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## Prosociality in Relation to Developmental Tasks of Emerging Adulthood

**Abstract.** Prosociality, understood as the capacity to act in a way that benefits others, is an important feature for emerging adults to fulfill their personal needs and fulfill developmental tasks. This life period is a time of exploration within various areas of life, enabling individuals to try out and choose own worldview, lifestyle, work and preferred patterns of interpersonal relationships. This review aims at bringing together the evidence on how prosociality (prosocial orientations, values, behaviors) or deficits in such features may be linked to the fulfillment of three basic human needs as conceptualized by the self-determination theory in emerging adults. The relation of prosociality to the three tasks in the context of development in emerging adulthood: (1) reaching autonomy from the family of origin, (2) achieving own identity and (3) establishing positive relationships with others, are outlined based on a literature review. Implications for future research are also provided.

**Keywords:** autonomy, emerging adulthood, identity, relatedness, prosociality

**Słowa kluczowe:** autonomia, wyłaniająca się dorosłość, tożsamość, powiązanie, prospołeczność

### INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is a period in life between 18 and the late 20s (e.g., Arnett, 2006; Bańka, 2006; Frye, Liem, 2011; Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Howard, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011). It is a time of exploration within various areas of life, enabling individuals to try out and choose own worldview, lifestyle, work and preferred patterns of interpersonal relationships (Arnett, 2006; Lipska, Zagórska, 2011; Wysocka, 2013). A characteristic feature of this time in life is also that people are focused on themselves and experience feeling in-between childhood and adulthood (Arnett, 2006; Brzezińska, Kaczan, Piotrowski, 2011; Nelson, McNamara Barry, 2005).

According to the self-determination theory (Ryan, Deci, 2000), people have three basic needs to be fulfilled: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy is the capacity to

make independent decisions and to have control over own life. Competence is the need to effectively cope with the demands of the environment. Relatedness is the need to have close and affectionate relationship with others. All of these needs might be supportive in realizing the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood (competence) or as goals themselves (reaching autonomy especially in relation to leaving the familial environment and trying to live on one's own and establishing relationships with people outside the family).

Crystallized identity and autonomy have been stressed in the literature to be the central factors of a mature personality; however, relatedness has also been acknowledged as its another important facet (Guisinger, Blatt, 1994). Sarah Coyne et al. (2013) suggested that the key developmental tasks of the period of emerging adulthood might be generally defined as: (1) gaining autonomy, (2) building own iden-

tity and (3) establishing positive relationships with others (intimacy understood similarly as in works by Erikson, 1950). Although identity formation and intimacy establishment have been traditionally understood as developmental goals of other life periods, conceptual and empirical data suggests that they are relevant to the period of emerging adulthood.

A simplified view on the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood based on one of the most influential theories of development in the life cycle – the life stages theory by Erikson (1950) – suggests that finding own identity (in contrast to identity diffusion) is the key developmental task of adolescence, whereas the key task for young adulthood is establishing intimacy, meaning the capacity to form deep relationships with others (in contrast to remaining in social isolation). In fact, according to Erikson, no clear and strict boundaries between stages can be set. The attainment of particular goals may considerably overlap across these life stages (Côté, Levine, 1987; Erikson, 1978). Nowadays, it is argued that due to the lengthened time of education and prolonged period of taking responsibility, emerging adulthood – a period in-between adolescence and young adulthood – may still be a time of identity formation (Brzezińska et al., 2011; Ní Bhrolcháin, Beaujouan, 2012; Settersten, Ray, 2010). Additionally, Arnett (2000) suggested that identity development in fact continues into the mid-twenties and therefore enters into emerging adulthood instead of being solely a part of adolescence. Furthermore, according to Erikson, identity crisis is indeed characteristic for adolescence, but identity formation may spread throughout the lifetime (Côté, Levine, 1987). Another theory of identity, formulated by Marcia (1966), suggests that identity formation takes place in cycles of moratorium (identity crisis and readiness to change identity) and achievement (Stephen, Fraser, Marcia, 1992). However, regardless of the understanding of the process of identity formation, the phenomenon of the overlap of developmental tasks (intimacy and relationship formation in addition to finding own identity) in emerging adulthood might be very challenging. It might force individuals

who enter adulthood to face not only one, but a number of aims to be reached within one developmental period. Also connected to entering adulthood is the necessity to take responsibility for one's own life and to get control over it. It might be viewed both as a developmental task and as a personal need, similar to autonomy and competence as suggested by Ryan and Deci (2000).

