

Deconstructing Instrumental Helping and it's Socio-Cognitive Prerequisites in Young Children

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ABSTRACT

Prosocial behaviour in children emerges in the beginning of second year of their lives and evolves further in more complex forms as children grow. Empirical evidences show that development of early social understanding plays a key role in performing prosocial acts. However children's natural proclivity propels them to display a range of prosocial behaviours. There are different arguments available regarding the prerequisites for helping behaviour in children. The aim of this theoretical paper is to review and discuss the socio-cognitive mechanisms involved in the manifestation of instrumental helping behaviour in the young children.

Key Words : Instrumental helping, Cognition, Empathy, Social understanding

INTRODUCTION

A peculiar characteristic of human behaviour is that it is multilayered. Human beings use various sub-processes to produce behavior, whether it is desired or undesired. Display of socially desirable behaviour acts as an agency for the acceptance of an individual in his or her family or other social group. Prosocial behaviours are those that are positive form of social behavior (Wispe, 1972) and at the core of the human condition (Warneken and Tomasello, 2007), integral to human social life (Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, Connell and Kelly, 2011). A prosocial personality may include other-oriented cognitions and prosocial actions, as well as sympathy (Eisenberg, Guthrie, Murphy, Shepard, Cumberland and Carlo, 1999). Prosocial behavior is generally defined as any behavior that is directed to help, assist and/or favour another person. This is based on the perception or inference of another person's need. For example, if someone drops an object, another person's act of picking up the object

and handing it over will be a prosocial act. Simply put, it is a positive response in any given situation. From various known forms of prosocial behaviour, this paper focuses specifically on instrumental helping and the role of rudimentary cognitive structures in the manifestation of helping acts.

Several research studies have recorded that young children readily help others, even unknown experimenters, as soon as they cognize the need for help (Rheingold, 1982; Svetlova *et al.*, 2010; Warneken and Tomasello, 2006, 2007; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner & Chapman, 1992). Developmentally, instrumental help is seen as the primary and simplest form of prosocial behaviour that children exhibit to complete a goal-oriented behaviour. For example, handing over a fallen clip by a young child which is out-of-reach of an adult is a form of instrumental helping prosocial behaviour. Researchers are of the opinion that children as young as 14 months of age offer help. In a series of studies, Warneken and Tomasello (2006, 2007 and 2009) suggested that young children have

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an intrinsic motivation to act altruistically. They demonstrated that infants from 14- to 18-months of age display spontaneous, unrewarded helping when another person was unable to achieve a goal. To help someone with a problem, the child must understand the other person's unachieved goal and possess the altruistic motivation to act on behalf of the other. They argued that instrumental helping behaviour is the earliest manifestations of human altruism, irrespective of any rewards or benefits in return, and this proclivity emerges before formal socialization begins. Exclusive influences of socialization on making children more prosocial was critiqued through their views on existence of a natural propensity for being altruistic and seeing this predisposition as a part of human ontogeny.

Conversely, assumptions of evolution-developmental psychology endorse that the evolutionary account of development stresses the bidirectional gene-environment interactions emerging dynamically over time (Bjorklund and Ellis, 2014). That is the mutuality of experiences and interactions between individuals and their environments, provides them with necessary adjustment to be made in the behaviour. In a recent study, Dahl (2015) has presented two views to understand prosocial behaviour. The natural tendency view supports the idea of natural propensity of young children to help, spontaneously emphasizing that this early helping behaviour is not influenced by parental practices used for socialization. On the other hand, the researchers are also of the opinion that emerging prosocial behaviour does get influenced by children's social experiences. This view called the social-interactional view, presents an argument that infants have specific social experiences, involving requests, participation and praising that contribute to the emergence and development of helping (Dahl, 2015). It emphasizes the dynamic nature of the social contexts of children that changes with age. It is consistent with the developmental perspective on emergence of early helping behaviour and focuses on everyday interactions and opportunities that children receive in their social context.

