PROSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZED YOUTH ACTIVITIES

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Human and Community Development in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the types of prosocial behaviors youth engage in within organized youth activities, and determine if these behaviors are related to developing increased prosocial reasoning and behavior in other contexts of their lives. A sample of youth participating in a longitudinal study of organized youth activities were interviewed about their experiences within youth programs and these responses were utilized to determine what types of prosocial behavior youth engage in within their organized activity, and how this behavior influenced their prosocial attitudes and behaviors both within the activity and in other contexts of their lives. Results suggest that youth take on a number of prosocial roles within organized youth activities, and they perceive that these roles are related to thinking and behaving more prosocially with peers and others.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Social responsibility is a concept that is used in multiple disciplines and has been defined as having concern for others or having concerns that go beyond one’s individual desires, needs, or goals (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Other concepts used in the field of human development are prosocial reasoning and prosocial behavior – an ability to think morally or think outside one’s own immediate needs/wants, and behavior that benefits others (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & van Court, 1995). Developing prosocial reasoning and behaviors is crucial to fostering a caring society in which individuals take responsibility for themselves and think about how their actions affect others. One study found that prosocial behaviors may even be protective against engaging in delinquent behaviors (Carlo et al., 2014). There is a prevailing notion that today’s youth, particularly those in the United States, are self-preoccupied and unconcerned with others. Given the high degree of concern that youth lack prosocial attitudes, it is important to determine contexts in which prosocial reasoning and behavior are fostered.

Organized youth activities are known to have a positive influence on adolescents’ development, yet not much is known about the prosocial nature of the roles youth take on within this context. The goal of this study was to identify the types of prosocial roles youth take on within organized youth activities, and determine if these roles are related to developing increased prosocial reasoning and behavior in other contexts.

Literature Review

Social roles and developmental processes. In order to better understand youths’ roles within organized activities and the influence these roles have on prosocial attitudes and behavior, it is necessary to first understand how social roles influence development. Therefore, in this literature review I focus on current theories regarding social roles and the influence they have on individuals and their sense of identity. In addition, I provide evidence which supports studying organized youth activities as a context in which youth take on meaningful roles and develop prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Role identity theory emphasizes the importance of social roles for human development; individuals play roles in their daily life in relation to others and these roles in turn influence their self-concept, or sense of identity (Stryker, 1980). Following symbolic interactionist thought, the social roles individuals hold in society involve shared expectations and meanings; for example, being a teacher is a widely understood role that is accompanied by expectations that one is compassionate and patient. Through interactions with others, the expectations that accompany a particular role become internalized within an individual. Social roles also come with demands and obligations; the role of teacher, for example, includes obligations to grade students’ work and create lesson plans.

Since the inception of role identity theory, many models have been proposed that outline the process of how social roles become engrained into one’s sense of identity. Burke’s Control System Model
emphasizes processes of reflexivity and self-verification. Reflexivity refers to an individual’s attempt to find fit between their conception of a social role and others’ conception of the role. Self-verification refers to an individual’s desire to achieve consistency between their own self-concept and how others perceive them. Individuals attempt to shape their role performance based on their internal standards. According to this model, individuals go through “state adjustment”, or adjusting their current self-concept to better align with the expectations that are inherent to the social role they play. This occurs through social interactions and self-referent feedback (Burke, 1997).

Situated identity theory also emphasizes the importance of reference groups in the process of identity development through social roles (Alexander & Wiley, 1981). A reference group refers to a group of individuals one identifies with, usually through their social role. Individuals compare themselves with their reference group as a means of developing an identity. This theory posits that the way one enacts a role with others in similar situations determines which dimensions of a role become most salient to them (Alexander & Wiley, 1981). Social capital theory emphasizes that interpersonal relationships give youth a context to think about and trust others, which are important components to developing prosocial reasoning (Putnam, 2000).