It might be observed that prosociality has an important role in realizing the developmental tasks and needs of persons in the period of emerging adulthood. In this paper, prosociality is understood as either a prosocial orientation or as the prosocial behaviors. Prosocial orientation is defined as a preference to display certain patterns of behavior, especially sharing behaviors, so as to maximize the positive outcomes for both oneself and the partner of an interaction, and at the same time to minimize the differences between oneself and the partner (e.g., McClintock, 1978; Murphy, Ackermann, 2014). Prosocial behaviors are actions of an individual, performed with the intention to benefit or help another individual or a group (Eisenberg, Mussen, 1989; Jensen, 2016), such as helping, comforting, caring, donating, sharing or other voluntary actions undertaken for the benefit of others (Eisenberg, 2006). The capacity to do so might have prominent benefits for both society and interpersonal relationships, but also for personal and societal well-being as well as the development of a helping individual (Crocetti et al., 2016). Behaving prosocially has been proven to be linked to successes in academia and in the field of social relationships (Van der Graaff, Carlo, Crocetti, Koot, Branje, 2018; Crick, 1996). It also decreases the risk of engagement in anti-social actions, including hostile and aggressive behaviors (e.g., Carlo et al., 2014; McGinley, Carlo, 2007). Therefore, the decreases in empathy and prosociality may serve as inhibitors to the optimal development during this life period (Fraser, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Nelson, Stockdale, 2012).

The aim of this review is to integrate data on prosociality in emerging adulthood with regard to the three abovementioned developmental



tasks of this life period (Coyne et al., 2013): reaching autonomy, achieving identity and establishing positive relationships with others. To date, no such review has been conducted. Every subsection of the paper consists of a definition of the developmental goal and an overview of the state-of-the-art in terms of its link to prosociality. This review aims at bringing together the evidence on how prosociality (prosocial orientations, values, behaviors) or deficits in such features may be linked to the attainment of important life goals and the well-being of emerging adults. The findings gathered serve as a source for deriving implications for both research and practice.

## REACHING AUTONOMY AND PROSOCIALITY

Autonomy is defined as independence from something or somebody – it assumes that “self” is developed through the individuation process with participation of other people. Reaching maturity is a process of going from dependence to independence in formulating life tasks and goals (Obuchowski, 1977). Although autonomy develops intensively in adolescence (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz, 2017), it is also crucial for the emerging adults in order to move on from the role of a child within a family to a person who can decide on their own about their life and become a full-fledged adult. According to the self-determination theory, the ability to control the course of one’s own life is one of the basic needs of a human (Ryan, Deci, 2000). An emerging adult has the potential to increase own self-certainty and competences necessary to fully self-determine. Being able to stand for oneself and make independent decisions is possible due to lower control (familial or parental) over decisions and choices. Being a formal “adult” also enables one to decide how to spend free time. Although adolescents use resources that are forbidden to them (e.g., substance use, pornography, certain kinds of entertainment), being a formal “adult” enables them to do so freely and how they make use of these opportunities is up to them (Coyne et al., 2013). The

novel opportunities to make own choices are tempting, but also difficult.

This period offers opportunities to thrive but is also a source of threats, such as developing addictions or choosing risky lifestyles. Familial support might be viewed both as a support in reaching independence and empowerment (Inguglia, Inguglia, Liga, Coco, Cricchio, 2015), but also as a protective resource for the emerging adult not to engage in antisocial and/or self-destructive behaviors (e.g., Laursen, Birmingham, 2003; Li, Nussbaum, Richards, 2007; Sharaf, Thompson, Walsh, 2009; White, Bruce, Farrell, Kliewer, 1998).

Although emerging adulthood is expected to be a time of becoming more independent, autonomy development might be strongly supported by the parental capacity to let their child become self-reliant, as well as the parenting style, which can limit or enhance social development. During emerging adulthood, parents still remain key agents of socialization of their children in terms of values, emotion regulation, empathy and beliefs, all of which can positively affect social functioning (McNamara Barry, Padilla-Walker, Madsen, Nelson, 2008; Ruhl, Chow, 2016). Furthermore, parental attachment – even when taking into account the effects of peer attachment – may facilitate the development of self-esteem in emerging adults (Laible, Carlo, Roesch, 2004).

According to various studies, prosociality of emerging adults is related to how they perceive interactions with their parents regarding their autonomy. Guy Roth (2008) focused on another mechanism of prosociality, that is the internalization of values and helping in connection to perceptions of parental behaviors by college students. The perception of parental conditional regard was linked to internalization by introjection and self-oriented helping. In contrast, perception of parenting that was supportive of reaching autonomy predicted fuller internalization as well as helping oriented towards others. Luengo Kanacri, et al. (2014a) found that civic engagement at the age 22–23 – considered to be a form of prosocial action – was predicted by filial self-efficacy at the age 16–17 understood as the conviction of



a teenager that negotiating with their parents is possible without losing either autonomy or relatedness. Therefore, creating familial space to be autonomous seems to facilitate the behaviors directed at benefitting others.

