

## The Mordovian Youth's Understanding of Prosocial Behavior

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### ABSTRACT

The article refers to the results of the empirical research of some peculiarities of prosocial behavior in Mordovian young people, exactly, the normative behavior. It also analyzes the differences of prosocial behavior in young people and adults. Statistically significant differences between the students and adults data has been shown. For young people the sense of pity, compassion, love to the subject have the least ranks in motivation for prosocial behavior, unlike for adults for whom those feelings are the most important. The opposite situation occurs in the case when a selfless act for the benefit of another person helps to increase the self-esteem. For young people this motivation is the most significant while for adults it is of the least importance. The results of empirical research of the interrelation of empathy development level and pro social behaviour of a person are discussed in the article.

**Key words:** Prosocial behavior, Normative behavior, Extranormative behavior, Norms, Youth, Understanding, Social distance, Mordovia, Representations.

### INTRODUCTION

In domestic humanitarian field pro social behaviour problem has been for a long time treated in the frame of philosophical concepts (of V. Solovyev, M. Berdyaev – in Russia and A. Comte, I. Kant, P. Holbach, T. Hobbes etc.). (Sobolev, 2014). Recently the problems of pro social behaviour have been actively studied in psychological researches. (Bandura, 1990; Batson and Powell, 2003; Bénabou, Roland and Tirole, 2008; Dunning, 2001; Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1990; Eisenberg, Fabes and Spinrad, 2000; Hamilton, 1964; T. L. Lindenberg, 2006; Schwartz, 2010)

From evolutionary point of view pro social behaviour is defined as a behaviour enabling a person receiving help to be fit on the account of fitness of a helping person. Usually empathy, altruism, helping behaviour, etc. are included here. Rendering assistance is a granting of a direct help

to the one who needs it. The term “helping behaviour” is used to denote situations in which actions do not presuppose any real or potential donations from a helping person. In a case of altruistic behaviour the rendering assistance presupposes some kind of a risk or deprivation. From the point of view of social psychology, pro social behaviour is a set of acts directed for blessing of the other person. Moreover, a helping person always has a choice whether make them or not.

Human existence is always intermediated with attitudes to another person and society in general. More or less often and for different reasons almost every person performs prosocial actions – the actions aimed at well-being of another person. For any society such trend of behavior is more desirable than individualistic behavior

Personal behavior including his/her understanding of normative prescriptions to oneself

and to another person is regulated with moral imperatives, with understanding of what must be done. Norms and rules developed in the social consciousness are important regulators of personal behavior. Of course, they are reflected, evaluated, understood and interpreted by individual consciousness. Though "Do not lie" – is a moral imperative universal for all world religions, but at the same time every physician has to decide whether to inform his patient about terminal disease in any concrete case, anyone has sometimes to use white lies to rescue a friend, children do not dare to tell the whole truth to their elderly mother trying to protect her, etc. Such actions aimed at conscious processing of social norms presume a certain level of personal development, when a person becomes the creator of one's own life and the life itself is perceived as an active, creative and conscious personal act in the world. (Tarasova, Sobolev and Polyakova, 2009)

One of the essential characteristics of the modern society is that social standards and norms of behavior are becoming increasingly blurred and uncertain, they no longer decree how one should behave, they only give some guidelines for personal behavior. For example, though the family and marriage values have always been important ones, but nevertheless, the benefits of informal cohabitation and homosexual partnership are widely discussed nowadays. There has been formed tolerance to drug addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, trans-sexuality and other phenomena in modern society that were considered to be vices and social diseases before. Eventually, collectivism as a way of social life is being replaced by individualism in traditional communities. Today a person is oriented at individual success, achievements and ego-centric interests. All these result in changes of the individual concept of norms and normal behavior.

The traditional problem in humanitarian sciences is the question of personal learning and adoption of social norms and mechanisms that transform them into effective moral imperative for a subject, effectively regulating his/her behavior. Therefore, one of the mainstreams of modern psychology is oriented at existential paradigm making emphasis on investigation of human

existence as a holistic way of subject's life, raising problems of specific understanding of social norms by a person as well as the sources, mechanisms and conditions of forming one or another type of individual prosocial motivation under specific existential circumstances. The problem of personal attitude to reality, the developing of personal values and ideals has become a main trend of psychological research. In the framework of this problem we have performed a research of peculiarities of semantic understanding in subjects with different types of value-sense positions. (Polyakova, 2005)

The essential issue of investigation does not restrict itself to the problem of *how and to what extent the norms are acquired and implemented* in the behavior, but *how these norms are understood* by the person.

Understanding is not only cognitive but also an existential phenomenon (Arutyunova *et al*, 2013; Znakov, 2014; Znakov, 2000), it is a universal human ability developing through the individual and responsive way of life of human being in the world (H. Gadamer, P. Ricoeur). Existential concept of that consideration involves the holistic approach to the study of specific situations of human existence. Therefore, understanding is determined by a certain personal value-sense position, as well as by of cultural and environmental factors. "Values and meanings belonging to the consciousness of a particular person do not exist outside social consciousness; they always fit into a specific socio-cultural environment, which, for ones turn, form in the result of a long cultural and historical process". (Tarasova, Sobolev and Polyakova, 2009.)

