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# Role of Gender in Prosocial Behaviour

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## Abstract

Prosocialness, the intention to help others is one of the important aspects of a well-functioning society. Factors influencing helping behavior are not limited to feeling, ideas, or willingness but include other factors like gender. Research has been conducted to investigate whether there is a 'more helpful' gender. To investigate the role of gender Diversity in findings has been reported regarding gender differences in prosocial behavior. Considering these findings, this paper is aimed to study the gender differences in prosocial behavior among young adults. It was hypothesized that there will be a gender difference in prosocial behavior among young adults. This research was conducted on 500 university students (both males=250, females=250) selected from government universities of Karachi. The age of the university students was between 18-25 years. In addition to Demographic details, The Prosocialness Scale for Adults (Caprara, Steca, Zelli, & Capanna, 2005) was used in the study. Independent sample t-test was applied for the analysis. Results showed significant gender differences in prosocial behavior among young adults.

**Keywords:** Prosocial Behaviour, Gender Differences, Young Adults, University Students, Gender Role.

## Introduction

Development of a balanced and well-functioning society depends on many factors including positive interpersonal relationships. Prosocialness, the intention to help others is considered one of the main elements of these relationships (Caprara, Steca, Zelli & Capanna, 2005). To be more precise, prosocialness includes prosocial conduct as well as the feelings, ideas, and intentions that lead up to it (Santos, Pimentel, Mariano & Abreu, 2023). Prosocialness can also be an indication of a healthy functioning society that works for the prevention of negative elements and increases the positive effects on society (Streit, Carlo & Killoren, 2020). Behaviour aimed at benefiting others, known as prosocial behaviour, yields numerous positive outcomes for individuals and society.

People who demonstrate increased helpfulness experience enhanced self-esteem, improved academic performance, and stronger interpersonal connections (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). Furthermore, engaging in prosocial actions may enhance adolescents' capacity for perspective-taking and empathic concern (Carlo, Crockett, Wolff & Beal. 2012). In addition to this, individuals exhibiting prosocial behaviour contribute positively

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to society by offering assistance, support, and facilitation (Shin-an & Cooney, 2006). Prosocial behaviour can be an outcome of many motivating factors, altruism is one of them. Any action or behaviour motivated to enhance the well-being of another person is known as altruism, particularly when it is clear that the helper will not directly benefit from it (Batson, Ahmad & Stocks, 2011; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder & Penner, 2006). Donating blood, helping an unknown person who has been trapped on the highway, motivated to opt for donation, or taking active steps to prevent a crime from happening all exemplify altruism.

Numerous acts of kindness take place all around us every day. While some symbolize genuine helping intentions, others show helping behaviour driven more by self-interest. Of course, there are also examples in which we behave indifferently to the needs of others and provide no help at all (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin & Schroeder, 2005). Along with altruism, prosocial behaviour may occur because of perceived similarity and genetic factors. According to Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, and Neuberg (1997), most of the helping behaviour is motivated by the perceived similarity—the "oneness"—between the person in need and the person who helps them. This is also noted that the intentions to help others are influenced by perceived similarity and genetic relationships.

People are more inclined to help strangers who are more like them, offer more help to friends as compared to strangers, and offer more help to members of their groups instead of outgroups' members (Dovidio, Gaertner, Validzic, Matoka, Johnson & Frazier, 1997; Krupp, DeBruine & Barclay, 2008; Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp & Siem, 2006). Even though it makes sense that people would like to offer help to those who are connected to them or who they assume to be like them, why would anyone offer help to those who are not similar or related? Reciprocal altruism is one theory that may explain this kind of behaviour. Reciprocal altruism emphasizes that people engage in prosocial behaviours with the intent that they will receive the same helping behaviour if they ever need their assistance and support. Consequently, people engage in increased prosocial behaviour because they consider it a mechanism of enhancing survival chances of their own and of others as well. (Trivers, 1971).