Rick Kosterman et al. (2011) described a finding related to the abovementioned ones, but concentrated on another phenomenon – namely the history of interactions between parents and children. According to them, this interaction history seems to play a vital role in expressing prosociality. Positive childhood experiences for instance, may influence positive functioning in adulthood (e.g., civic involvement, responsibility, interpersonal connection, productivity and even physical exercise). A mediator of the relationship between childhood experiences and the continuity of displaying prosocial behaviors was adolescent substance use. However, the level of substance use was also linked to the characteristics of childhood experiences – the more positive they were, the less substance use was observed in adolescence.

Additionally, the current relationship with parents may play a vital role in prosociality expression. Carolyn McNamara Barry and colleagues (2008) indicated that the quality of the relationship between mother and child is positively related to the regulation of prosocial values among emerging adults, which in turn predicts prosocial tendencies. Higher internal regulation of prosocial values is positively related to prosocial tendencies to de-emphasize oneself and negatively related to prosocial actions performed to gain the approval of others. Another interesting finding was made in regard to the phenomenon of helicopter parenting (both maternal and paternal). Helicopter parenting is defined as the hyper-involvement of parents who tend to solve problems related to social, academic and work functioning of their child instead of letting their child solve them. Such offsprings have limited opportunities to make decisions for themselves, given that parents do it for them to ensure success in life (Segrin, Givertz, Swaitkowski, Montgomery, 2015). Such a parenting pattern not only makes autonomy development impossible, but also does not enable the youth to develop adequate styles of coping, emotion re-

gulation or to achieve a sense of self-efficacy to develop the skills necessary to manage difficult situations in life (e.g., Reed, Duncan, Lucier-Greer, Fixelle, Ferraro, 2016; van Ingen et al., 2015). Given that both autonomy and self-control may be important in developing prosocial behaviors, helicopter parenting might be viewed as a threat to them. This has been confirmed in a report by McGinley (2018), where a helicopter parenting style tended to negatively impact the self-regulatory behaviors of emerging adults, to promote narcissistic tendencies and to undermine prosocial outcomes as well as empathic responding. This phenomenon is argued by the authors to be a specific contributor to the moral development of emerging adults.

Autonomy is therefore a very important feature to be developed by emerging adults for them to internalize prosocial values and learn how to function within society. The parental role in autonomy support for children of emerging adulthood age seems crucial and a look at the wider familial system in which an emerging adult functions, seems critical to adequately understand the patterns of prosocial behaviors of an individual.

## IDENTITY ACHIEVEMENT AND PROSOCIALITY

The sense of identity is defined as a holistic, reflective and intuitive reference to oneself specific for an individual (Pilarska, 2014; Pilarska, Suchańska, 2013). Formation of mature identity has links to taking responsibilities (Oleszkowicz, Senejko, 2013). According to Wysocka (2013), during emerging adulthood a crisis regarding identity is observed, which might be a consequence of the postmodern world and its chaos (Bauman, 1993). The freedom of choice from numerous autocreations options, none of which is dominant in the life of an emerging adult (Wysocka, 2013) and possibility to explore without commitments may become the reason for moratorium prolonged from adolescence to the time of emerging adulthood (Brzezińska et al., 2011; Góral, Zagórska, 2006; Liberska, 2007).



Emerging adulthood is an age of various possibilities and sometimes it is a time of heightened risk-taking in order to explore identity (Padilla-Walker, 2016). Although as Ledzińska argues (2012), people entering adulthood cannot let themselves behave in escapist, accommodative or risk-oriented way as they did in adolescence. Apart from exploring opportunities and trying out new things in this life period, emerging adults experience transitions in personality that are connected to their patterns of behavior (Luengo Kanacri, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, Caprara 2013). According to Erikson (1950), individuals tend to form identity during adolescence and as a result of this process can be called adults at the end of it. However, the antecedent theories such as Marcia's (1966), enabled the development of four statuses of identity: (1) foreclosure (commitment without the exploration stage), (2) diffusion (lack of commitment and exploration), (3) moratorium (identity crisis with an openness to change and revise the chosen identity), and (4) achievement. Marcia's theory provided researchers with a more complex tool to understand identity status than the Erikson's theory, which enabled a better understanding of the patterns of observable behaviors in emerging adults regarding their development. The notions introduced by Marcia were employed in some of the studies referenced below.

