, but empathy does not necessarily produce the same outcome in every situation. At times it may generate other-oriented concern; in other circumstances it may produce self-focused distress and a desire for emotional relief.

Social-exchange and normative approaches add further complexity by showing that helping is influenced by anticipated consequences and shared expectations. Developmental perspectives demonstrate that these motives can change as people become more capable of perspective taking, moral reflection, emotional regulation, and autonomous self-guidance.

The most coherent interpretation is therefore integrative. Prosocial behaviour is better understood as the product of interacting personal and situational processes than as a simple expression of either selfishness or selflessness.

Implications

The theoretical literature has practical implications for education, parenting, counselling, workplaces, and community programmes. Prosocial tendencies are more likely to develop when people encounter consistent models of care, opportunities for cooperation, experiences that encourage perspective taking, and clear expectations of social responsibility.

Schools can promote prosocial behaviour through cooperative learning, peer mentoring, meaningful community service, and structured discussion of fairness and responsibility. Parents can support development by modelling concern for others and helping children reflect on how their actions affect other people.

Counselling and helping professions should also recognize that effective empathy requires emotional regulation. Excessive personal distress can interfere with constructive assistance, while chronic self-sacrifice can weaken healthy psychological boundaries. Mature prosociality therefore requires responsiveness to others together with appropriate self-regulation.

Organizations and communities can further support helping by reducing ambiguity, clarifying responsibilities, and creating norms that encourage mutual assistance and collective care.

LIMITATIONS

This paper is theoretical and does not present original empirical data. A major difficulty in the study of altruism is that motive cannot be observed directly, making it difficult to establish with certainty whether a given act is ultimately altruistic or egoistic.

Many influential studies of helping were conducted in controlled settings, whereas real-world prosocial behaviour may involve stronger emotional, relational, cultural, and institutional influences. A substantial proportion of the literature has also emerged from Western psychological contexts, so ideas such as family obligation, reciprocity, community responsibility, and self-sacrifice may not function in the same way across cultures.

Finally, prosocial behaviours differ greatly in cost, duration, and relational context. A brief act of assistance to a stranger should not automatically be assumed to involve the same psychological processes as long-term caregiving or sustained community service.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research should examine how altruistic and self-oriented motives operate together rather than treating them as mutually exclusive. Longitudinal studies could clarify how empathy, moral identity, emotional regulation, and socialization contribute to the development of relatively stable prosocial tendencies across time.

Cross-cultural research is particularly important for understanding how duty, family obligation, reciprocity, and social responsibility shape helping in different societies. Researchers should also give greater attention to digital forms of prosociality, including online volunteering, crowdfunding, peer support, social-media activism, and anonymous digital assistance.

Digitally mediated interaction raises new questions about visibility, reputation, emotional distance, and social reward. Future work may also explore how artificial intelligence and technology-mediated communication affect recognition of need, perceptions of social distance, and empathic responding.

CONCLUSION

Prosocial behaviour and altruism are closely related but conceptually distinct. Prosocial behaviour refers to action intended to benefit others, whereas altruism concerns the motivational goal that underlies such action.

Psychological theories explain helping through several pathways. Empathy-altruism theory emphasizes genuine concern for another person, negative-state relief theory focuses on the regulation of the helper's emotional state, and social-exchange approaches highlight perceived costs and rewards. Social norms, developmental learning, evolutionary processes, personality, situational factors, and intuitive cooperation provide additional perspectives.

No single theory accounts for every form of helping. Human prosocial behaviour emerges from multiple interacting processes, and similar outward actions may arise from very different motives. The most defensible theoretical position is that genuine altruism is psychologically possible, while coexisting with self-oriented and mixed forms of motivation. The central question is therefore not whether the helper receives any benefit, but whether improving another person's welfare functions as the ultimate goal of the act.

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