In addition, it is equally crucial to identify the aspects of prosocialness that occur at various developmental stages. For instance, moral identity, as well as the subsequent prosocialness, is formed during adolescence due to the effects of socialization (Carlo & Padilla-Walker, 2020). Unlike childhood, the individuals do not focus on family, they mostly rely on peers during this period. According to Busching and Krahé (2020), adolescents in prosocial classrooms are likely to adopt such behaviours in the future too. However, in adults, family and social transitions are the primary sources of prosocial tendencies (Arnett, 2000). Regardless of the difference, Davis, Martin-Cuellar & Luce (2019) reported six types of helping behaviour that is equally common both in adolescents and adults: helping behaviour

caused by emotions, providing help in any crisis, giving help when asked, providing help openly in public or anonymously, and selfless altruistic helping behaviour. Furthermore, emphasis has also been placed on other factors causing individual differences like personality traits and gender. People vary in their personality traits and this can be one of the reasons some people offer more help than others. Gender is another factor that influences prosocial behaviour; women are thought to be more inclined to provide help (Sajjad, Ambreen & Tahir, 2021).

## Rationale of the Study

Several studies have explored gender differences in prosocial behaviour both nationally and internationally (Abdullahi & Kumar, 2016; Batool, Ahsen, Bibi & Khalid, 2023; Durrani, Ambreen & Looni, 2023; Olsson et al., 2021; Sajjad, Ambreen & Tahir, 2021). It was noted that the findings of these studies are inconclusive. Moreover, very few researchers have identified in Pakistan, regarding gender differences in prosocial behaviour (Batool, Ahsen, Bibi & Khalid, 2023; Durrani, Ambreen & Looni, 2023; Sajjad, Ambreen & Tahir, 2021) among young adults. It indicates the scarcity of literature on gender differences in prosocial behaviour with reference to Pakistani culture. It shows an intense need to explore gender differences in prosocial behaviour in the context of Pakistani culture. Considering inconsistency in findings and limited literature on gender differences in Pakistan, this study aims to investigate the gender difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults.

## Aim of the Study

The research aimed to study the gender difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults.

## Hypothesis

There will be a gender difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults.

## Operational Definition: Prosocial Behaviour

Abdullahi and Kumar (2016) define prosocial behaviour as a voluntary act to help and support others (Caprara, Steca, Zelli & Capanna, 2005).

## Limitations and Implications

This research was conducted on university students of public sector universities in Karachi. Therefore, the findings of this study can only be generalized to students of public sector universities. Moreover, since Karachi is a metropolitan city with a

diverse population, this factor also limits its generalization to any other city that does not possess similar characteristics. Despite these limitations, this study will contribute to the existing literature on gender differences in prosocial behaviour specifically concerning Pakistani culture. Moreover, this research can also help in designing interventions targeting young adults. The findings of this study can also help in planning strategies specifically for females to enhance their prosocial behaviour and positive contribution to society.

## Review of the Literature

Prosocial behaviour has been studied with different variables and research has shown that individuals who exhibit prosocial behaviour experience reduced anxiety symptoms (Miles, Andiappan, Upenieks & Orfanidis, 2021). Additionally, a systematic review conducted by Preston and Rew (2022) identified prosocial behaviour as a protective factor against social isolation. Not only this, but engaging in prosocial acts can also improve mental states, including life satisfaction, well-being, and psychological flourishing. These beneficial effects can persist for weeks or even months after the completion of a helping behaviour (Layous, Nelson, Kurtz & Lyubomirsky, 2017). Studies also suggested that prosocial behaviours generate positive emotions and increase happiness (Aknin, Wiwad & Hanniball, 2018).

Along with this, the predictive value of prosocial behaviour for individuals' personal and social adjustment is well-established (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura & Zimbardo, 2000). Evidence indicates that an individual's characteristic prosocial conduct acts as a shield against experiences of depression and behavioural problems, while simultaneously promoting and sustaining academic achievement during adolescence (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996). Moreover, two recent meta-analyses have uncovered that prosocial activities yield positive effects on "emotional well-being," an umbrella term encompassing happiness, well-being, positive mood, psychological flourishing, and the absence of negative emotions (Hui et al., 2020).

