Enduring Goodness: A Person by Situation Perspective on Prosocial Behavior

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**Introduction**

Most lay people believe that there are some individuals who consistently care about others and provide aid to them with little or no prompting. Further, they believe that these individuals’ willingness to help is not motivated by selfish or self-centered desires to gain an interpersonal advantage over recipients of the help or as a way of making a favorable impression on others. Rather, these individuals’ prosocial actions are believed to be due to a stable disposition that one might call “enduring goodness.”

This belief in personal dispositions as causes of prosocial actions has not always been shared by the psychologists who study prosocial behavior. Instead, many argue that prosocial actions are determined largely by characteristics of the situation that confront potential helpers. That is, dispositions, if they even exist, are thought to play a relatively unimportant role in many prosocial actions. In this chapter we consider both the lay person’s and the social psychologists’ perspectives and the relative validity of each. Our own position is closer to that of the lay person; we believe that dispositions play an important role in prosocial behavior. However, as the chapter title suggests, we also believe that a full understanding of the causes of prosocial actions requires considering how person and situational variables interact affecting this class of behaviors.

To justify our interest in dispositions we must find affirmative answers to four key questions. First, is there evidence of intra-individual consistency in prosocial actions across situations and across time? Second, is there evidence of reliable inter-individual variability in prosocial responses among people who confront the same situation? Third, to what extent are both temporal/situational consistency and inter-individual variability in prosocial action due to enduring personal dispositions? And fourth, can we identify these dispositions?
We begin the chapter by presenting our conceptualization of personal dispositions, and after this we present a brief history of theory and research on dispositional variables as causes of prosocial actions. Then, we discuss some of the personal attributes we believe are at the core of a prosocial personality orientation. In the next two sections we examine how personal dispositions are associated with different kinds of helping. More precisely, we first consider dispositions and *macro-level* prosocial actions—those that occur among strangers in the context of large formal and informal organizations (Penner, Dovidio, Schroeder, & Piliavin, 2005); second, we consider dispositions and *meso-level* prosocial actions—helping that occurs in interpersonal dyads and other similar contexts. We close with a summary of the chapter and suggestions for future research directions.

*Research on Dispositions and Prosocial Actions*

*Our Conceptual Approach to Dispositions*

For the most part, the dispositions of interest in this chapter are facets of personality. Our conceptualization of such dispositions reflects the two authors’ different theoretical orientations to personality. Following Orom’s more social/cognitive perspective (e.g., Orom & Cervone, under review), we believe that a useful definition of dispositions should encompass psychological structures and processes that have the potential to cause behavior. Also, we do not presume that dispositions influence behavior regardless of context, but rather that dispositions are heuristics for grouping biopsychological structures and processes that unfold in subsets of individuals in similar ways, in similar contexts. In addition, consistent with Penner’s (2002) approach to the prosocial personality orientation, we believe that a trait perspective on personality, although largely descriptive rather than explanatory, can substantially inform our understanding of how individuals function in the world and can lead the way to increased
understanding of the structures and processes in the individual that are the proximal causes of behavior.¹