Prosocial behavior can be defined as voluntary actions intended to benefit another individual or group of individuals. While these actions benefit the recipient, they can also be costly to the subject. (Bénabou, Roland and Tirole, 2008). Some authors define prosocial behavior exclusively as altruistic behavior. We determine the term according to R. Cialdini and co-authors: "Prosocial behavior characterizes the acts committed by one person for another and for his/her benefit" (Kenrick, Neuberg and Cialdini, 2010,

p.34). This is true, when the benefactor is moved solely by altruism, as well as when he also expects some moral or material benefits for his acts. Some authors note, that the altruistic motivation is not the only motivation for prosocial behavior. A common definition of altruism is "intrinsically motivated voluntary behavior intended to benefit another"—acts motivated by concern for others or by internalized values, goals, and self-rewards rather than by the expectation of concrete social rewards or the avoidance of punishment (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989, 2003). Arousal and affect theories hold the crucial principle that people are motivated to behave in ways that help them to attain a certain goal, and the interpretation of the arousal regulates the character of prosocial motivation. (Penner *et al.*, 2005.) With egoistic motivation, self-appraisal and self-image are the significant factors of prosocial motivation (Simpson and Willer, 2008; Trivers, 1971; Batson and Powell, 2003).

#### METHOD

We carried out an experimental research of the Mordovian Youth's Understanding of Prosocial Behavior. In this article we analyse the empirical data of 111 young people aged 19-21 (19.8 on average), all of them being University students in Saransk. Mordovia is one of the 83 subjects of the Russian Federation in the central part of the European area of Russia. Saransk is the capital with 300,000 inhabitants.

Analyzing the Understanding of Prosocial Behavior in students, first of all we tried to compare the experimental data of young and adult participants. Our task was to find out whether we could observe the "parent-and-child conflict" in the perception of acts performed for the benefit of another person. For the comparative analysis we investigated a sample of 55 adult people / 41.2 on average./

Both samples completed the Prosocial Behavior Questionnaire by S.I.Sobolev. Statistical data analysis (U-criteria of Mann-Whitney) revealed significant differences of prosocial behavior rates between students and adults in six test scales ( $p < 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The data analysis allowed us to come to the following conclusions.

#### Basic part

Narcissistic experience is the most significant reason for prosocial behavior in students: prosocial acts enable young people to increase their self-esteem provoking the feeling of pride. Besides that young people tend to do generous actions in order to set closer relations with other people. Least of all they are motivated by the sense of pity, compassion or love to the person. However, we cannot state that those feelings are not important for students, they are just on the last positions in the hierarchy of prosocial motives. In adults the situation is different.

The opposite situation has been found out on the scale "Narcissistic experience and increase of self-esteem as a result of committing a prosocial act", assessing the motives of pride in prosocial behavior. For students this tendency seems to be the most important (28.7 points) while for adults it has the least rate with the rate of 15.6 points. At the same time the Standard deviation in the adult group is higher than in the students one (2.15 and 3.08 accordingly), which could be interpreted as a narrower range of opinions in students.

Comparing students with adults ( $n=55$ ,  $Me=41$ , 2 years old) we can notice that the structure of motives for prosocial behavior in adults is different, the most important of them being the sense of pity, compassion and love to the subject. The least significant are narcissistic reasons. The adults are less focused on their self-esteem or the sense of pride.

Thus, the study revealed differences in the representations of young people and adults in Mordovia concerning the motives for performing prosocial acts.

At the second stage of the research we investigated the respondents' representations of the behavioral norms according to the groups of increasing social distance: to their families, friends, colleagues, co-inhabitants in their home town, region / Mordovia/ and the State /Russia/. For that purpose we offered the respondents to finish such sentences as "I must do and I really do for my family

/friends, colleagues, etc/....” Participants’ responses were content analyzed.

First of all we analyzed the total amount of the units of meaning representing the acts of behavior that the respondents could recall within the borders of their social experience according to the each category of the social distance. In students the largest part of units of meaning representing prosocial norms (I must do and I really do) is related to the categories of “Family” (39) and “Colleagues” (27). In adults the largest amount of units of meaning refers to the categories “Colleagues” (22) and “Friends” (19).

In some items students and adults did not response. For students the most difficult categories are: “For the residents of the Republic of Mordovia” (36.4% of respondents didn’t give any response) and “For a person of my own nationality” (30.9% of respondents). For adults the most difficult categories were: “For the residents of the Republic of Mordovia” (37% of respondents); “For a person of my own nationality” (29.6% of respondents) and “For Russia” (29.6% of respondents). We believe the explanation may be that the norms regulating prosocial behavior at closer social distances toward the subjects of everyday interaction are more clearly represented in consciousness both in adults and students than the norms of behavior toward subjects at longer social distances.