As mentioned above, identity formation and finding one's own path is one of the tasks of emerging adulthood that influences the actions and choices of individuals. They encounter transitions in personality (e.g., Luengo Kanacri et al., 2014b), which also affects their self-regulatory competences, enabling them to work out better coping strategies and confront the demands of adult life. Developing these competences has close links to prosocial development, given that the self-regulatory abilities to halt egoistic motivations and to self-transcend may result in acting prosocially (Alessandri, Caprara, Eisenberg, Steca, 2009; Caprara, Alessandri, Eisenberg, 2012).

Research suggests that the engagement of emerging adults in various positive behaviors – e.g., prosocial behaviors, religiosity and va-

lue internalization – is a function of gender and identity status (Padilla-Walker, McNamara Barry, Carroll, Madsen, Nelson, 2008). It has been indicated that emerging adults in the stage of identity diffusion displayed fewer prosocial tendencies, whereas those in moratorium had the same tendencies as those who had formed their identity.

Interpersonal behaviors defined as a broad category of prosocial behavior, levels of relational and physical aggression as well as self-versus other-oriented helping, are associated with identity styles (Smits, Doumen, Luyckx, Duriez, Goossens, 2011). In this study a classification of identity styles by Berzonsky (1990) was employed. According to the latter, three styles of identity might be distinguished: (1) information-oriented, when individuals search for, process and utilize information about identity to make well-informed choices regarding their life, (2) normative, when individuals follow the expectations of significant others and reference groups in forming their identity, and (3) diffuse-avoidant, when individuals do not make any decisions regarding their identity unless forced to do so by the situational pressure. The study by Smits et al. (2011) revealed that only an information-oriented identity style contributed to adaptive patterns of interpersonal behaviors. Empathy was a mediator of relationships between an information-oriented identity style and interpersonal behavior as well as between a diffuse-avoidant style and interpersonal behaviors. This study suggests the validity of taking into account the identity styles while examining prosociality and other patterns of interpersonal behaviors, even though identity formation may be a lifespan process.

Religious and moral identity can be one of the strongest predictors of both prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Hardy, Nadal, Schwartz, 2017). However, these types of identity interact with personal identity to predict antisocial behavior. Another report indicated that the clarity of self-concept was also positively related to prosociality, with prosociality positively affecting self-concept (Crocetti et al., 2016).

When taking identity into consideration more broadly, it can be said that the construction



of the self-concept might involve finding purpose in life. A study by Okun and Kim (2016) revealed that when individuals scored high on the prosocial motivation dimension, their volunteering activity was related to purpose in life. This relation was not observed in persons who scored low on the prosocial motivation scale. It suggests that when taking activities that are deemed prosocial into consideration, we need to account for the actual prosocial motivation of an individual, and not assume that engagement alone can have the desired effect on development.

Another interesting phenomenon is constructing identity online, given the fact that today emerging adults are digital natives. They spend more time online than performing any other kind of activity – most of this time is being spent surfing on the Internet and listening to music (Coyne et al., 2013). The co-construction theory (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, Greenfield, 2006), originally tested regarding aggressive behaviors, states that the identity displayed by a person offline might be constructed in the same way online. The theory was also confirmed in a study regarding prosocial behavior off- and online (Wright, Li, 2011). It is a valuable finding for researchers and practitioners who are interested in the phenomena of social interactions online as well as the promotion of prosocial behaviors instead of antisocial actions and the hate speech on the Internet. It suggests that promoting offline prosociality and targeting interventions into the general development of positive identity may be linked to behaviors that are observable online.

## **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS AND PROSOCIALITY**

Relatedness or connection is a need for belonging and connectedness with other people (Deci, Ryan, 2008). Emerging adulthood is a crucial moment in life to try out ways to enter relationships and function inside them, which is necessary both to benefit the mental health (Simon, Barrett, 2010) and to learn successful functioning within society (Arnett, 2007). However, nowadays the developmental expectations of

emerging adults regarding their education and work life may involve a necessity to frequently change places of residence, which may result in instability in social relationships and difficulties in “learning” intimacy, thus threatening mental health (Cusack, Merchant, 2013; Frye, Liem, 2011; Nelson, McNamara Barry, 2005). Depressive symptoms might be a result of this unstable environment in connection with continuing development and having self-perception of being “in-between” childhood/adolescence and full-fledged adulthood (Cusack, Merchant, 2013; Frye, Liem, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2011). Therefore, addressing the developmental characteristics of an emerging adult who seeks psychological help regarding their capability to form positive relationships with others may be crucial for designing an adequate support curriculum.