Dispositions and Prosocial Behavior: A Brief Research History

The early years. This brief history begins with Hartshorne and May’s (1928) report on an investigation of whether there was consistency in children’s “character.” Hartshorne and May identified several situations in which the children might act honestly or dishonestly (e.g., lie or cheat) and assessed consistency across situations with respect to this aspect of the children’s character. For example, did the same children behave honestly (or dishonestly) in both the classroom and on the playground? The correlations among behaviors related to honesty across situations were quite low. In subsequent studies, Hartshorne and May reported similar low correlations for cross-situational behaviors related to helpfulness and self-control.² These null findings did not result in the immediate demise of dispositional approaches in psychology. Indeed, the 1930s and 1940s were in many ways the heyday of trait theories, the most popular dispositional approach (e.g., Allport, 1937). However, by the 1960s, the dispositional approach was in serious trouble. The major source of this trouble was the discourse that followed the publication of Walter Mischel’s (1968) monograph, Personality and Assessment. In his book, Mischel reported on a large body of evidence that showed: (1) low correlations (.30 or less) for behavioral consistency across situations, when either the same kinds of behaviors (e.g., being honest) or conceptually-related behaviors (e.g., being helpful and honest) were examined; and (2) weak correlations (again, .30 or less) between self-reports of traits and observed behaviors that should be related to those dispositions. Mischel concluded from these findings that the “concept of personality traits as broad dispositions is thus untenable” (p. 140). Orom and Cervone (under review) have argued that Mischel’s real goal in this critique was to point out the
weaknesses of personality research that focused solely on inferring broad dispositions from behavioral signs and that personality researchers should instead seek to understand the “cognitive social learning” that shapes social behaviors. However, many researchers interpreted him as arguing that features of the situation were much stronger predictors of behavior than personality variables (i.e. the so-called “situationist” position). This position had widespread appeal to social and even some personality psychologists.

Research on prosocial behavior was especially influenced by the situationist zeitgeist. One reason was Bibb Latané and John Darley’s (1970) seminal work on bystander interventions in emergencies. Latané and Darley’s model of the causes of bystander interventions clearly reflects a situationist approach to why bystanders do or do not help. However, they did examine the possibility that there were individual differences in bystanders’ responses to emergencies. But like most other researchers at the time, they found no evidence that personality traits were systematically associated with prosocial behavior. Indeed, this research rarely produced correlations that even reached the modest .30 level Mischel had called the “personality coefficient.” (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006).

Other researchers also challenged the dispositional approach to social behavior. For example, Nisbett (1980) believed that the “trait approach to the determination of social behavior … is largely wrong” (p. 110), and that lay people’s beliefs in the importance of traits as causes of social behavior were also largely wrong. In a review that focused specifically on personality and prosocial behaviors, Gergen, Gergen, and Meter (1972) identified studies that had found dispositional correlates of prosocial actions and examined the strength and replicability of these findings. Gergen et al.’s succinct and depressing conclusion was that the findings were a “quagmire of evanescent relationships among variables, conflicting findings and (very weak)
correlations” (p. 110). A similar position was taken by Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Clark (1981) in their monograph on emergency interventions. Specifically, these authors concluded that, "(t)he search for the ‘generalized helping personality’ has been futile" (p. 184).

The comeback. Despite the fact that dispositional approaches to social behavior were basically on life support in the 1970s and 1980s, they survived and rebounded. There are many reasons for the comeback of dispositional variables as explanations of prosocial behaviors, some of which we will discuss here.

First, the simplistic version of the situationist position (i.e., situations, not dispositions cause behavior; dispositions are largely irrelevant) was challenged on empirical, conceptual, and methodological grounds. Some of the more successful challenges were: Bem and Allen’s (1974) reconceptualization of when and why individual dispositions do and do not affect social behavior, which produced disposition-behavior correlation coefficients much greater than .30; Funder’s (1987) conceptual arguments, which pointed out the logical fallacies of studies that purported to show that personality dispositions were largely illusory and did not predict social behavior; and Epstein’s (1983) methodological criticisms of Mischel’s approach to the prediction of social behavior. Epstein argued that Mischel had failed to consider measurement error as a primary cause of low estimates of transitiuational consistency and the poor predictive validity of self-report personality measures. Epstein pointed out that there is a considerable amount of measurement error when one uses a specific behavior measured at a single point in time as an indicator of a class or kind of behaviors. If we conduct multiple measurements, the social behavior of interest will be measured much more reliably. As a result, we should find both substantial transitiuational consistency and good predictive validity for self-report personality measures. Epstein’s data showed exactly these effects. Although Epstein’s findings were
challenged by Mischel and Peake (1982), his work did much to reinvigorate dispositional approaches to social behavior.

