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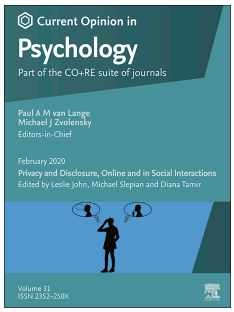

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The Dispositional Basis of Human Prosociality

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Abstract

Individual differences in prosocial behavior have been consistently observed in a variety of contexts. Here, we summarize and critically discuss recent developments in two research agendas on the dispositional basis of human prosociality: a personality approach, proposing a variety of trait concepts and corresponding measures to predict prosocial behavior in different situations; and a behavioral consistency approach, testing for consistency in prosocial behaviors and its underlying latent disposition(s) across situations. Drawing on different properties of situations (so-called situational affordances), we outline a theoretical framework that can help integrate these so far hardly connected research agendas. We also point out limitations of prior research, such as a lack of theory, and provide suggestions on how to overcome them.

Keywords: personality traits; prosocial behavior; behavioral consistency; cooperative phenotype; affordances

The Dispositional Basis of Human Prosociality

People differ, and this truism also holds for prosociality. Whereas some people are rather selfish and primarily interested in maximizing their own personal profit, others are rather prosocial and primarily interested in the welfare of others, even if corresponding behaviors produce tangible individual costs (e.g., money, time). For example, people differ in their willingness to donate to victims of natural disasters [1], to help refugees [2], to forgo personal benefits for the sake of environmental protection [3], or to protect others from being infected during a pandemic [4,5]. According to this ubiquity of individual differences, research on human prosocial behavior has increasingly integrated concepts and methods from personality psychology to provide a better understanding of *who* behaves in a prosocial way and under which circumstances (for recent meta-analyses, see [6–8]). Here, we summarize the most recent developments in this research area. Specifically, we outline two agendas—a personality approach and a behavioral consistency approach—that have dominated research on individual differences in prosociality in recent years and summarize a theoretical framework that may build the foundation for stronger integration of these agendas in the future.

Before going into detail, we will define the key terms used herein. *Prosocial behavior* broadly describes all kinds of actions that benefit others—often, but not necessarily, at personal costs [9]. Prosocial behavior is commonly assessed using economic games (for recent reviews, see [10,11]), which allow measuring actual (consequential) behavior in different situations. Moreover, research increasingly resorts to experience sampling to measure (self-reported) prosocial behavior in more everyday settings [12–14]. *Personality traits*, in turn, denote "relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reflect the tendency to respond in certain ways under certain circumstances" [15, p. 140]. These tendencies can be located at different levels of the trait hierarchy and either be considered as specific, lower-level characteristics or subsumed under broader, higher-level personality constructs, such as the HEXACO dimensions [16] or the Big Five [17,18].

1. Agenda I: Personality Traits Capturing Prosocial Tendencies

One agenda that has been pursued in research on individual differences in prosociality is what we term a *personality approach*. This approach is based on the idea that certain personality traits may account for inter-individual variation in prosocial behavior. Over the years, scholars have introduced an ever-growing variety of personality traits and corresponding measures to describe individuals' stable tendencies to behave prosocially. On the prosocial side of the continuum, prominent examples of specific (lower-level) traits describing individual differences in prosociality are altruism [19], empathy [20], and trust propensity [21]. On the selfish side of the continuum, prominent examples are competitiveness [22], dispositional greed [23], and Machiavellianism [24]. At the higher level of the trait hierarchy, these specific traits are most strongly aligned with Honesty-Humility [8], which denotes "the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others" in the HEXACO personality model [16, p. 156]. Moreover, the recently proposed Dark Factor of Personality [25] has been specifically defined as the basic disposition of maximizing one's utility at the expense of others, from which more specific (lower-level) traits—such as greed or Machiavellianism—arise as (flavored) manifestations [26].