An ecological systems perspective supports the idea that context has a significant impact on an individual’s development of prosocial reasoning and behavior. Ecological systems theory emphasizes that development is influenced by relationships, activities, and roles. It places particular emphasis on the influence that social relationships in these contexts have on development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Following this train of thought, it seems that social roles have a vast impact on how individuals see themselves and their relationship to others. Youth take on a number of roles as they develop – they are sons and daughters, siblings, students, and workers. Scholars have emphasized the importance of studying youths’ identities as they relate to their various roles. While research primarily focuses on youths’ roles within an academic context, there is evidence that their roles outside of school are just as significant, if not more so; research on youths’ work roles suggests that this is an important context for identity development (Tannock, 2001). Previous research suggests that youth who work outside of school feel their jobs make them more autonomous and responsible. In addition, these work roles allow them to demonstrate accountability to their family – many youth contribute to their family’s finances with the money they earn at their jobs (Newman, 1996). Youths’ experiences in organized activities are similar to that of occupational work – youth are expected to take on various responsibilities and fulfill obligations. When youth take on a role within an out-of-school program, such as football captain or debate team president, they may be incorporating a new social role into their sense of identity.

Organized youth activities as a context where youth develop prosocial reasoning and behavior. Organized activities have been theorized to be a promising context which fosters positive youth
development, facilitating skill-building which can carry over into other areas of youths’ lives (Larson, 2000). Previous research has determined that youth who participate in these activities have better academic and psychological adjustment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Youth who become engaged in organized activities feel greater self-worth and have higher social and academic self-concepts than those who do not participate; youth also experience lower rates of internalizing problems (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; Gardner, Browning, & Brooks-Gunn 2012). Participation in these activities even has a protective effect against problems associated with domestic abuse in the home (Gardner et al., 2012). In addition, participation is associated with lower rates of drug and alcohol use (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). These findings suggest that the organized youth activities are a promising context for researchers to examine positive youth development.

Organized activities facilitate youths’ development in a number of ways. One study by Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) distinguished five different types of experiences provided to youth in the context of these programs: experiences related to initiative, exploring identity and self-reflection, emotional learning, working as a team, and developing relationships with members of the community. Previous research has also found that different types of organized youth activities provide different types of experiences and skills. For example, service activities were associated with developing teamwork skills, positive relationships, and social capital; in contrast, sports programs provided youth with more experiences which developed initiative (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Youth become engaged in extracurricular activities by making personal connections to the program and aspiring to various goals, such as learning, becoming competent, and pursuing a purpose (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Youths’ reference group within these organized activities may also influence their development in this context.

Research that has examined youths’ experiences in organized activities and the skills they can build in this context have described various ways in which peers are an important element in this process. Peers within organized youth activities provide a different reference group that they may not be exposed to outside of the program context. Work by Fredricks and Eccles (2006) determined that youth who engage in organized activities outside of school tend to surround themselves with pro-social peers, which mediates the positive relationship between participation in these activities and academic engagement. This suggests that peers may be even more influential to youth than the activities themselves. In other work, youth involved in organized activities had more learning experiences related to social processes (group processes) and leadership compared with youth who primarily participated in only school or unstructured social activities (Hansen et al., 2003). This may be because youth take on roles within organized activities that are different from those they have in other areas of their life. Within these activities youth must interact in order to achieve a common goal. Peers are co-participants alongside youth as they fulfill their obligations.
While much research has focused on the school and family as contexts which help youth to develop prosocial reasoning and behaviors, there is a paucity of research investigating how organized activities might also foster these traits. Organized youth activities are unique in that youth participate voluntarily and often work together with youth they may not encounter in their school or home context, providing them with a new reference group. In addition, many youth take on roles which they would not otherwise experience in other contexts. These roles often require youth to show accountability to peers and rely on them to complete tasks (Salusky, Larson, & Hansen, 2013). This is an environment which fosters prosocial reasoning and behavior and can lead youth to develop a greater sense of social responsibility, even when they step into other contexts.