Moreover, studies have revealed a positive association between prosocial conduct and contentment with life. A study by Hunter and Lin (1981) indicated that retirees aged 65 and above who participated in volunteer activities experienced higher life satisfaction, reduced depression, and lower anxiety levels. Additionally, prosocial actions have been found to yield greater emotional well-being in comparison to other activities (Nelson, Layous, Cole & Lyubomirksy, 2016). This phenomenon may be attributed to prosocial behaviours satisfying essential psychological requirements for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Martela & Ryan, 2016), or potentially addressing a need for morality (Prentice, Jayawickreme & Fleeson, 2020). Helpful acts might also elicit positive cognitions and additional constructive behaviours, further enhancing well-being (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Although the

precise mechanisms underlying the effects of prosocial behaviour on happiness are still under investigation, the fundamental relationship appears to be consistent. Moreover, individuals who perform prosocial acts for others report higher levels of emotional well-being than those engaged in self-oriented activities (Nelson, Layous, Cole & Lyubomirksy, 2016).

Furthermore, research has been done in the area of gender differences in prosocial behaviour both domestically and internationally (Abdullahi & Kumar, 2016; Durrani, Ambreen & Looni, 2023; Olsson, Froehlich, Dorrough & Martiny, 2021; Santos, Pimentel, Gunther & Mariano, 2024). According to the kind of help they offer, diversified findings are concluded on gender differences in prosocial behaviour. It is noted that females are more inclined to provide empathetic and emotional help in contrast men mostly offer chivalrous and heroic helping. (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Moreover, Feinman (1978) reported that males have higher intentions to help others than females. Another research identified no significant gender difference in prosocial behaviour (Boice & Goldman, 1981) In addition to this, males are found to be more helpful than females according to a detailed meta-analytic review conducted by Eagly and Crowley (1986).

As mentioned above, prior studies have shown inconsistent results regarding gender disparities in prosocial behaviour. One potential explanation is that individuals conform to societal expectations of their gender roles in various spheres, including work and home environments. These gender-based differences extend to helping behaviours as well. Men typically exhibit agentic forms of assistance, which align with masculine characteristics such as risk-taking, assertiveness, and status-seeking. In contrast, women often display communal forms of help, corresponding to feminine traits like warmth, other orientation, and nurturing. The gender role perspective offers insight into these differences in helping behaviours. Research indicates that while both genders are inclined to assist others, the nature of their help differs systematically, particularly in contexts where gender roles are prominent (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Another potentially underlying cause of mixed findings on prosocial gender differences could be the assumption that women are more considerate of others and more fascinated with relations than men. Not only this, women as compared to men are more likely to describe themselves as being prosocial (Gardner & Gabriel, 2004). Moreover, Lippa (1998) also concluded that women generally show more concern for people as compared to things, on the other hand, men show more concern for things not for people. In their cross-sectional study of employed adults, Dyke and Murphy (2006) inquired about currently employed middle-aged adults with prominent and extraordinary accomplishments in their chosen field to describe their concept of success. Success in relationships was cited more frequently by women as compared to men. Furthermore, cultural norms and expectations

contribute to the mixed findings on gender differences in prosocial behaviour. In collectivistic societies like Pakistan, men are generally expected and more likely to assist in high-risk situations, such as offering unsolicited help to strangers or performing heroic acts during emergencies. Women, on the other hand, are less inclined to help when they perceive the situation as dangerous and are less likely to offer unsolicited (as opposed to requested) assistance to strangers. Men's generally larger physical size and overrepresentation in physically demanding professions give them an advantage in heroic scenarios that require physical strength, such as rescuing individuals from fires or drowning (Heilman & Eagly, 2008).

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

A Cross-sectional research design was used to conduct the study. This research was conducted for a large-scale study for PhD thesis and this paper was extracted from that research.

### Sample

500 university students including both males (N=250) and females (N=250) participated in the study. The age range of the participants was 18-25 years. Data were collected from different departments of the public sector universities of Karachi. Data was collected using the Convenience sampling technique.

### Instruments

The instrument included a Demographic form and Prosocialness Scale for Adults (Caprara, Steca, Zelli & Capanna, 2005).

#### 1. Demographic Form

Demographics included age, gender, academic year, and marital status.

#### 2. Prosocialness Scale for Adults

The Prosocialness Scale for Adults (PSA) is developed by Caprara, Steca, Zelli, and Capanna (2005). The scale not only measures feelings and behavioural intentions for prosocial behaviour but also focuses on empathetic concerns for others' needs and problems. The Prosocialness Scale for Adults includes 16 items with a 5-point response set from ‘1’ (Never/Almost Never) to ‘5’ (Always/Almost Always). The scale shows good psychometric properties across different countries in analysis based on Item response theory. In addition, Cronbach’s alpha of the Prosocialness Scale for Adults was found as .91.

## Procedure

500 participants from various public universities were approached for the study. Eligibility criteria included being between 18 and 25 years old and enrolled in a Public Sector University. Individuals with diagnosed mental or physical conditions were not included in the research. Potential participants were asked to volunteer and were provided with a brief overview of the study's objectives, the time commitment required to complete the questionnaire, and their freedom to withdraw at any point. Researchers assured participants that their personal information would remain confidential and would only be used for research purposes. After acquiring verbal informed consent, written informed consent was also obtained. The research was then conducted using instruments that included a Demographic form and the Prosocialness Scale for Adults. Throughout the data collection process, a researcher was present to address any questions from the participants.

## Statistical Analysis

Cronbach Alpha was used to establish the reliability of the questionnaire. Demographics analysis was carried out using mean, frequency, and percentage. Moreover, an Unrelated t-test was used to examine the gender difference in the prosocial behaviours of university students.

**Table 1**

**Cronbach's Alpha Value (N=500)**

| Name of the Scale | No. of Items Alpha | Cronbach's |
|---|---|---|
| Prosocialness Scale for Adults | 16 | .770 |

The table shows the value of Cronbach's Alpha .770. This indicates that all items measure prosocial behaviour.

**Table 2**

**Demographic Details of Study Participants**

| Demographics | n(%) |
|---|---|
| **1. Gender** | |
| Male | 250(50%) |
| Female | 250(50%) |
| **2. Qualification** | |
| BS I | 132(26.8%) |
| BS II | 141(28.2%) |
| BS III | 114(22.8%) |
| BS IV | 111(22.2%) |
| **3. Marital Status** | |
| Single | 479(95.8%) |
| Married | 17(3.4%) |
| Widowed | 2(4%) |
| Seperated | 2(4%) |
| **4. Age** | Mean age 21 years<br>18-24 (Range) |

***Note.*** BS= Bachelor of Science

The table shows an analysis of the demographics of the study. The age range of the university students was from 18-24 years while the mean age was noted as 21 years. In addition, 250 male and 250 female students participated in the study. Along with this, the qualification of students was BSI 26.8%, BSII 28.2%, BSIII 22.8%, and BSIV 22.2%. Regarding marital status, the majority of the students were single (95.8%) while the remaining included married (3.4%), widowed (4%), and separated (4%).

**Table 3**

**Gender Differences in Prosocialness Scale for Adults among Young Adults**

| Variables | Males[1] | | Females[2] | | *t(498)* | *P* | *Cohen's d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| **Prosocialness Scale for Adults** | 52.83 | 7.981 | 51.10 | 7.465 | 2.500 | 0.013 | 0.22 |

*Note*. N= 500, *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation

Gender differences in prosocial behaviour among young adults were explored using an Unrelated t-test and a significant gender difference **t**= 2.500, **p**<0.05 was found. It was noted that males scored higher on prosocial behaviour (**M**= 52.83, **SD**= 7.981) than females (**M**= 51.10, **SD**= 7.465).

## Discussion

The research aimed to see the gender difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults. It was hypothesized that there would be a gender difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults. Results showed a significant gender difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults (see results Table 03). It was noted that males and females significantly differ in their tendency to help others. Moreover, it was also observed that males showed increased prosocial behaviour compared to females. These findings are also supported by other researchers (Carlo, Crockett, Randall & Roesch, 2007; Nielson, Padilla-Walker & Holmes, 2017).

While understanding intentions to help others, one must consider the internal motivating factors of the person providing help. One of the significant internal motivating factors can be the helper's emotional state. Sometimes people intend to help others to get relief from distress and negative emotions they are experiencing (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1973). Consequently, it might be possible that male participants of the research may experience more distress seeing anyone who needed help and as a result showed more intentions to help others to get relief from that negative emotional state. It is also supported by another research (Krebs, 1975) in which men experiencing increased distress while responding to people in need offered more help to the needy person.