Although it is encouraging to see that prosociality has become established as an integral part of research on personality and individual differences, the inflationary number of trait concepts and corresponding measures gives cause for concern: arguably, it lays the ground for jingle and jangle fallacies, meaning that the same term is used for different constructs (jingle fallacy) and different terms are used for the same construct (jangle fallacy). In fact, "jingle and jangle fallacies … waste scientific time. … [They] prevent the recognition of correspondences that could help build cumulative knowledge" [27, p. 210]. Critically, there is no end in sight for the practice of proposing evermore constructs and measures in the realm of prosociality as recent research shows [28–31]—an issue that, in fact, applies to psychology as a whole [32]. We therefore call for stronger integration of trait concepts and corresponding

measures in future research, especially when new constructs and/or measures are proposed. For example, both Honesty-Humility and the Dark Factor of Personality have been shown to account for various instances of prosociality [6,8,33], and it thus seems a reasonable bar to set that any newly suggested personality construct or measure in the realm of prosociality must demonstrably yield incremental explanatory power beyond these broader trait concepts.

2. Agenda II: Behavioral Consistency across Situations

The second agenda that research on individual differences in prosociality has pursued is what we term a *behavioral consistency approach*. This more bottom-up-type approach is based on the idea that consistency in behaviors across various situations is the manifestation of one (or several) latent disposition(s). Thus, whereas the personality approach starts out from certain personality constructs (e.g., traits) to account for individual differences in prosocial behavior, the behavioral consistency approach starts out from individuals' behaviors and considers consistency in behaviors across situations as manifestations of personality (without referring to specific personality constructs). Note that the approaches are thus complimentary rather than contrary to each other. A key question of research pursuing the behavioral consistency approach that has dominated research in recent years is whether one single latent disposition may underlie prosocial behavior across various situations, which would be reflected in high behavioral consistency across diverse contexts.

To test this idea, scholars have most commonly studied behavioral consistency across different economic games (see Table 1 for frequently used games in this context). Indeed, several studies provided evidence for a general latent disposition underlying prosocial behavior across games. For example, Yamagishi and colleagues [34] found behaviors in multiple games (e.g., Dictator Game, Trust Game as trustor and trustee, Prisoner's Dilemma) to correlate substantially and to load on a single latent factor. Similar results based on a similar set of games were provided by Peysakhovich et al. [35] who concluded that "a substantial shared input to each of the cooperation decisions appears to be a domain-general

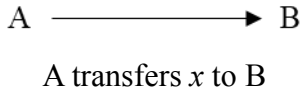
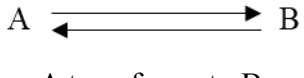
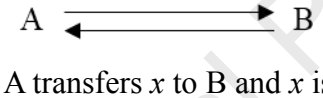
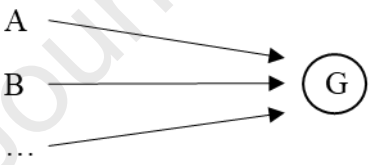
trait of prosociality" (p. 3), which they termed the *cooperative phenotype*. A comparable level of behavioral consistency in these and related games also emerged in other research [36–38]—although Haesevoets et al. [37] interpreted their findings as questioning behavioral consistency across contexts rather than supporting it (but see [38,39]). Further evidence favoring the view of a single latent prosociality factor comes from studies that combined behavioral (e.g., game-based) with other measures of prosociality—such as self- and other-reported personality traits and measures of neural activity—to extract their common core [40–42]. For example, Knafo-Noam et al. [42] studied prosociality in a twin design, measuring maternal reports of their children's empathy, prosocial behavior, and prosocial attitudes. Replicating and extending previous results, their findings suggest a broad *prosociality phenotype* with a strong genetic component.