The content analysis of the students responses while completing the sentence “I must do and I really do for my family...” included 39 different variants of units of meaning. The most popular representations of normative behavior towards one’s family are described with the unit of meaning “help” (including household assistance). It was presented by the majority of students (95.5%).

At the second place of the rank is the unit of meaning of “respect” – it was noticed by 43.2% of students. Next in rank are the “care for the family” (38.7%), “love” (21.6%), “give moral support” (11%), “share family problems” (9.9%), “render material assistance” (9.9%).

Friends are another group towards whom people perform normative prosocial actions quite often. As in the previous case the list of normative prosocial actions towards friends in students is also considerable including 32 items. The leading positions in rank such actions as “help, support, relieve” take. 82.9% of students believe those to be their responsibility to their friends and try to fulfil those. Less number of respondents noticed such items as “respect” (27%), “communicate” (12%), “show compassion, appreciate and trust” (10.8%), “hear out” (9%).

In the list of responses from adult respondents “assistance and support” takes the first position as well (70.4%); “compassion” is in the second place (14.8%). As for other items, there is a wide range of opinions.

As to the respondents representations of the normative behavior towards their work or at school colleagues, both the students and adults believe that their colleagues make quite a significant part of their life. For students the interpersonal relations with colleagues seem to be more important than for the adults: the list of normative actions that the students “must do and really do” for their co-students is twice as long as that of the adults (up to 90%). The majority of the students mentioned among the norms of prosocial behavior towards their colleagues they follow as mandatory such units as “assist, help and support” (33.3%), “respect” (32.4%), “do not conflict” (9.9%), “co-work” (9.9%), “support good relations” (9%).

Students and adults’ views concerning the norms of behavior in relation to the co-inhabitants in their home town vary considerably. Here are the norms that most students stick to: “respect” (27%), “try to keep the place clean” (14.4%), “help” (14.4%), “greet” (12.6%). The priority list of adults is completely different. The first two norms are “do not offence against public order” (14.8%) and “respect” (14.8%). The units “feel proud of my place” and “try to keep the place clean” (11.1% for each item) are the next in the list. This part of the investigation seemed to be the most difficult for the respondents, what is quite understandable, taking into account a person’s permanent contacts

with friends, family and colleagues, which make situations for prosocial behavior. At the same time contacts with strangers that are only one's co-inhabitants are more seldom.

### DISCUSSION

The representations of the young people and adults of the norms of prosocial behavior are found to be close with regard to the following prosocial actions:

- towards the family (respect, help, housework);
- towards friends and colleagues (the predominant action is help);
- towards a person of one's own nationality (respect),
- towards Russia (to observe the laws, to love the country, to be a patriot).

The representations of the young people and adults of the norms of prosocial behavior are found to be different with regard to the following prosocial actions:

- towards neighbors: the most common response from students was "to control noise" (40%), from adults "to be loyal" (25%);
- towards inhabitants of their home town, the most frequent response from students was "try to keep the place clean" and "show respect" (21.8%),
- from adults – "do not offend against public order" (18.5%).

To summarize we can make the following conclusions. There is a statistically significant difference between the students and adults representations concerning their normative prosocial behavior. For young people the senses of pity, compassion, love to the subject have last ranks in the motivation to prosocial behavior, while for the adults those feelings make most important motives. The opposite situation occurs in the case when a selfless act for the benefit of another person

helps to increase the self-esteem. For young people this motivation is the most significant while for adults it is of the least importance.

The content analysis of the answers of the respondents made it possible to analyze the motives of actions performed for the benefit of others. Both for students and for adults the norms of help, cooperation and respect for one's friends, family, colleagues as well as to neighbors and co-inhabitants is found to be important.

To realize further development of psychological researches of personal pro social behaviour investigations of interrelations of personal pro social behaviour on the one hand, and empathy and axiological personal position, on the other hand, are carried out. In accordance with this it is necessary to notice, that in researches preliminary carried out by us it was established, that the higher the empathy is the more significant tendencies of pro social behaviour are displayed. While analyzing the peculiarities of students' pro social behaviour we stated the following: for the students with the high empathy level realizing pro social behaviour it is significant: 1) giving by itself, 2) feeling of pity, compassion, love to the object, 3) perception of an object as incapable to take care of itself. For the students with a middle empathy level the most important things for realizing pro social behaviour are:

1) value of giving, 2) expectation of social distance reduction after committing pro social act. Upon the whole, the higher the empathy is, the more vivid are the tendencies of pro social behaviour. This research will be continued with expansion of examinees' group and deepening of a psychological problematic.

In practical aspect the data of the research present a certain value for the formation of pro social behaviour model of a person and perfection of educating technologies of a prosociality of modern youth.

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