Interactionism. Perhaps the most cogent criticism of the original position of the situationists, however, is that they set up a false dichotomy by pitting “person variables” against “situational” variables. Critics of this position (e.g., Funder, in press) return to Lewin’s classic formulation $B = f(P, E)$—behavior is a function of both the person and the situation, and use it to argue that one needs both classes of variables to predict social behavior. It is a mistake to argue that one class of variables is invariably a stronger or more influential cause of social behavior than the other. Social behavior is the product of reciprocal interactions between the characteristics of the person and the characteristics of the situation; and researchers will understand much more about the causes of social behaviors by considering both classes of variables rather than only one of them (Funder, in press; Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007; Mischel, 2004).

As the proceeding discussion suggests, to a large extent, the original situationist and dispositional perspectives have merged and there is more or less consensus that both classes of variables are necessary for an intelligent understanding of social behavior. Yet among prosocial researchers there is still some skepticism about the value of studying dispositions and how they relate to prosocial thoughts, feelings, and actions. In the remainder of this chapter we try to persuade the skeptics to reconsider their position.

Prosocial Dispositions: A Prosocial Personality Orientation

In this section we review research that attempts to identify the core elements of a prosocial personality orientation, which we define as “an enduring tendency to think about the welfare and rights of other people, to feel concern, and empathy, and to act in a way that benefits
them” (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998, p. 526). Specifically, we examine conceptual and empirical convergence among different attempts to define and measure a prosocial personality orientation. This section is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the literature on dispositions associated with prosocial behavior. Rather, it is intended to demonstrate that there is some substantial degree of agreement with regard to the core elements of a prosocial personality orientation.

We should note that we are deliberately using the word prosocial rather than altruistic. If we claim that a measure is tapping altruistic personality tendencies, then we are restricting ourselves to one specific aspect of prosocial actions, which, while important and interesting, is probably not all that common. Further, if we claim that our measure is assessing altruistic dispositions, then we need to demonstrate persuasively that the prosocial actions associated with it are truly selfless and other-oriented. As most readers know, this has not been an easy task (see, e.g., Batson, 1997, versus Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997). Thus, we have opted to avoid claiming that either the dispositions or behaviors we study are due to altruism; to us they are simply prosocial.

We begin our discussion with the work of Penner and colleagues on the nature of what they called a “prosocial personality orientation” (Penner, Fritzsche, Craiger, & Freifeld, 1995). They initially approached the question of what attributes make up a prosocial personality from an empirical perspective. Penner et al. did not believe there was one specific disposition or trait that would be associated with all prosocial behaviors. Rather, they suggested that there was a cluster of interrelated dispositions that collectively are related to prosocial thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. To identify these attributes, they did an exhaustive search of the literature and identified personality traits and related constructs that consistently correlated with prosocial behavior. These dispositions then had to meet two additional criteria: (1) there was a coherent
theoretical explanation of why this attribute was associated with prosocial behavior; and (2) there were theory-based associations between this attribute and the others that had been identified. That is, Penner et al. sought to identify dispositions that could be reduced to a smaller number of theoretically meaningful underlying factors.

Initially, Penner et al. identified ten dispositions, and combined measures of these dispositions in one (very long) questionnaire. After considerable preliminary work that addressed both the reliability and validity of each measure and of the items it contained, a 56-item scale was derived that measured six dispositions: social responsibility, affective empathy, cognitive empathy, other-oriented moral reasoning, past helpfulness, and egocentric personal distress in response to other people’s distress. Factor analyses of the total scores on the measures led Penner et al. to a two-factor solution that has been replicated with a wide variety of different samples in the United States and Europe (Penner, 2002). The first factor was called “Other-Oriented Empathy;” it appears to represent prosocial feelings and thoughts. Measures of social responsibility, empathic concern, perspective taking (i.e., affective and cognitive empathy) and other-oriented moral reasoning had their primary loadings on this factor. People who score high on this factor are empathic and feel responsibility and concern for the welfare of others. The second factor is called “Helpfulness” and represents a tendency to engage in prosocial actions. Measures of past helping and of personal distress (from Davis’ 1980 empathy scale) loaded on this factor. High scorers on this factor report a history of being helpful and also report that they experience little egocentric distress in response to distress in others. The two factors typically correlate .40 or less.

Converging evidence indicates that the first factor represents the predisposition to have other-oriented thoughts and feelings and the second factor represents the tendency to act
prosocially. For example, Penner et al. (1995) reported that, whereas scores on the Other-Oriented Empathy factor correlated significantly with social desirability, scores on the Helpfulness factor did not. Our own and others’ research (e.g., Graziano & Eisenberg, 1991; Graziano & Tobin, 2002) suggests that this correlation does not represent a response bias that invalidates responses to items that load on the Other-Oriented Empathy factor. Rather we believe that scores on the social desirability measure represent the need for social acceptance, which is more closely associated with prosocial thoughts/feelings than with prosocial behavioral tendencies.

Other research has identified unique correlates of each of the factors. The Other-Oriented Empathy factor correlates about .50 with the other-oriented agreeableness dimension of the Big Five, even when one controls for social desirability (Penner et al., 1995; Graziano et al., 2007). Other-Oriented empathy also correlates strongly with a nurturant /communal interpersonal style (nurturance; Wiggins, 1991), the tendency to be other-oriented and to want to please and be accepted by others. By contrast, the Helpfulness factor correlates weakly or not at all with agreeableness and nurturance. However, there are moderate to strong positive correlations between Helpfulness and Wiggins’ (1991) dimensions of Agency (or Dominance) and Assertiveness. Helpfulness also consistently correlates positively with the predisposition to have a sense of self-efficacy or personal control (Penner et al., 1995).

A fair amount of theory and research on prosocial dispositions converges with Penner et al.’s empirically derived conceptualization of the prosocial personality orientation. Peterson and Seligman (2004), for example, argue that the three variables most commonly associated with “altruism” are empathy, moral judgment, and social responsibility. The dispositions that Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg, Chapter 7, this volume; Eisenberg, Guthrie, Cumberland,
Murphy, Shepard, Zhou, & Carlo, 2002) found to be associated with prosocial thoughts and actions were quite similar to those identified by Penner et al. (1995) (e.g., empathy, social responsibility). Furthermore, the pattern of intercorrelations among measures of these dispositions was largely the same as reported by Penner and colleagues. Eisenberg et al. also found substantial consistency in self-reports and friends’ reports of these dispositions over a 5-year period, indicating that prosocial orientations are temporally stable. This is consistent with Graziano and Eisenberg’s (1997) review of the literature on the temporal stability of prosocial actions, in which they presented persuasive evidence for the consistency of prosocial responding across time and situations. They argued that such consistency is most reasonably attributed to “personality and/or sociocognitive functioning” (p. 810).

Other descriptions of the core elements of the prosocial personality are derived from comparisons of people who differed from one another in their willingness to help in real-world settings. For example, Bierhoff, Klein, and Kramp (1991) studied people who administered first aid to traffic accident victims and found that among the traits that differentiated them from non-helpers were empathy, social responsibility, and locus of control. Heroic rescuers, specifically the “righteous gentiles” who rescued Jews from the holocaust, also had dispositional profiles similar to Penner’s prosocial personality orientation. The most recent research on the rescuers was conducted by Midlarsky and her colleagues (Fagin-Jones & Midlarsky, 2007; Midlarsky & Jones, 2005). Unlike earlier work on rescuers by Oliner and Oliner (1988), these rescuers had never been formally recognized for their behavior, but rather were identified by one of the people they had saved. Similar to the Oliners, Midlarsky et al. compared the rescuers to a group of demographically similar individuals who did not engage in any rescues. The personality characteristics that best discriminated between rescuers and non rescuers were social
responsibility, other-oriented moral reasoning, empathy, locus of control, autonomy, and risk-taking (not surprisingly, given the dangers associated with the heroic rescues). Samuel Oliner’s descriptions of personal attributes that distinguish holocaust rescuers from non-rescuers also identify several of the same characteristics we have been discussing:

(The rescuers) were definitely more empathic (than the nonrescuers) ... (they) ... had a strong sense of personal and social responsibility – a norm-based belief about how they should act (Quoted in Hunt, 1990; p. 203)

As children, (the rescuers) were likely to have been disciplined by reasoning and taught to consider the consequences of their misbehavior (Oliner, 1992, retrieved from http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp March 1, 2008) (and)

(They) felt they could control events and shape their destinies ... (and had a) stronger sense of personal efficacy ... (Oliner & Oliner, 1988 p. 177)³

There is substantial convergence among these independent investigations with regard to descriptions of prosocial individuals. Such people are predisposed to experience high levels of empathy in response to other’s distress, feel responsibility for the welfare of others, and engage in other-oriented moral reasoning. These thoughts and feelings are associated with prosocial behavioral tendencies. They are probably most likely to result in actual prosocial behavior among individuals who are also socially dominant and have a sense of self-efficacy or personal control. (For a different but quite complementary perspective on prosocial dispositions, see Graziano and Eisenberg [1997] and Graziano et al.’s [2007] discussions of the association between the big-five dimension of agreeableness and prosocial thoughts, feelings, and actions.)

As we conclude this section, we acknowledge the absence of a discussion of situational influences on prosocial actions. This does not mean we believe situational influences on
prosocial behavior are trivial; to the contrary, they are quite important. For example, both the Oliners and Midlarsky et al. identified situational factors associated with being a rescuer. Most of these are not terribly surprising. For example, rescuers were substantially more likely to have been asked to help than nonrescuers. Rescuers also had interacted with Jews more, and had more Jewish friends and co-workers than the nonrescuers. Finally, probably because the rescues often involved hiding people, rescuers’ dwellings typically had more rooms than those of nonrescuers. We will discuss additional evidence for the importance of situational variables and how they interact with dispositions in the section on meso-level prosocial behaviors.

**Dispositions and Macro-Level Prosocial Actions**

In this section we examine the relation between dispositional variables and *macro-level* helping; that is, helping that occurs within the context of groups and large organizations. We have chosen to begin with this level of helping, quite honestly, because it holds the greatest promise for positive findings for the dispositional approach to prosocial behavior. To explain why, we consider a very common kind of macro-level prosocial behavior, volunteering.

*Volunteering*

Penner (2002) defined volunteering as “long-term, planned, prosocial behaviors that benefit strangers within an organizational context” (p. 448). We believe that three aspects of volunteering increase the potential for personal attributes to influence this prosocial behavior. The first is that volunteering usually involves long-term behaviors with multiple components, and thus produces a reliable indicator of the class of behaviors of interest. As discussed earlier, reliability in outcome measures will increase the size of disposition-behavior associations. Second, the decision to volunteer is usually the result of thoughtful decision-making. The more complex and elaborate the cognitive processes before an action, the more likely it should be that
enduring social/cognitive processes and mechanisms (i.e., dispositions) will influence the person’s decision. For example, there should be greater inter-individual variability in volunteering decisions than in decisions in bystander emergency intervention situations, where there is typically an immediate and pressing demand to make a decision about helping and strong, widely shared social norms regarding helping in these situations. And third, volunteers rarely know personally, have a preexisting relationship with, or interact with the recipients of their aid. Volunteering is what Omoto and Snyder (1995) call “nonobligated helping.” Because of this, volunteers are less likely than interpersonal helpers to experience influences such as their relationship with the recipient, the recipient’s reactions to the situation, or the recipients’ personal characteristics (Dovidio et al., 2006).

Of course, situational factors are associated with differences in volunteers’ behavior. For example, many volunteers report that they first decided to volunteer because someone asked them to (Independent Sector, 2000); and the reputation and goals of the organization and the volunteer’s relationship with the organization influence both how much time volunteers give and their tenure as a volunteer (Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2001; Grube & Piliavin, 2000). Thus, like any other prosocial behavior, volunteering is the product of person-situation interactions. However, the situational forces that influence macro-level helping probably allow for much more inter-individual variability than is the case in short-term meso-level helping.