In contrast to these findings, other results question the idea that a single latent disposition may adequately capture individual differences in prosociality. For instance, several of the studies referenced previously [35–37] found that behavior in some games was only weakly correlated with behavior in other games (if at all). This mostly applied to behaviors emphasizing reactive aspects of prosociality, such as responder behavior in the Ultimatum Game (see Table 1). Accordingly, using a more diverse set of games modelling both active and reactive prosocial behaviors, Baumert et al. [43] extracted four distinct (albeit intercorrelated) latent factors to represent individuals' behavior across contexts, with each factor representing individuals' behavioral tendency in one type of game. Likewise, when both costly and costless prosocial behaviors were assessed using economic games, Ferguson et al. [44] found these behaviors to load on different factors and to be linked to different (self-reported) personality traits. Such findings led some authors to conclude that "perhaps a general cross-situational preference for pro-social behavior does not exist" [45], or to even suggest that "if the prosocial personality is defined solely as a single, individual difference in behavioral acts, … then the prosocial personality may be a mirage" [46]. As outlined in what

follows, we suggest that these inconsistencies in findings can be attributed to systematic differences in the aspects of prosociality considered in prior studies.

Table 1

Commonly used economic games

Game	Decision Path	Description
Dictator Game	 A transfers *x* to B	A (the dictator) freely decides how much *x* to give to B (the recipient), who has no veto power.
Ultimatum Game	 A transfers *x* to B; B can accept or reject *x*	A (the proposer) decides how much *x* to give to B (the responder). B can accept or reject A's offer. If B accepts, outcomes are split as proposed by A; if B rejects, A and B both get nothing.
Trust Game	 A transfers *x* to B and *x* is multiplied by *m*; B can return any amount *m*x*	A (the trustor) decides how much *x* to give to B (the trustee). *x* is multiplied by a constant ($m > 1$). B can return any amount $m * x$ to A.
Public Goods Game	 *N* members of a group transfer *x* to a group account G and *x* is multiplied by *m*; $\sum x$*m is equally distributed among all *N* members	Each member of a group of size *N* decides how much *x* to contribute to a group account. Contributions are multiplied by a constant *m* ($1 < m < N$) and shared equally across all group members, irrespective of their individual contributions.

Note. Adapted from Table 1 in Thielmann et al. [6]

3. Piecing Together the Puzzle: An Affordance-Based Framework

As reviewed in the previous sections, two so far hardly connected lines of research have dominated the study of individual differences in prosociality in recent years. We propose that these two agendas can be theoretically integrated by means of a recently proposed framework specifying the key situational *affordances* that provide the basis for personality to become expressed in prosocial versus selfish behavior in social situations [6]. Specifically, "situations

have properties [affordances] that provide a context for the expression of motives, goals, values, and preferences" [47, p. 316]. Thus, depending on the affordances of a situation, different personality characteristics or latent dispositions, respectively, may become activated to guide behavior [48].

Inspired by Interdependence Theory [49] and other theories of situations and prosocial behavior, four key affordances relevant for prosocial behavior have been distinguished [6]. These are (i) a *possibility for exploitation* (i.e., whenever an individual can increase their own outcome at another's cost), (ii) a *possibility for reciprocity* (i.e., whenever an individual can react to another's prior behavior), (iii) a *temporal conflict* (i.e., whenever an individual's immediate self-interest conflicts with long-term individual and/or collective interests), and (iv) *dependence under uncertainty* (i.e., whenever an individual's outcome depends on another's behavior, and the individual has no knowledge about what the other will do). These affordances also offer a fine-grained perspective on situations as modelled in economic games, given that structural features of the games represent certain situational affordances [10]. Each of the four affordances, in turn, provides the basis for a specific class of characteristics to guide behavior, namely characteristics in the realm of (i) *unconditional concern for others' welfare*, (ii) *conditional concern for others' welfare*, (iii) *self-regulation* (of one's impulse to behave in a selfish way), and (iv) *beliefs about others' prosociality*.

3.1 Affordances in the personality approach

Regarding the personality approach, the affordance framework allows deriving clear predictions about which trait(s) should predict behavior in which situation(s). Specifically, a trait should particularly account for individual differences in behavior whenever the affordances of the situation activate the trait. Support for this reasoning comes from a recent meta-analysis [6]. For example, traits capturing individual differences in unconditional concern for others' welfare (e.g., Honesty-Humility, [low] Machiavellianism) predicted prosocial behavior most strongly in situations providing a possibility for exploitation.