Emergence and development of instrumental helping:

The available literature on early prosocial behaviour acknowledges infants' emerging proclivity in early years of their lives. In second year of life, children develop a capacity to intervene on behalf of others. These prosocial interventions take varied action-oriented forms such as

helping, sharing and comforting the other person in distress (Zahn-Waxler *et al.*, 1992). The prosocial patterns become more pronounced as there is a transformation from self-concern to empathic concern for others (Hoffman, 1982). Reflecting on the human ontogeny Warneken and Tomasello (2009) argued that children as young as 14-months-old act on behalf of others, without expecting a benefit or reward, to achieve an unfinished goal.

Multiple research studies have used out-of-reach tasks with children (Warneken *et al.*, 2006, 2007, 2008; Svetlova *et al.*, 2010; Dunfield *et al.*, 2011, Torrens and Kartner, 2017) to establish roots of emergence and processes for execution of instrumental helping (Rheingold, 1982; Eisenberg *et al.*, 1999). In a typical instrumental helping situation, the child views the enacting adult (the actor) as being unable to reach the object (*i.e.* the goal) which is out of his/ her range. Thus, the child is expected to make an effort to complete the task on adults' behalf. Several arguments that are available regarding interpretation of out-of-reach instrumental helping tasks concludes that children find it easy to identify the adult's goal, with an outstretched arm, and respond in accordance with the adult's expectation. These findings indicate that the children have cognitive understanding to mitigate the visible trouble.

One could possibly argue that children might use prior experiences of similar situations to produce desired behaviours. Meltzoff (1995), in his study of understanding intentions of others among 18-month-old children, successfully demonstrated that the participant children were able to situate people with a psychological framework that included goals and actions. They performed the acts that adults intended to do irrespective of the surface behaviour that adults were engaged in. He asserted that children were able to differentiate between kinds of attributions that are attached to people and an inanimate object. This assumption provided the essential link between young children's understanding of surface behaviours and intended behaviours. In an imitation study, Bellagamba and Tomasello (1999) attempted to explore infants' ability to understand others' intentions as they exercise imitative learning. Building on to Meltzoff's study, they found out that unlike 18-month-olds, 12-month-olds were unable to imitate the intended act without fully witnessing it to precipitate down to a real outcome. The interpretations of their study were in support of the species-unique forms of cultural learning

and engagements perspective (Tomasello *et al.*, 1993) which promoted human beings' ability to read intentions and perceptions of others as significant processes for cultural learning.

Research studies have evidenced that prosocial behaviour is present in children from young age. However its various forms have differential rates of development and manifestation in behaviour. Along with developmental progression of all domain in terms of age the varied social experiences also shapes a child's behaviour. Young children are often seen taking keen interest and participating in household chores. The participation by children is often viewed from two different vantage points. Parents in cultures with more complex socio-economic structures find children's behaviour as interfering as it delays the achievement of their intentional goals such as completion of a task in kitchen, doing the laundry or finishing daily chores before leaving for work. On the other hand parents in some cultures and communities appreciate children's participation in everyday tasks, they see it as a crucible for transmitting skill and preparation for future roles.

Socio-cognitive inventory of children:

Babies are born with innate learning mechanisms that enable them to learn from experiences (Berk, 2001). They have natural abilities and propensities to generate or respond to a stimuli presented to them. They find human faces, voices and movements engaging enough to impel others to communicate to them and vice versa (Flavell, 2000). Flavell further suggests that with developmental advancement infants begin to learn that people relate to distinct objects with aboutness and intentionality. That is, a person is concerned with a desired object if he shows perceptually inclined actions such as following through gaze, trying to grasp, attending to it, throwing it or relating to it in any way. This suggests that children do have an ability to infer individual's intentional goal which has also been discussed above through Meltzoff's work.

Contemporary researchers are contesting that individual differences in children's helping may exist due to their sociability, temperamental differences and their understanding of a social situation. The basic components that trigger helping behaviour in children has been discussed by Warneken and Tomasello (2006). They noted that instrumental helping has both cognitive and motivational components. Where cognitively children

must know something about the goal to complete the action on behalf of other person, motivationally they should be self-encouraged by the sight of other person's distress or efforts in achieving the goal. A fundamental characteristic of human infants that shows helping and other forms of prosocial behaviours, is infants' interest in other people and the activities they are involved in (Rheingold, 1982). She found that children's participation in the work of adults is usually cheerful and willful. From her observations, she deciphered that children's contribution could be characterized as helping, especially when there is no particular request from adults. Children's social understanding and socio-cognitive capacities permits them to provoke reciprocity in others. Hammond (2014) and Svetlova *et al.* (2010) discussed the developmental trends seen in emergence of prosocial behaviour, that is transition from instrumental helping (handing over or returning an object) to empathic helping (when children acquire self-other differentiation and ability to assign mental states to others) to altruistic helping (which requires greater social understanding and involves a cost to giving away something which is yours) contouring the prerequisites for each type of helping behaviour. Likewise, Svetlova *et al.* (2010) postulated that early helping seem to arise when children have only 'rudimentary social-cognition' abilities. They argued that instances of early instrumental helping is motivated by children's self-interest in the actions, objects or simply in other people whereas empathy (concern) based helping is rooted in other-oriented concern as pointed by Hoffman (2007).

Barresi and Moore (1996) focused on the interplay of the cognitive mechanism involved in accumulation of information by an observer through reading the agent's movements and its associative relation to the goal object. More specifically they demonstrated that the *intentional schemas*, perceptual and conceptual structures, play an important role in achieving an object-directed target behaviour through coordination and integration of first person sources that is your own experience and third person sources of information reported by the agent such as physical movement, facial expressions, visual tracking of the object and so on. Therefore it can be inferred that in case of instrumental helping, children understand the intentions of the acting agents to finish an unaccomplished task by meaning of his/her actions without gauging the mental states of self and others. It is extremely important to understand this critical difference between the

mechanisms involved in instrumental helping and other forms of prosocial behaviour.

Conclusion:

The principal understanding that develops from the discussion here emphasizes the pivotal role of emerging cognitive capacities of children in the early helping behaviour. Infants' and toddlers' social understanding of a situation is construed by reading of the intentions, intentional actions and cues available in the environment. To dissociate interpreting cues and gestures as direct requests for wanting an object, Warneken and Tomasello (2007) argued that requests have verbal or perceptual attributes intertwined in them. Findings from their study of 14-month-old children on helping and cooperation clearly show that the children helped spontaneously, mostly without being addressed through any other means. Also their physical actions such as returning the object to the experimenter and experimenter's grasping gesture, rather than palm-up gesture which is a generalized action for demanding an object, indicate that children did not comprehend gestures as direct requests. Related studies assert that children as young as one year and few months were able to help even an unknown adult when the tasks presented were cognitively less challenging and had easily recognizable goal. By and large, prosocial orientation involves understanding of others intentions and one's ability to benefit another or alleviate distress or assist in completion of the task. Simple helping acts such as handing over an out-of-reach object or assisting others in completing a chore are recorded as instances of primary prosocial behaviours displayed by children. Similar to the achievement of other developmental milestones, in prosociality, there is a preceding stage before more complex behaviour is learnt and exhibited. Each successive genre of helping behaviour is expected to be laden with more complex skills, mental structure and socio-cognitive requisites. It is important to see children's prosocial responses as a function of their age.

There are inevitable differences in how a young child interprets and responds to a situation as compared to an older child or an adult. Although social learning could be one significant factor, the role of mental representations-schemas (a Piagetian tem) and intentional schemas (Barresi and Moore, 1996) cannot be underplayed. This theoretical paper brings forth the nuanced difference in underlying psychological mechanisms involved in execution of early helping and other precocious prosocial

behaviours. It will contribute in rendering subtle understanding of similarities and variations in diverse models of prosocial behaviour. This paper is an attempt to situate the crucial theoretical constructs, research studies and emerging models of prosocial behaviour in simplified approach.

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