In 1998, Penner and Finkelstein, studied the dispositional correlates of sustained volunteering among AIDS/HIV volunteers. Specifically, they assessed prosocial personality orientation, feelings about the organization, organizational commitment, and motives for volunteering. They then used these measures to predict how much time volunteers spent working for the AIDS/HIV organization and the amount of contact volunteers had with an AIDS/HIV
patient. These outcomes were obtained 5 and 10 months after the predictor variables were initially measured. Organizational commitment and prosocial motivations for helping predicted time spent volunteering at five and ten months. However, in the context of this chapter the most important findings concern a prosocial personality orientation. Among the male volunteers, Other-Oriented Empathy predicted time spent volunteering and time spent with an AIDS/HIV patient five months after the initial assessment; it also predicted time spent with a patient at 10 months.

In 1999 Penner conducted a study in which readers of *USA Today’s* weekend supplement went online and anonymously completed his measure of prosocial personality orientation, provided demographic information, and indicated whether they had volunteered in the last year. If they had, volunteers answered questions about their length of tenure as a volunteer, the number of charities for which they volunteered, and the amount of time they spent in this activity (Penner, 2002). More than 1,100 people completed the online survey. Both the Other-Oriented Empathy and Helpfulness factors (see above) distinguished between people who had and had not volunteered in the last year. The two factors were also significantly associated with all three indices of volunteer activity—length of service, number of charities, and amount of time spent as a volunteer. Finally, Penner conducted hierarchical regression analyses in which the three outcome measures were regressed onto the respondents’ demographic characteristics, followed by the two factors of the prosocial personality measure. In all three equations, Other-Oriented Empathy and/or Helpfulness added significantly to the explanation of variability in volunteering, even when demographic characteristics were controlled.

Similar results have been obtained in a number of other studies of volunteering that used either Penner et al.’s measure or conceptually similar measures. (e.g., Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de
Finally, a longitudinal study of volunteerism by Atkins, Hart, and Donnelly (2005) speaks to the long-term impact of prosocial dispositions on volunteering. Parents in a national probability sample in the United States responded to a series of questions about their 6-year-old children. The responses were used to classify children as “resilient,” “overcontrolled,” and “undercontrolled.” (The authors explicitly noted that their construct of resilience was conceptually related to Penner et al.’s [1995] prosocial personality orientation.) Eight and ten years later, the now-adolescents reported whether they had volunteered in the previous two years. Atkins et al. found that at both time periods those who had been characterized as resilient as children were more likely to be volunteers than those who had been characterized as over or undercontrolled. Significantly, this effect was not mediated by membership in social organizations that provide opportunities for adolescent volunteering.

In summary, although some researchers argue that dispositions play no role in volunteering (e.g., Wilson, 2000), there is rather strong and consistent evidence that differences in volunteering covary with differences in dispositions. These dispositions appear to be part of a prosocial personality orientation.

Dispositions and Meso-Level Prosocial Actions

We now turn to the role of dispositional variables in meso-level prosocial actions. Situational cues and related variables, such as social norms, are usually salient and potent in the helper-recipient dyads where meso-level kinds of prosocial behavior occur (Dovidio et al., 2006). Thus, although dispositional variables are clearly important in meso-level helping, we
would not expect to find many studies in which there are main effects for dispositional variables that are not somehow moderated by situational variables.

A study by Graziano et al. (2007) provides an interesting and important illustration of such an interaction in meso-level helping. Graziano et al. used two well-known paradigms from the prosocial research literature, but added agreeableness as an independent variable. The first paradigm was taken from Burnstein, Crandall, and Kitayama’s (1994) study on the effect of kinship on helping. Participants imagined situations in which they had the chance to help a friend, a relative, or a stranger by either: (a) doing them a small favor or (b) saving their life from an imminent danger; and estimated how likely it would be that they would help. Similar to Burnstein et al., Graziano et al. found that participants were most likely to say they would help when the recipient was a relative and was in imminent danger. However, there was also a significant three-way interaction among agreeableness, helper’s relationship with the recipient, and kind of helping. When this interaction was decomposed, there were person by situation interactions of the type we would expect. For example, high and low agreeable participants did not differ in how much they would help siblings (or friends) when their lives were in danger, but when the helping involved doing a favor, high agreeable people helped relatives/friends more than low agreeable people. In their second study, Graziano et al. replicated parts of Coke, Batson, and McDavis’s (1978) bystander intervention paradigm, in which empathic responding was manipulated and amount of help offered was measured. Graziano found a significant interaction between the empathy induction and agreeableness. In the high empathy induction condition, high and low agreeable participants offered equal amounts of help, but in the low empathy condition, high agreeable participants offered significantly more help than did low
agreeable participants. Similar kinds of person by situation interactions have been found using other Batson paradigms (e.g., Bierhoff & Rohman, 2004; Otten, Penner, & Altabe, 1991).

*Parents and distress in their children.* In this section we consider another way in which dispositional variables might affect meso-level helping. We present data on how parents’ dispositions might affect their empathic responses when their children are facing a potent stressor: invasive treatments for pediatric cancer. Pediatric patients and their parents often report that the pain and distress from such treatments are worse than the disease itself (Hedstrom, Haglund, Skolin, & von Essen, 2003). In our field study, we first measured parent and child traits; then on a treatment day (usually three to four weeks later) we assessed parents’ negatively valenced (state anxiety and personal distress) and positively-valenced (empathic concern) empathic responses just before their children received treatment, and we then video recorded parents and children in the treatment room. Parents, children, and nurses rated the children’s pain and/or distress while they were still in the treatment room; independent coders later used the video recordings to rate children’s distress. The manner in which parents communicated with their children during treatment was also coded.

Parents’ empathic responses just prior to their child’s treatments were related to their child’s pain and distress (Penner, Cline, & Albrecht, 2007). There was a significant positive association between parents’ state anxiety before the procedures and parents’ rating of their children’s pain/distress during treatment; that is, the higher parents’ state anxiety, the greater the children’s pain/distress. However, there were significant negative correlations between parental empathic concern and: nurses’ ratings of child’s pain, nurses’ ratings of child’s distress, and independent coders’ ratings of child’s distress; there was also a trend in this direction for
children’s own pain rating (p < .08). That is, the higher the parents’ empathic concern, the less the children’s pain/distress.

Empathic concern was also associated with parents’ communication patterns during treatment. Cline et al. (2006) developed a typology of parent communication patterns that can be used to classify parents on the basis of how they interact with their children during treatment sessions. One of these patterns was called “invalidation.” It is characterized by communication that “denies, invalidates, and/or challenges the validity (merit, worth, or accuracy) of the child’s experience” (Cline et al., p. 890). These parents may show anger and frustration and/or engage in name-calling, ridicule, or criticism of their children. Cline et al. found that children of invalidating parents experienced significantly more pain and/or distress than did children of the parents with other types of communication patterns. Penner et al. (2007) found that invalidating parents also had significantly lower levels of pretreatment empathic concern than did parents with other communication patterns.

Thus, parents’ pretreatment empathic responses seem to make a difference in how they and their children respond to the treatments. We now discuss dispositional variables associated with parents’ empathic responses. The theoretical model that drove this research did not lead us to measure traits associated with a prosocial personality orientation. Rather, the dispositional measures in the study included personality traits that should be related to how the parents coped with the stresses of the pediatric cancer experience. Thus, we measured parent traits we thought would be negatively associated with adequate coping: trait anxiety, depression, and enduring emotions; and traits we believed would be positively associated with coping: enduring positive emotions, resilience, and satisfaction with social support.
Personality traits associated with enduring negative affect (trait anxiety, depression, and enduring negative emotions) were all significantly and positively associated with parents’ state anxiety and personal distress before the procedures began. These associations were as strong as, or stronger, than the associations with two situational variables—children’s age and the type of procedure the children were going to receive (either a port start, which involves inserting a needle into a port in the child’s chest, or a lumbar puncture).

Figure 1 presents the results of the analyses for the correlates of parents’ empathic concern. Neither child’s age nor type of procedure was significantly related to parents’ empathic concern, but there were significant positive associations between empathic concern and parents’ enduring positive emotions and perceived level of social support. The correlation with parents’ resilience, while also positive, was not significant. Thus, in this highly stressful situation, where one might expect relative homogeneity in empathic responses across the parents, we found variability in parents’ pretreatment empathic responses that could be accounted for by parents’ dispositions.

Finally, we want to mention briefly that there were also significant associations between parents’ empathic responses and their ratings of some of their children’s attributes. We found, for example, that the higher the parents’ ratings of the children’s resilience, the higher the parents’ pretreatment empathic concern (Penner et al., 2006); and the higher the parents’ ratings of their children’s problems with anxiety/depression and aggression, the greater the parents’ pretreatment anxiety and personal distress. We recognize the method bias inherent in these data (parents filled out both measures) and the difficulty in arguing for a simple causal path from the children’s dispositions to the parents’ empathic responses, so these findings must remain tentative at this time. However, they suggest another, quite different, way in which dispositions may affect
helpers’ empathic responses in meso-level helping among intimates. Specifically, if helpers
believe they have accurate knowledge of a recipient’s dispositions, this knowledge may
influence helpers’ estimates of how a recipient will be affected by the problem at hand. These
estimates, in turn, may influence helpers’ thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to the need
for help.

Conclusion

Our major conclusions about dispositions and prosocial actions can be summarized in
answers to the four questions presented at the beginning of this chapter. First, there is substantial
temporal stability and transituational consistency in prosocial thoughts, feelings, and actions.
Second, there is reliable inter-individual variability in prosocial responses among people who
encounter the same situation. Third, enduring dispositions play important roles in both intra-
individual consistency and inter-individual variability in prosocial responses. And fourth, we can
identify the core elements of a prosocial personality orientation. Predispositions to respond
empathically to others’ distress, feel a sense of responsibility for others’ welfare, and engage in
other-oriented moral reasoning are associated with prosocial thoughts and feelings. Furthermore,
these thoughts and feelings are most likely to result in prosocial behaviors when accompanied by
a sense of personal control and of self-efficacy.

However, significant questions about dispositions and prosocial behavior remain. One of
the most important of these questions concerns the origins of enduring individual differences in
prosocial dispositions. Answers to this question will come from understanding the complex
reciprocal relationship between how genes express themselves and the influence of variability in
environments. Another important question is how and under what circumstances the proximal
affective and cognitive causes of prosocial behavior are activated. This will require us to move
beyond descriptions of the associations between dispositions and behavior and focus on identifying and understanding the feelings and cognitions that immediately precede prosocial responses. This should be done without arguing about people versus situations as causes of behavior, because we cannot intelligently talk about one class of variables without considering its relation to the other. Ultimately it will be answers to these kinds of questions that clarify the true causes of enduring goodness.
Footnotes

1 Because “dispositions” such as attachment style and values are discussed elsewhere in this volume, we will not discuss how they are related to prosocial actions. Also, because of disagreements as to whether motives are dispositions as we have defined them, we will not discuss their role in prosocial actions. (However, readers interested in motives should see Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Penner, Midili, & Kegelmeyer, 1997; Rioux & Penner, 2002).

2 Rushton (1981) disputes this conclusion, but he is one of the few researchers who takes this position on Hartshorne and Mays’s findings.

3 In a similar vein, Colby and Damon (1992) conclude that the life-long altruists they studied all had a sense of “personal effectiveness” and efficacy.

4 Because child’s age was significantly correlated with pain/distress; these correlations are actually partial correlations, with child’s age partialed out.

5 Actually we also measured dispositional empathy, but the abbreviated measure we used was not reliable.

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References


Figure Caption

Figure 1. Situational and dispositional correlates of parents’ empathic concern immediately before their children receive cancer treatments.
** p < .01