This study. Although previous research suggests that organized youth activities are a promising developmental context which can foster prosocial reasoning and behavior, there is a lack of research examining the prosocial nature of youths’ roles within these programs. In addition, there is a paucity of research that examines whether youths’ roles leads to an increase in prosocial attitudes and behaviors in other contexts. Therefore, the present study sought to answer the following questions: What sorts of prosocial roles do youth take on within organized activities? Are these prosocial roles related to youth developing more prosocial reasoning and behavior in other areas of their lives? What types of prosocial reasoning and behaviors do youth engage in outside of their organized programs?
Chapter Two: Methods

The Pathways Project

The Pathways Project is a longitudinal study of youth development in the context of out-of-school programs. The sample for this study included high-school age youth, program leaders, and youths’ parents. Questionnaire data was collected for the entire sample, and program leaders and a subset of youth and their parents were interviewed. The data from this study comes from the qualitative interviews with the sub-sample of youth.

Programs

The Pathways Project included data from fourteen ethnically diverse youth programs. Many of these programs primarily served low-income, minority youth. Seven programs primarily served Latino/a youth, and the remaining programs primarily served European American and Black youth. The programs ranged in focus and included arts, leadership, recreation, and STEM programs. The programs were geographically diverse, and included two urban settings and one rural setting. Programs ranged in size from 9 to 74 youth. In each program youth took on roles and responsibilities in which they worked toward accomplishing a goal or finishing a project.

Procedures and Interview Protocol

A representative subset of youth who completed questionnaires for the Pathways Study was selected to be interviewed with semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Youth were interviewed at four different time points, which occurred throughout the program cycle. For this study data from Time 2 and Time 4 were included in analysis; Time 2 occurred in November through December and Time 4 data was collected in April through May. Different samples of youth were interviewed at Time 2 and Time 4, but all youth received the same questions. Questions which were related to youth’s roles and responsibilities within their program and questions which were related to how these roles influenced their development were analyzed to answer the research questions of interest to the study.

Before youth in the main Pathways study were interviewed, a pilot study was conducted to learn about processes of development within youth programs. Based on data collected from this pilot study, the final interview protocol was adjusted and new questions were added to collect in-depth information (Salusky et al., in press). Interview questions were open-ended; interviewers were encouraged to use alternative wording and ask probing questions to learn as much about youths’ experiences as possible. Interview questions used in analysis included questions which asked what youths’ roles and responsibilities were in their program, and how these roles and responsibilities influenced them in other areas of their lives (Appendix A).
Sample

A total of 106 youth participated in interviews at Time 2 and Time 4. Youth in this sample ranged in age from 12 – 19 (mean = 14 years; median = 16 years); 50% boys and 50% girls. Approximately 43% of youth were Latino, 29% were non-Hispanic Black, 23% were non-Hispanic White, and 5% were some other ethnicity. These youth came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Analyses

Coding of interviews was an iterative process that involved initial coding and then re-coding based on overarching themes and patterns that emerged from the data. The first stage of coding involved close line-by-line coding of a subset of interviews, which resulted in very specific descriptions of youths’ roles and the prosocial attitudes and behaviors they engaged in. I then used these specific descriptions to identify patterns in the data, which allowed me to develop initial analytic codes. In the next stage of coding, I applied the codes I had developed to the remaining sample of youth. As new concepts emerged I adjusted my coding scheme, developed new codes, and re-coded interviews based on the new data. For example, when youth described their roles within their program, “keeping others on task” emerged as a pattern during open coding and became its own code. Through analysis of additional interviews, the definition of this code broadened and recoding allowed the inclusion of additional cases.