Prosociality might be viewed as a variable enhancing relatedness. Although by definition, prosocial behaviors – as directed at benefiting others – might be viewed as fostering the establishment and sustaining of relationships. Some empirical evidence that has made an important contribution to this particular area of development can be mentioned.

For instance, one of the important features of functioning is the way people interpret and tend to behave towards others. This might be shaped via social value orientations, which in general might be defined as preferences for sharing outcomes between oneself and a partner of interaction (McClintock, 1978) and are often assessed via tasks in which persons are asked to choose the most preferred distribution of a certain amount of points or imagined resources to oneself and to a partner of interaction (for a review of methods of assessment of social value orientations, see Murphy, Ackermann, 2014). Prosocial orientation as mentioned in the Introduction section is a tendency to cooperate, maximizing the outcomes both for oneself and for the partners of a particular interaction. It is also characterized by a pattern of minimizing the differences between these outcomes. A competitive orientation is the tendency to maximize own outcomes compared to the outcomes of others, and look for an advantage over the partners of



interaction. An individualistic orientation is the inclination to maximize own outcomes without paying attention to the outcomes of others. A social value orientations may have various implications for the way in which individuals think about other people and how they behave towards them (Van Lange, De Bruin, Otten, Joireman 1997). According to Van Lange et al. (1997), social value orientations are shaped by the history of social interactions throughout life. Therefore, the patterns of relatedness to others may have an impact on prosocial value orientations and in turn prosocial value orientation may be associated with behavior in intimate (not only romantic) relationships.

The way in which people manage their relationships with others has also been found to be linked to strong self-efficacy in self-regulation. Interestingly, affective self-regulation was revealed in the same study to be related to prosocial behavior with interpersonal self-efficacy intervening in this relationship (Caprara, Steca, 2005). These findings have links to the self-determination theory idea of competence and relatedness. Self-efficacy in self-regulation is a form of competence that was found to be linked to both dealing with relatedness and prosociality.

Another relevant field of study on emerging relatedness in adults is the matter of forming relationships online. Taking into account the fact that media – especially the Internet – absorb the attention of the youth and take more of their time than other activities (Coyne et al., 2013), the influence of this medium on interpersonal bonds cannot be ignored. The research mentioned in the previous section, performed by Wright and Li (2011) revealed that displaying face-to-face (offline) prosocial behaviors was associated with prosocial behaviors observable online, e.g., via social networking sites, email, text messages and chats. Another study by Fraser et al. (2012) indicated that violent video gaming is related to lowered prosocial behavior, especially towards strangers, with lowered empathic concern correlating with violent video gaming and intervening in the abovementioned relationship. Both studies suggest the two-sided character of the relationship between engage-

ment with the media and displaying real-life prosocial behaviors connected to relationships with other people.

## CONCLUSION

Prosocial behaviors might have a positive link to the optimal development in emerging adulthood. Being able to reach autonomy, achieve identity and establish positive relationships with others can also have beneficial effects on the prosociality of emerging adults. One of crucial aspects of developing the capacity for prosociality is the relationship with parents and their attitudes towards reaching autonomy by their children as well as their standards and patterns of behavior. Moreover, formation of identity, finding one's own "self" and purpose of life, observable in adolescence and continuing in emerging adulthood, require activities which are directed at oneself rather than other people, limiting the space for expression of prosociality. However, fulfilling the need for relatedness and developing in contact with others can support the emerging adults in maturing. Being able to act prosocially can support forming positive relationships with others and balance the "give and take" in social relationships so that they are meaningful and supportive to further development.

This review, although pioneering in terms of bringing together the ideas of the self-determination theory and data about prosociality, has its limitations. Firstly, prosociality was treated generally and a broad scope of evidence was sought. Secondly, the review aimed primarily at exposing research for deriving future avenues. Finally, the scope of literature search was limited to English and Polish, not taking into account data from other cultural and linguistic areas.

Several interesting avenues for future research can be derived from the data analysis. For instance, the investigation of individuals displaying various trajectories of prosocial behavior would enable conclusions to be derived on how to individualize interventions promoting development. Moreover, longitudinal



studies examining how prosocial behaviors come into use within various sub-periods of emerging adulthood would be valuable. Taking into account the variables connected with the suggested developmental tasks of emerging

adulthood (achieving autonomy, identity, relatedness) within one study design would bring a more comprehensive view on what may have an impact on displaying various prosocial development trajectories.

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