

Spinrad, T. L. (2024). *Lessons from Rohingya Children: Future Directions in Prosocial Development Research*. [Peer commentary on the article "[Fostering Prosociality in Refugee Children: An Intervention with Rohingya Children](#)" by T. Callaghan, T. Colasante, S. Muhammad, et al.]. *Monograph Matters*. Retrieved from <https://monographmatters.srcd.org/2024/08/16/commentary-spinrad-89-1-2/>

Lessons from Rohingya Children: Future Directions in Prosocial Development Research

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In their *Monograph*, [Fostering Prosociality in Refugee Children: An Intervention with Rohingya Children](#), Callaghan and colleagues implemented a culturally sensitive intervention to improve prosocial behavior and social-cognitive outcomes in a sample of refugee children. In this commentary, I discuss key contributions of the monograph and suggest areas for future research. Specifically, I highlight how this work supports the multidimensional nature of prosocial development and argue that conceptual models of prosocial development should differentiate among various prosocial behaviors. Next, I offer suggestions to extend the work by considering specificity in intervention effects, as well as understanding processes and potential moderating factors. Finally, I suggest that a focus on characteristics of the recipients of children's aid is a growing area that has important implications for children growing up in intergroup conflict settings.

Key Contributions

This work contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, in contexts of traumatic stress, developmental scholars tend to focus on the concerning consequences of exposure, such as psychopathology, adverse health outcomes, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, rather than seeking to understand strength or resiliency factors. Thus, an obvious contribution of the current work is its focus on prosocial outcomes in a sample of vulnerable children. Next, the authors' commitment to creating a culturally sensitive approach that included vetting and input from a Rohingya field team is commendable. Frankly, the authors seemed to have pulled off a miraculous undertaking in conducting this work. Finally, creating and implementing an intervention that translates research into a viable intervention program in a sample of vulnerable youth is another important contribution to the field. The impact of this work is evident for the Rohingya children included in this study, as well as the potential for broader impact on policy and practice with regard to refugee children around the world.

The Multidimensional Nature of Prosocial Behavior

One aspect of this work that is particularly noteworthy is the attention to understanding the multifaceted nature of prosocial behavior (i.e., helping, sharing) in this sample of refugee children. The authors measured children's helping using the newly developed origami task and assessed sharing behaviors through classic dictator games and forced-choice distribution tasks. Indeed, findings indicated different correlates and intervention change effects for helping versus sharing tasks. Differential findings across prosocial tasks suggest that conceptual models identifying the factors that account for individual differences in prosocial behavior should vary somewhat across the different types of prosocial behavior (Paulus, 2018).

Helping. Helping refers to children's responses to another's need to accomplish some action or goal, such as (for this study) completing an origami task (Dunfield et al., 2011). It is important to note that this form of prosocial behavior could be motivated by goal-oriented motivations rather than other-oriented concerns and that costs for helping in the origami task were quite low. It is possible that this form of prosocial behavior emerges when children desire social interaction, have an interest in joint activities, and/or have a preference for completing the goal-based activity (see Eisenberg et al., 2016).

Given that the motivation for helping is unlikely to be based on other-oriented concern (and in this study, it was negatively related to children's self-reported concern for others), a conceptual model to understand helping behaviors may include the ways that children interpret the goals of the context and their recognition of their ability to help. Experience of early trauma could be an important predictor of these social-cognitive factors. However, the child's individual characteristics, such as their regulatory skills, may play a relatively minor role in children's helping behaviors (Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2023).

Sharing. Sharing is described as giving resources or possessions to others. This form of prosocial behavior may be motivated by the desire for fairness (as evidenced by a tendency toward equal distributions) and less by other-oriented concerns. Indeed, young children have a tendency to divide resources equally in this task and to avoid inequity (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Flook et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2016).

Because sharing in distribution tasks involves distributing resources when other people are not visible, this form of prosocial behavior is unlikely to be motivated by other-oriented emotion. Rather, performance on this task may be particularly dependent on children's goals of fairness and equality and on situational variables (i.e., recipient's need), as well as the costs of sharing. In this study, birthplace differences suggesting greater exposure to trauma (born in Myanmar during genocidal violence versus born in the refugee camp) may indicate nuances in children's desire for equal distributions as opposed to indicating generosity, per se. Future research that considers children's reasoning for their choices would be informative for understanding the motivations behind children's sharing behaviors.

Comforting. Children's responses to others' distress can take many forms, and demonstrating concern or prosocial behavior/comforting in response to another's distress requires that children understand the mental state and emotions of another (emotional perspective taking) and is likely the most other-oriented form of helping (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2000).

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Given the culturally sensitive nature of the study, the authors rightly did not measure such responses given the harm that could be caused to children who have faced war-related and forced-migration trauma.

Nonetheless, a conceptual model of comforting forms of prosocial behavior would include the cognitive-affective processes that involve interpreting the context to determine whether another is distressed and whether the children have the ability to help. Further, children's other-oriented emotional reactions (sympathy) and perhaps the perceived causes of the distress may be relevant factors in children's willingness to comfort a distressed person.

The various forms of prosocial actions and examples provided illustrate how different prosocial actions may benefit from different conceptual models to understand their performance. Furthermore, in terms of intervention practices, it is possible that various aspects of interventions (i.e., cooperation, perspective taking) are more or less likely to be related to each of the different forms of prosocial behavior (discussed below). Further, the predictors of each type of prosocial outcome could change with development, as was found in the current study.

Intervention Specificity

Intervention programs often target improvements in very broad areas (e.g., parenting practices, social and emotional learning). Thus, there is a need to test intervention programs that are specifically designed to improve children's prosocial outcomes and skills that are thought to promote different forms of prosocial behavior. In the current study, the researchers targeted three skills (i.e., cooperation, EF, and perspective taking) hypothesized to improve children's prosocial outcomes (see Eisenberg et al., 2015). If, as discussed above, there are different correlates and developmental trajectories for each type of prosocial behavior, researchers should examine how different components of intervention programs (e.g., helping to understand another person's emotions or needs) might impact some forms of prosocial behaviors but not others.

Although Callaghan and colleagues have provided us with valuable information regarding improvements in prosocial outcomes in refugee children, there is much to learn about the *processes* involved. That is, it is one thing to know that the intervention was associated with (some) children's improved prosocial functioning; it is another to know **why** this is so. In addition, researchers should attempt to learn about the potential moderators (e.g., initial levels of the behavior, temperamental differences) of the effectiveness of interventions (beyond birthplace and age) on children's prosocial behavior. Potential moderators might include the cumulative number of risks experienced by refugee children, cultural and economic factors, children's temperament, or parenting practices (e.g., warmth, prosocial values). Finally, using a controlled experimental design is a goal for understanding causal relations among the variables of interest.

Recipients of Prosocial Outcomes.

In the monograph, children's prosocial behavior towards peers (sometimes the partner, sometimes anonymous) was examined. Recently, my colleagues and I have argued that the

development of prosocial behavior, equity, and fairness may depend on characteristics of the recipient (Spinrad et al., 2023). In contexts where groups are marginalized, it stands to reason that understanding children's prosocial behavior towards similar peers compared to prosocial behavior toward other groups may provide important data that can set the stage for children's later humanitarian conduct.

Within the U.S., my colleagues and I focused on race-based intergroup prosocial outcomes. A group of White (kindergarten through second grade) children viewed films with either White or Black protagonists being mistreated, and children's emotional responses (i.e., sympathy, empathic anger) to the films were assessed using multiple methods. Children were also given an opportunity to share their resources with either White or Black children (who were not the same as those in the films). Our findings indicated that younger children showed fewer facial expressions of concern toward Black than White targets and greater increases with age in concern and sharing toward Black, compared with White, targets of mistreatment. Children's facial expressions of anger increased with age for White but not for Black targets in the films. These results suggest that as children develop more sophisticated prosocial reasoning skills, sympathy and prosocial behavior toward racial or ethnic groups other than one's own may increase, although a different pattern was observed for observed anger. It is possible that as children have more experience with anti-bullying campaigns in school, they find these situations toward ingroup members as particularly egregious, but more research on children's moral outrage is needed (Spinrad et al., 2023).

We also have studied individual differences in White children's prosocial outcomes toward ingroup (White peers) and outgroup (Black peers). Our findings have indicated that a number of contextual factors, such as parents' racial attitudes (Wang et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2022) and children's characteristics (Xu et al., 2024, Xu et al., 2023) predicted children's outgroup prosocial behavior. In one recent investigation, White children's own regulatory skills predicted prosocial behavior toward White peers; however, when predicting prosocial behavior toward Black peers, children's regulation interacted with parents' racial attitudes. Children's higher regulation skills positively predicted their willingness to share with Black peers only when their parents exhibited less implicit racial bias (Xu et al., 2023). Thus, the predictors of children's outgroup sharing may depend on a number of different factors, particularly the messages they are receiving about the outgroup.

The Developmental Peacemaking Model (DPM) is particularly relevant for understanding how children's prosocial behavior has implications for humanitarian conduct in intergroup conflict settings (Taylor, 2020). In this model, children's behavior toward outgroups can function on several levels, from prosocial action toward individual outgroup members, prosocial action toward the outgroup as a whole, and prosocial behavior that targets the broader collective good. In this way, children's volunteering, donating, sharing, and helping, particularly in settings of intergroup conflict, contribute to building social cohesion and peace.

Conclusions

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Fostering Prosociality in Refugee Children: An Intervention with Rohingya Children sets the stage for promoting positive social behaviors in a sample of refugee children whose families have experienced war-related trauma, genocidal violence, and forced migration. Despite these horrors, these children are remarkably cooperative and giving. This work provides a roadmap for pursuing culturally sensitive and impactful work that fosters kindness and ultimately improves the lives of vulnerable children and their families.

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