During the coding process, I considered the relationship between codes and overarching themes, which helped to develop categories that encompassed these codes. For example, the code “keeping others on task” became encompassed within the category “supervising others”. Throughout the analytic process I wrote self-reflective memos to help guide analyses. These memos helped to sensitize myself to emerging themes and patterns within youths’ responses. They also helped me to recognize and acknowledge my own biases toward the data. Interview questions related to youths’ roles and responsibilities in the program were coded separately from those related to the influence these roles and responsibilities had on youth, since these questions were focused on different topics.

As a result of coding the data related to youths’ roles and responsibilities, five major categories were identified that related to various ways youth demonstrated feeling obligated to their peers within the programs. Coding of interview questions related to the influence these roles and responsibilities had on youth resulted in the identification of four major categories related to the types of prosocial attitudes and behaviors youth reported engaging in both within and outside of the program context.
Chapter Three: Results

A large number of youth took on roles and responsibilities within their program in which they felt obligated to their peers, and they demonstrated this obligation both in their thought processes and through their actions. Feelings of obligations to peers within the program corresponded to an increase in prosocial attitudes and behaviors in other contexts of their lives.

Feeling Obligated to Peers

When asked about the roles and responsibilities youth had in the various programs studied, youth described various ways in which they felt obligated towards their peers. Youth took on obligations which included directing and supervising peers, keeping peers and others informed of program activities and policies, teaching peers, helping peers complete projects, and cooperating with peers to complete tasks.

Directing and supervising. Approximately 39% of the youth interviewed described directing and supervising peers in their program. Youth described making sure peers stayed on task, and ensuring that program tasks were completed. For example, one youth in a program which made video documentaries described that his role was, “… being the manager. Making sure everyone was doing what they had to do.” Youth also needed to ensure that program tasks were being completed correctly. Another youth noted, “It’s like I’m leading the crew, so I gotta make sure I’m in control. I gotta make sure they on point, we on task, we doing everything right.”

Keeping others informed. A smaller number of youth (about 10%) also kept peers and others informed about program activities and events. Although a fewer number of youth described keeping others informed, these youth played a critical role; one youth stated, “If I had a role it’ll probably be making sure that flyers get around the place and get to everybody, and if I didn’t do my role, it would just be a waste of time.” Another youth organized live music concerts for his program: “You have to contact everybody, you have to get all kinds of contracts out to them, you have to keep in touch with each band and then give all the information to each band.”

Teaching. About 16% of youth in the sample described taking on a teaching role within their program. Youth taught their peers and others involved in the program how to accomplish certain tasks, and various techniques and skills which were useful in their work. Youth explained leaders’ instructions and trained peers in how to fill various program roles. One youth who participated in her program as a camp counselor for younger youth described, “I’ve been working with the newer kids teaching them . . . because that’s what I worked on last year. And I’ve been helping them understand those projects in case I’m not there one day or if I do something else.”

Helping others. The majority of youth in the sample (90%) reported that they helped their peers on program tasks and projects. Youth helped their peers by giving advice and pointers on how to complete tasks. One youth in a theater program said, “You have to help the people on stage portray their
roles better. As stagehand you have to help, you have to worry about the set, you have to worry about the props, you have to worry about how this character is going to interact with this character and this prop needs to be on at this time.” Youth also provided hands-on support when peers struggled with their work. One youth in the same theater program noted, “I had someone I was training and she would be working the CD deck or she’d be using my computer, and she’s not the best with computers so I had to help her with that some.”

Cooperating with others. Approximately 17% of youth described working together with others to accomplish a specific task. Youth worked with partners on projects such as writing journal articles or filming a documentary. For example, one youth described how he worked with others to build a structure out of straws: “We had to make any design and we had to use straws. And we were in teams. So, whoever got the highest building or structure, would win a prize.”

Thinking and Behaving more Prosocially

Youth also described ways in which their prosocial thought processes and behaviors in other contexts increased over the course of the program cycle. This increase in prosocial thoughts and behaviors seemed to be related to their feelings of obligation toward the peers in their program. Youth were also asked if they thought their roles and obligations within their program had resulted in a change in their thoughts or behavior in other areas of their life. The vast majority of youth interviewed (97%) described thinking and behaving in a more prosocial manner within and outside of the program context. Most of these changes related to their thought processes, though some youth also noted that their behavior changed as well.

Thinking more prosocially. Youth mentioned a change in their thought processes in which they began to think more prosocially. They noted three different ways in which their thinking changed: youth noted that they developed an increased respect for peers and others, they stated they were able to relate to others more easily, they also felt more accountable for their own actions and realized the influence they could have on others through their actions.

Developing increased respect for others. About 10% of youth felt more respect for others, including their own family members, after taking on their roles and obligations in the programs. These youth said they not only became more appreciative of working with different types of people, but they also became more respectful of these individuals’ opinions. One youth from a theater program said, “I kind of just realized being around these amazingly talented people that everyone has their flaws and everyone has their strengths.” Another youth from the same program stated,

I always respect my parents. So that would probably be the one thing that changed. I kind of gained more respect ‘cause I kinda saw off stage I had to have these responsibilities that my
parents probably have . . . where they have to be assertive in positions where they don’t want to be. So it kind of helped me gain some respect for my parents at home.

Youth also felt more considerate towards others. One youth from a leadership program described how he became considerate of others’ opinions:

I think whenever we had the last meeting Mr. Dunn brought up a whole different bunch of different topics and I tried to just kind of let other people, like watched what other people did when you would ask a question and someone would raise their hand and say an idea or a thought that they had about it. Instead of me being like, ‘oh, I have this idea’ I try to just kind of like watch and like see how they approach situations, versus just me automatically being like, ‘oh here’s my idea.’

**Feeling more relatable.** Over a third of youth interviewed described being able to relate to other people more easily after taking on their roles and responsibilities in the program. Youth described becoming more open to interacting with individuals from different backgrounds and took others’ opinions into account. One youth involved in a leadership program noted, “In school, I still try to be a leader and still try to be the one who comes up with ideas, but I’ve learned to listen to other people and let them talk and work with other people.” Youth also described feeling more confident in their interactions with others – they found it easier to speak their mind and speak to a large audience. For example, one youth who held a role as a camp counselor said, “You have like a group or something or – present in front of a class . . . it’s easier for me to do it now because I’m more used to talking in front of people.”

**Feeling more accountable.** A large number of youth (44%) described feeling more accountable for their own actions as a result of their roles and obligations in their program. Youth discussed that they began to think more about the consequences of their actions, including how these consequences will affect other individuals. They described feeling that they could be more effective with their work, and impact others through their actions. One youth described feeling more competent and more confident taking on additional obligations: “It kind of changed my abilities . . . because I feel like I can take on more responsibilities now. And even with bigger responsibilities, I can learn how to manage them.”

Another youth said, “Before this, I didn’t really think of myself as a leader. And after this, I feel like I can do a lot of things.”

**Behaving more prosocially.** A number of youth (13%) reported that their role and responsibilities within the program influenced how they acted towards others. In all cases this involved being more helpful towards others, including their families. Some youth noted that they began helping out around their house more; one youth said, “I started helping with the laundry. I just help my mom. Sometimes now I go to the grocery store with her. Before, I didn’t do it because I didn’t see why!” Another youth described how her philosophy towards her role in the program carried over to other areas
of her life: “Because you have to be responsible in a job, and outside a job. You have to be responsible cleaning your dishes, or cleaning your room . . . you have to be responsible as well as here at work.”
Chapter Four: Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the types of prosocial behaviors youth engage in within organized youth activities, and determine if these behaviors are related to developing increased prosocial reasoning and behavior in other contexts of their lives. Based on these results, it seems that youth in organized youth activities are given responsibility for directing and supervising their peers, teaching peers and others various skills and techniques, keeping others informed about program activities, helping peers complete aspects of projects, and cooperating with their peers in the program. These responsibilities require that youth fulfill obligations to their peers.