Contrary to this reasoning, however, traits capturing self-regulation (e.g., Conscientiousness, [low] impulsivity) showed no consistent associations with prosocial behavior at all, irrespective of whether temporal conflict was present or not. Future research is thus needed to further scrutinize (aspects of) the proposed framework in tailored experimental settings.

Another important implication of applying the affordance framework to the personality approach is that scholars should consider the match between trait conceptualizations and affordances when their goal is to predict behavior from personality traits. First, one cannot expect certain traits to account for prosocial behavior if the situation does not afford the expression of the trait. Second, to increase predictive validity of the traits, it can be useful to discriminate between certain traits that are uniquely linked to *different* affordances rather than clustering them together in one (very) broad trait. As a prominent example, consider the distinction between Honesty-Humility and Agreeableness in the HEXACO model: Whereas Honesty-Humility has been shown to specifically account for prosocial behavior when the situation provides a possibility for exploitation, Agreeableness specifically accounts for prosocial behavior when the situation provides a possibility for reciprocity. In the Big Five framework, by contrast, the broader Agreeableness domain[1] is conceptually linked to both these affordances—albeit to a lesser extent—which arguably results in Big Five Agreeableness predicting prosocial behavior only weakly, within and across situations [6]. Crucially, however, other broad traits might exist that may very well account for prosocial behavior in the presence of different affordances. In the end, the decisive question is whether a broad trait is activated by multiple affordances to a comparable extent as a more specific trait is activated by its uniquely tied affordance. Only then, a broader trait may allow for a

[1]Although bearing the same name, Agreeableness in the HEXACO model is differently conceptualized as Agreeableness in the Big Five, which also captures some Honesty-Humility-related content. For a recent theoretical and meta-analytic comparison of the Big Five and HEXACO models, see [50].

particularly parsimonious account of individual differences in prosocial behavior. Systematic tests of this proposition are needed.

3.2 Affordances in the behavioral consistency approach

Regarding the behavioral consistency approach, applying the affordance framework reveals that those studies providing evidence for a general prosociality factor largely included measures tapping into the same disposition (e.g., unconditional concern for others' welfare), for example, by only using games involving the same affordance (e.g., a possibility for exploitation). By contrast, those studies providing evidence against a general prosociality factor included measures tapping into different dispositions, for example, by using games involving different affordances (e.g., a possibility for exploitation vs. reciprocity). Arguably, the number of dispositional prosociality factors extracted in a study thus directly results from the diversity of situations and measures considered. By implication, it is unlikely that a single, unitary latent disposition can account for prosociality across the huge variety of contexts affording prosocial behavior. Future research pursuing a behavior consistency approach needs to consider various situations providing different affordances for prosocial behavior to provide conclusive insights into the structure of dispositional prosociality.

4. Conclusion

Research on the dispositional basis of human prosociality has recently seen an upsurge of interest in the social and behavioral sciences. Summarized briefly, this research has shown that (a) there are several trait constructs that can account for individual variation in prosocial behavior in certain situations and (b) there is noteworthy consistency in behaviors across situations. Both these findings can well be accounted for by an affordance-based framework that considers situational features as providing opportunities for the expression of certain aspects of personality in behavior. This is a promising starting point for future research which should (a) closely consider the theoretical conceptualizations of traits and social situations and (b) strive for stronger integration of the two agendas outlined here. We are confident that such

theory-based and integrative work will offer a more detailed understanding of what characterizes the prosocial personality and how it manifests within and across situations.

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Highlights

- There are stable individual differences in prosocial behavior
- One research approach has linked various personality traits to prosocial behavior
- Another approach has focused on consistency in prosocial behaviors across contexts
- Considering situational affordances can integrate these poorly connected approaches
- We call for more theory-driven research on the dispositional basis of prosociality

Declaration of interests

☒ The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

☐The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: