# Abstract

Across childhood and adolescence prosocial behaviour is consistently female-typed ([Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006](#_ENREF_10); [Hine & Leman, 2013](#_ENREF_21)). This is in contrast to patterns in adulthood suggesting that some prosocial behaviour, congruent with the male gender role, is distinctly male-typed ([Eagly, 2009](#_ENREF_8)). This study investigated the gender-typing of prosocial behaviour in children and adolescents aged 9-19 years. 1189 participants rated 24 prosocial items on a 5-point masculinity/femininity scale. Exploratory Factor Analysis revealed a distinct subset of seven behaviours, characterised by masculine qualities that loaded onto a separate, masculine factor. Contrary to previous studies, these results suggest that male-typed prosocial behaviour, or a ‘male prosocial niche’, exists before adulthood.

**Keywords**

Stereotypes, Femininity, Masculinity, Gender Differences, Moral Behaviour

# Introduction

# Prosocial behaviour is defined as ‘voluntary behaviour that benefits or promotes harmonious relations with others’ ([Eisenberg, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_10); [Eisenberg & Miller, 1987](#_ENREF_11); [Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999](#_ENREF_13); [Hay, 1994](#_ENREF_18)) and from as early as three years, most children recognise prosocial behaviours as morally good ([Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011](#_ENREF_39)). This is due to the fact that prosocial behaviours are predominantly moral actions, governed by moral rules concerning right and wrong ([Smetana, 2006](#_ENREF_35); [Turiel, 1998](#_ENREF_38)). These actions are what Kant referred to as positive moral duties, governed by universal moral principles and which oblige action ([Kant, 2013](#_ENREF_25)). Furthermore, whilst it is true that the motivations behind prosociality change for both boys and girls with age (from broadly materialistic to altruistic motivations; Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Leiser, 1980) and across different contexts (for example, depending on relative cost; Piliavin, et al., 1981), prosocial behaviours are largely associated with developing positive traits and ‘good’ behaviour in children ([Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989](#_ENREF_12)) and are recognised as positive actions that are central to the well-being of groups ([Helliwell & Putnam, 2004](#_ENREF_19)).

# Prosocial behaviour is also consistently stereotyped as more of a ‘girly’ thing to do ([Eisenberg, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_10); [Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989](#_ENREF_12)), despite this moral label. Children and adolescents rate girls as more likely to be prosocial as a gender group ([Hine & Leman, 2013](#_ENREF_21)), and rate girls as behaviourally more prosocial using self- and other-report measures ([Eisenberg, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_10); [Fabes, et al., 1999](#_ENREF_13)). Evidence for this stereotype is also found outside of academia, for example in the popular children’s nursery rhyme ‘*What are little boys made of?’* which states that girls are made of ‘sugar and spice and all things nice’ ([Opie & Opie, 1997](#_ENREF_30)). This suggests that researchers and laymen alike believe that girls are more prosocial than boys ([Eisenberg, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_10)). Conceptualisations about prosocial behaviour, and the judgements associated, may therefore be bound to stereotypes about what is appropriate moral behaviour for boys and girls. It is imperative to understand said judgements about who should perform prosocial behaviour, and the inter-relatedness of gender stereotypes and beliefs, in order to understand what guides the actualisation of these actions.

# The categorisation of prosocial behaviour as both morally positive and feminine suggests that children’s knowledge about these actions may relate to both moral and social rules as suggested by Domain Theory (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1983). Turiel (1983, 1998) proposed that thinking about the social world can be categorised into heterogeneous, coexistent strands or domains concerning *moral*, *social-conventional*, and *personal/psychological* issues, based on knowledge amassed through social experience. Knowledge in the moral domain consists of universally applied rules, evaluated based on their intrinsic features, such as the consequences of violating said rules for the rights and welfare of others. Conversely, the social-conventional domain contains knowledge of norms that facilitate the smooth functioning of social groups, the form and context of which vary based on factors such as culture, experience and group membership. Finally, the content of the personal/psychological domain pertains to the understanding of the self, identity, personal choice and personality, such as understanding one’s body, choice of friends, and the origins of one’s own and others behaviour. In contrast to other structural-developmental models of moral development describing the gradual differentiation of moral principles from social conventions or pragmatics (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984), Domain Theory proposes that moral knowledge exists as distinct from, but in co-ordination with (or in subordination to) other types of social knowledge. Therefore, knowledge about prosocial behaviour can exist in all domains, and each can provide their own moral, social or personal motivation for performing prosocial actions. In addition, social-conventional knowledge regarding gender appropriateness (i.e., the female-typing of prosocial behaviour) could act in a limiting capacity to actions that, if guided purely by moral knowledge, would be performed consistently regardless of gender ([Kant, 2013](#_ENREF_25)).

# However, research in adulthood suggests that social-conventional knowledge regarding the gender-appropriateness of prosocial behaviour may be more complicated than the simple idea that girls and women are uniformly more prosocial than boys and men. Instead men and women tend to express prosociality in ways that are congruent with their gender role ([Eagly, 2009](#_ENREF_8)) with the typically masculine/agentic vs. feminine/communal qualities of a behaviour influencing the ways in which men and women choose to act prosocially. These ideas are in line with social role theory, which proposes that adults perform behaviours, and reason about moral dilemmas, in ways that reflect the social roles they occupy in society ([Eagly, 1987](#_ENREF_7); [Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000](#_ENREF_9)). For example, prosocial behaviours such as providing physical assistance and defending others are congruent with the idea of men wishing to achieve dominance and a hierarchical advantage ([Gardner & Gabriel, 2004](#_ENREF_16)), as well as the masculine idea of chivalry ([Glick & Fiske, 2001](#_ENREF_17)). In contrast, prosocial behaviours such as comforting someone when upset and providing community service are congruent with the relational emphasis within the female gender role and the propensity to bond with others ([Spence & Buckner, 2000](#_ENREF_36)). Eagly therefore posits that ‘neither sex deserves recognition for delivering the majority of prosocial behaviour. Although both women and men deliver extensive help to others, they specialise to some extent in different types of behaviour’ (2009, p.649).

There appears therefore to be a fundamental difference between the female-typed notion of prosocial behaviour in childhood and adolescence, and the gender differentiated prosocial behaviour of adulthood. It may be that gender differences in the type of prosocial behaviours utilised by men and women, and the associated differential gender-typing of behaviour, only manifest in adulthood. However, considering that gender knowledge is amassed very quickly and at a young age ([Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006](#_ENREF_32)), this is unlikely. If stereotypes regarding male vs. female prosociality exist, it can be assumed that children and adolescents should be aware of them from an early developmental stage and gender-type prosocial behaviour accordingly. Differences in the gender-typing of prosocial behaviours between children/adolescents and adults may instead result from the paucity of behaviours used in traditional prosocial behaviour studies at younger ages (most commonly; helping, sharing, comforting, and giving, see Fabes & Eisenberg, 1996). These ‘broad’ behaviours do not represent the wide variety of prosocial acts that children and adolescents undertake, and may garner feminine ratings as they are cognitively incorporated into the broader gender stereotype of feminine prosociality. Offering a greater variety of prosocial behaviours within research, as well as allowing the inclusion of prosocial ‘traits’ (i.e., a personal quality or characteristic that promotes harmonious relations with others), may reveal patterns of gender-typing before age 18, similar to those seen in adulthood, that recognise the existence of male-typed prosociality. Whether differences in gender-typing exist before adulthood is an important question, as currently the consistent female-typing of prosocial behaviour does not allow space for masculine prosociality, or the ‘male prosocial niche’, in childhood and adolescence. Boys may therefore feel restricted in their expression of good behaviour because of the conflict they experience between the desire to perform positive moral actions and to avoid being perceived as feminine.

This study investigated children and adolescents’ gender-typed judgements of prosocial behaviours and traits. Importantly, and in contrast to the small amount of broad prosocial descriptors used in previous research into prosocial behaviour, 24 separate items were utilised. These items were identified by early adolescents in a previous focus group study by Bergin and colleagues (2003) which, whilst analysing the frequency that boys and girls mentioned each behaviour, did not investigate gender-typing specifically. It was hypothesised that, instead of items receiving unanimously feminine ratings, specific behaviours and traits synonymous with the male gender role (e.g., those involving broadly agentic qualities) would receive masculine ratings. In addition, whilst some small variations may occur due to changes in gender stereotype flexibility across development, it was further hypothesised that differential gender-typing of behaviours would occur across all ages and in both genders. This is due to the rapid acquirement of gender knowledge by both boys and girls from a young age ([Ruble, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_32)).

## Participants

Participants were 1189 children and adolescents aged between 9- and 19-years-old (M = 14.35, SD = 2.08). For the purposes of the analysis, participants were split by gender: Boys (n = 564, M = 14.11, SD = 1.87) and Girls (n = 625, M = 14.58, SD = 2.23). They were also split into three age groups: Late Childhood (n = 283, M = 11.66, SD = .93, 139 boys), Early- to Mid-Adolescence (n = 685, M = 14.48, SD = .91, 366 boys) and Late Adolescence (n = 221, M = 17.44, SD = .83, 60 boys). These three age groups were chosen because they map on to key periods of change in gender development and moral reasoning ([Martin & Ruble, 2010](#_ENREF_27)). Participants came from one primary school, one secondary school, and one college in the South East of the United Kingdom. The majority of participants were White British (87%), with the remaining percentage from a range of ethnic backgrounds (predominantly Other White, 2.6%, or White and Black Caribbean, 2.0%).

## Materials and Procedure

Each participant was presented with 24 prosocial items (shown in Table 1) to rate on a masculine/feminine 5-point scale. Items were from Bergin et al., (2003) and were originally generated by asking adolescents to name ‘positive social behaviours’ (a definition previously used by Mussen & Eisenberg-berg, 1977). Whilst some items do not represent ‘traditional’ ideas of prosocial behaviour, they were chosen because (a) they represent a significantly broader array of behaviours than is traditionally used in the literature (e.g., the four categories used in Fabes & Eisenberg, 1996), and (b) they were generated by early adolescents themselves, and are therefore more likely to be representative of children and adolescents prosocial experiences ([Bergin, et al., 2003](#_ENREF_5)). Items consisted of explicit prosocial behaviours (*Providing Community Service*), prosocial traits (*Honest*), and omissions of negative behaviour regarded as prosocial (*Does Not Yell*) all of which ‘intend to benefit another’. They could choose from: very masculine (something mainly boys do), slightly masculine (something that mostly boys do but some girls do), neutral (something both boys and girls do), slightly feminine (something that mostly girls do but some boys do), and very feminine (something mainly girls do).

Opt-out consent was obtained from parents before administration. Questionnaires were distributed to participants at the start of a school class. A short, age-appropriate description of the study was provided. Participants were encouraged not to discuss their answers and to complete the questionnaire individually. Any questions were answered as they arose. Teachers prevented talking and colluding as much as possible to ensure that answers were given on an individual basis.

# Results

Initially, the factorability of the 24 prosocial items was examined, firstly for the sample as a whole, then by age group and gender. Several well-recognised criteria for the factorability of a correlation were used. Firstly, it was observed that 17 of the 24 items correlated at least .3 with one other item (and this increased to 20 items with a threshold of .28), suggesting reasonable factorability (see Table 1 for the whole sample correlation matrix). This was reflected in the correlation matrices for each age group and gender. Secondly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin measure of sampling adequacy was between .68 and .90 across all groups, above the commonly recommended value of .6 (exact values are shown in Table 2). Furthermore, Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant for the whole sample (χ2 (276) = 5758.97, p < .0001), with similar values achieved across age and gender groups. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis was deemed to be suitable with all 24 items.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the 24 items for the sample as a whole, and on each age group and gender, to identify the underlying structure and relationship between these items based on their masculine/feminine rating. Each analysis revealed between 4 and 6 factors with eigenvalues over 1, with the first two factors explaining a significant amount of the variance between them, and with smaller values added by subsequent factors (see Table 2). Solutions for two to six factors were each examined using promax rotations of the factor loading matrix (as factors were shown to be significantly correlated and therefore statistically, as well as theoretically, related). Values less than .3 were suppressed. The two factor solution, explaining between 24.6 and 34.4% of the variance, was preferred because of: (a) the ‘levelling off’ of eigen values on the scree plot after two factors, and (b) the number of cross-loadings and difficulty in interpreting the three to six factor solutions.

Rotated solutions are presented in Table 3. Analysis on the sample as a whole revealed the presence of simple structure, with both components showing a number of strong loadings, and all variables loading substantially on only one component. This is mirrored in the analyses conducted on separate age and gender groups, although significant differences are visible. For example, early- to mid-adolescents showed greater simple structure than the two other age groups (i.e., at this age, all items loaded onto only one factor). This is in contrast to late adolescence, as a number of items failed to load on either component, and late childhood, where a number of items loaded onto the opposing factor. In addition, boys and girls showed broadly similar categorisation of behaviours, as well as presence of simple structure. However, two items in particular loaded onto different components in these two groups (*Does Not Brag* and *Inclusive*).

Internal consistencies and composite mean scores for each factor in each group are shown in Table 2. After examining the types of items loading onto each factor, factor labels of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ were proposed for factors 1 and 2 respectively. Across all groups (with some minor variations, as discussed above) seven items with characteristics congruent with the male gender role consistently loaded onto factor 2 (*Humorous, Willing to Play, Provides Physical Assistance, Good Sport, Stands up for Others, Keeps Confidences, and Confronts Others When Wrong*). Items congruent with the female gender role (e.g., *Providing Emotional Support*) and those with no obvious gender characterisation (e.g., *Honest*) loaded onto factor 1 in most groups. Other explanations were explored, such as whether items loaded due to their behaviour type, but these were not supported. Overall, these analyses indicated that two distinct factors were underlying the responses given to these items, and that participants may have rated these items based on their congruency with the male or female gender role.

# Discussion

Results from the present study indicate that, from a young age, children and adolescents judge certain forms of prosocial behaviour to be male-typed. This is the first study to demonstrate that prosociality is not uniformly female-typed across this age range, and does so uniquely by utilising a broader range of prosocial behaviours than is typical in this area of research. Importantly, these results are highly reflective of the agentic vs. communal dichotomy of prosocial behaviours shown in men and women respectively as adults ([Eagly, 2009](#_ENREF_8)). The differential gender-typing of prosocial behaviours seen in this study may therefore provide a precursor to gender differences in prosocial behaviour observed in adulthood, as the implications of these judgements are absorbed and enacted (i.e., as children make assumptions regarding the appropriateness of these actions for boys and girls). It is important to note that this study does not measure the performance of prosocial behaviours, but rather aims to conceptualise the development of judgements about the appropriateness of certain behaviours for boys and girls based on gender beliefs and stereotypes.

Many of the items (17) loaded onto the 1st component – Feminine. These items included behaviours that are synonymous with the female gender role, and are stereotypically feminine (e.g., *Providing Emotional Support*). In addition, items not obviously aligned with either gender role loaded onto this component (e.g., *Honest*). This is most likely due to the fact that prosociality is broadly thought of as feminine, and ‘neutral’ prosocial items often garner feminine ratings in gender-typing studies ([Zarbatany, Hartmann, Gelfand, & Vinciguerra, 1985](#_ENREF_40)). However, a distinct subset of seven behaviours (*Humorous, Willing to Play, Provides Physical Assistance, Good Sport, Stands up for Others, Keeps Confidences, and Confronts Others When Wrong*) loaded onto a 2nd, masculine component. All of these behaviours share characteristics representative of the male gender role, such as: being direct, involving physicality, involving dominance or competitive behaviour, or involving interaction in large group settings. These findings indicate that some prosocial behaviours are perceived to be masculine in childhood and adolescence. This is similar to the gender-typing of prosocial behaviours observed in adulthood ([Eagly, 2009](#_ENREF_8)) and is in direct contrast to previous research suggesting that prosociality is consistently female-typed across this age range ([Eisenberg, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_10); [Hine & Leman, 2013](#_ENREF_21)). This is an important finding, as the acknowledgement by children and adolescents of male-typed prosocial behaviours may allow for some element of freedom for boys to express positive moral acts, whilst still presenting as congruent with the expected behaviour of their gender.

Notably, there was a strong loading of *Humour* onto the second masculine component. Humour has been linked to peer acceptance, likeability, and perceived social competence in children aged 4-7 years ([Sletta, Søbstad, & Valås, 1995](#_ENREF_34)) and may be a form of prosociality in that it encourages positive social interaction. Boys in particular have been shown to use humour to gain status ([Huuki, Manninen, & Sunnari, 2010](#_ENREF_24)) and power in social groups ([Hobday-Kusch & McVittie, 2002](#_ENREF_22)) and humour is included in sets of characteristics used to describe a boy as ‘popular-prosocial’ ([de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006](#_ENREF_6)). However, as with some other items used in this study (e.g., *Confronts Others when Wrong*), humour could be equally interpreted as antisocial behaviour. For example, social assertiveness (typically important in group dynamics for boys; Savin-Williams, 1979) has been shown to be a strong predictor of humour in young adults ([Bell, McGhee, & Duffey, 1986](#_ENREF_4)). Boys may therefore use humour for positive gains, but these interactions may not necessarily be positive in and of themselves. However, the findings from this study suggest that boys may utilise humour to foster positive social interactions with peers to a greater extent than girls, and that using humour (in a prosocial context) is male-typed.

Some small variations in loading patterns also occurred between different groups. For example, when looking at age differences, early- to mid-adolescents demonstrated a much clearer distinction between male- and female-typed behaviours than children in late childhood or late-adolescence. Studies suggest that gender stereotypes consolidate and intensify at this age ([Galambos, Almedia, & Petersen, 1990](#_ENREF_15); [Hill & Lynch, 1983](#_ENREF_20)) and that gender stereotype flexibility significantly decreases ([Bartini, 2006](#_ENREF_3); [Huston & Alvarez, 1990](#_ENREF_23); [McHale, Shanahan, Updegraff, Crouter, & Booth, 2004](#_ENREF_28)). In addition, gender stereotype flexibility has also been shown to decrease when children make significant transitions in the school system (for example, from primary to secondary school; Alfieri, Ruble, & Higgins, 1996), and a substantial proportion of the children in this middle age group will have just experienced this type of change. These two explanations taken together would suggest that any differential gender-typing of prosocial behaviour would be particularly clear at this age in comparison to younger and older children, who may be more flexible in their thinking and more settled in their schools. Other explanations include cohort effects, as a large proportion of the children in the early- to mid-adolescent group were from the same secondary school, and something about this shared environment could have led to more extreme judgements. However, it must be noted that overall patterns of gender-typing across age shared more similarities than differences.

Boys showed slightly clearer loading patterns compared to girls, suggesting that boys are much more distinctive in their categorisation of prosocial behaviours as masculine vs. feminine. This may be due to boys’ greater stereotype preferences compared to girls ([Ruble & Martin, 1998](#_ENREF_31)). Furthermore, boys may have greater knowledge about which behaviours are distinctly masculine, due to the relevance of these behaviours to their same-gender schemas as proposed by gender schema theory ([Martin & Halverson, 1981](#_ENREF_26)). This theory posits that children are motivated to seek out, attend to, and remember more same-gender than opposite-gender information. Boys are therefore more likely to attend to information about prosocial actions that they believe to be masculine, and rate them as such when prompted. Alternatively, boys and girls could simply differ in their conceptualisations of these behaviours. For example, the differential gender-typing of *Does Not Brag, Inclusive* and *Confronts Others When Wrong* may be based on contrary understandings of what constitutes these behaviours, and therefore who is more likely to perform them. Largely however, both boys and girls gender-typed items in a similar way, most likely reflecting their similar acquisition of gender stereotype knowledge across childhood including that pertaining to prosocial behaviour. This demonstrates that, from a young age, all children acknowledge that a select number of prosocial behaviours are more likely to be performed by boys.

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, participants came from schools and colleges in the South East of England and form a largely homogenous sample. Norms and ideals regarding prosociality and gender vary within and between cultures and ethnic groups, and future research should attempt to assess the consistency of gender-typing patterns utilising more heterogeneous samples. Second, whilst these results provide strong evidence for the gender-typing of these behaviours, data on the behaviour of participants was not gathered within this study. It is therefore not possible to assess whether the gender-typing observed in this study affects real behaviour (i.e., do boys perform male-typed behaviours more frequently and girls more female-typed ones). Future research should seek to assess the causal relationship between the gender-typing of prosociality and prosocial behaviour in children, preferably from a longitudinal perspective. In addition, data regarding *why* participants gender-type behaviours as masculine or feminine would provide valuable insight into how important social information might be in performing prosocial behaviour and judging that of others, particularly in relation to domain theory ([Turiel, 1983](#_ENREF_37), [1998](#_ENREF_38)). Finally, a total of only 31.4% variance was explained by the two-factor model. This suggests that there may be other factors that better define and group these behaviours. However, this is still a considerable amount of variance explained, and the strong masculine characteristics of the behaviours loading on the 2nd component suggest that this is the correct way to categorise these items and factors.

Evidence that prosocial behaviours are differentially gender-typed across childhood and adolescence is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that using limited descriptors of prosocial behaviour (such as helping, sharing etc.) as items in research may not allow for the masculine ratings shown in these results. Instead, ‘traditional’ prosocial items may encourage participants to provide feminine ratings, which may in turn perpetuate the stereotype of prosocial behaviour as inherently feminine. This process may fundamentally discourage boys from performing the wide variety of prosocial behaviours they are capable of, or from performing prosocial actions altogether. Second, by acknowledging the early existence of male-typed prosocial behaviours, or the ‘male prosocial niche’, we better understand the complex relationship between gender and prosocial behaviour. Specifically, how social information may encourage or discourage certain forms of prosociality depending on their congruence with gender roles, despite the identification of these actions as morally positive. By tracking the development of the distinction between prosocial behaviours that are appropriate for boys and those appropriate for girls, researchers can better understand the underlying mechanisms that influence performance of these actions throughout the lifespan. This is vital not only in breaking down the feminine prosocial stereotype, but in encouraging the decision to act prosocially on the moral nature of the behaviour, rather than on its gender appropriateness, in children and adults alike.

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