These results also suggest that youth perceive their roles within organized activities as influencing them to think and behave more prosocially, both in their program and in other contexts. Youth reported developing more respect for others, were able to relate to others more, felt more accountable for their own actions and thought about how their behavior affected others, and became more helpful towards others. These findings suggest that organized youth activities are a very valuable context for youth to develop into more prosocial individuals. The prosocial thoughts and behaviors which youth develop in these programs influence them not only within their program but also in other areas of their life.

The results from this study support findings from previous work which illustrates that youth are participating in prosocial activities within youth programs. Findings also agree with previous research which suggests that participating in youth programs increases youths’ experience with social processes and aids youth in developing relationships with members of the community (Hansen et al., 2003). However, this study not only replicates results from previous work, it also extends these findings to identify which types of prosocial reasoning and behavior youth engage in both in and out of their organized youth activities. It also provides evidence that the prosocial behaviors youth engage in within their program are related to changes in prosocial reasoning and behavior in other contexts of youths’ lives, based on the youths’ self-reports.

These findings suggest that youths’ roles within organized youth activities may be a mechanism through which this increase in prosocial reasoning and behavior occurs. Youth take on new social roles within organized youth activities, and these roles often involve demonstrating accountability to others; as these youth engage in these roles over an extended period of time, thinking and behaving in a prosocial manner may become more engrained in their self-concept.

There are a number of strengths to this study. The use of a large, diverse sample of youth increases the generalizability of my findings. The qualitative nature of the study allows for a rich, descriptive analysis of youths’ experiences. In addition, the use of interview data allows these findings to remain grounded in youths’ own perspective.
While there are many strengths of this study, there are also some weaknesses which point to directions for further research. Although the results from this study are informative and suggest youths’ work within their programs resulted in changes in other contexts, it is necessary to conduct additional studies in order to determine if youths’ roles and responsibilities within their organized activities are a cause of increased prosocial reasoning and behavior. In addition, comparisons should be made between youth who demonstrate accountability to others and youth who do not; this would allow researchers to determine if their roles and responsibilities within their program are indeed related to increasing prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

This study’s findings have implications for researchers and individuals who work with youth in all contexts. Researchers can utilize these findings to develop further studies which examine the process of youths’ prosocial development. This is important to not only gaining more understanding of youth development in general, but is also crucial to understanding how we can influence youth to become more civically engaged individuals. Youth practitioners can utilize these findings to foster prosocial development in the youth with whom they work. By giving youth roles in which they act prosocially with peers, youth practitioners can influence youth to become more prosocial individuals in other contexts as well. In a society where the prevailing notion is that youth do not take on roles and lack a sense of prosocial reasoning and behavior, this study provides evidence that many youth within organized activities do have important roles, which in turn can foster prosocial characteristics.
References


Appendix A: Youth Interview Protocol

Now I want to ask about your roles and responsibilities in the program.

1. What’s the biggest or most demanding role you’ve had in the program this year?
   AW: This could involve having responsibilities within a project you were doing, being a committee chair or the person in charge of some task.
   [IF NO ROLE SKIP to #2b ]

2. What are the responsibilities or demands that come with that role? What is someone in this role expected to do?
   b. [IF NO ROLE:] Were there tasks, jobs, or other responsibilities you felt you had to do or were supposed to do? (AW: This could include deadlines, other expectations.) What were they?
   [IF NO ROLE OR RESPONSIBILITIES SKIP to #11]

10. How did this role or these responsibilities change how you view your abilities or how you see yourself?
   a. Some teens tell us that being involved in a program can lead to changes in other areas of their life. Did these responsibilities change how you think or act at home? In other parts of your life?
      Probe: In what way? Can you give an example?
   b. How do you think those changes happened?
   [SKIP TO next section: LEADER-YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS]

[ASK #11 ONLY IF YOUTH HAD NO RESPONSIBILITIES:]