Another explanation of the study's findings could be the cultural and social expectations. This study was done in Pakistan which has a collectivistic society and consequently has certain gender-related expectations and norms. Men are expected to be primary providers and protectors. This expectation could encourage them to engage in helping behaviours that benefit others, as part of their social role. Similarly, men from their childhood are trained to be cooperative with others and are encouraged to work in social groups, with a focus on benefiting others. They are usually encouraged to take on family responsibilities and participate in community support activities which could increase their level of prosocial behaviour (Saleem, Mahmood & Daud, 2017). Also, another reason for this gender difference could be that, collectivist cultures usually promote more traditional gender roles where females are expected to focus on family caregiving and maintaining social harmony. Whereas men find more opportunities and are also expected to interact with the larger community (Lai, Zhang & Wang, 2000).

Another important factor can be personality traits like neuroticism. Neuroticism is defined as being emotionally unstable. Individuals with high levels of neuroticism show increased levels of anxiety, nervousness, fear, irritation, jealousy, and suspiciousness. It was noted that females show high scores on neuroticism as compared to men also confirmed by research conducted by Costa et al. (2001) in which females reported a higher level of neuroticism than men. Along with this, it

was also identified that neuroticism and helping behaviour are negatively correlated with each other (Chishti, 2002). Therefore, it might be possible females who participated in the study might have an increased level of neuroticism and as a result showed a lower level of prosocial behaviour than men.

Along with this, self-compassion may also be one of the important reasons to provide help or not to people in need. Self-compassion is the ability to be non-judgmental and avoid self-criticism especially when anyone is experiencing negative emotions. Self-compassion helps people to be kind to them when facing any challenge, failure, or distress. To be empathetic towards others is also an important aspect of self-compassion. Research showed people with increased self-compassion show more helping behaviour than people with low self-compassion (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). In addition to this, it was also identified that males are more likely to be self-compassionate than females (DeVore & Pritchard, 2013). Therefore, it might be possible that males who participated in the study were more self-compassionate than females and consequently showed more intentions to help people in need than females.

In addition to the above-discussed factors, a sense of autonomy can also be a significant factor in offering help to anyone in need. A sense of autonomy is a sense of freedom a person experiences that indicates he or she can freely select any activity or action (Deci, 1971). It was noted that males experience an increased sense of autonomy compared to females (Kirsh & Kuiper, 2002). Moreover, a significant positive association was also identified between helping behaviour and a sense of freedom (Gagné, 2003). Therefore, it might be possible that males who participated in the study might have a higher level of sense of autonomy than females, and consequently showed increased intentions to provide help to others as compared to females.

## Conclusion

The study aimed to explore gender differences in prosocial behaviour among young adults. It was hypothesized that there would be significant gender differences in intentions to offer help among young adults. The findings of the research showed gender differences in prosocial behaviour as males scored higher on prosocial behaviour as compared to females. This indicates that males show more intention in offering help than females. There may be many contributing factors to these findings such as increased internal motivation to help, cultural and social expectations regarding gender roles, increased self-compassion, and possessing personality traits like neuroticism and a sense of autonomy.

According to these findings, it has been concluded that gender plays a very vital role in designing prosocial tendencies and they are triggered by many factors like, social, psychological, and cultural. The research has indicated that prosocial behaviour is a

very dynamic and complex subject and is highly influenced by socio-cultural, biological, and psychological factors. Normally women are more nurturing and empathetic in nature and are more into social services and these attributes connect women with traditional gender roles i.e., interpersonal relationships and social interconnection. By contrast, men act prosocially in agentic and heroic fashions by doing things such as acts of courage, altruism in the public eye, or economic help, which tend to be identified with masculinity and cultural expectations around strength and guarding. These distinctions between men and women are relative and not determined by any unchangeable male-female differences but by variations in socialization, culture, and individual variations. Cultural standards significantly influence whether men or women show prosociality. Boys and girls are taught from the very beginning to display different patterns of helping behaviours based on what is traditionally expected of gender roles. Yet, as gender roles become increasingly flexible, the difference in prosocial action may continue to decrease, so that people can demonstrate altruism in a variety of ways without regard to gender. One interpretation of these results is the effect of internal motivation, in which men might have a greater intrinsic motivation to help others. Cultural and societal expectations around gender roles could also play a key role.

Historically, men are traditionally viewed as protectors and providers, and this could lead them to help more often, especially in situations where physical assistance is needed. However, prosocial behaviour manifests in a variety of ways, for instance, self-compassion, being autonomous, and even neuroticism as well. But, on the contrary, the research has also identified that prosocial behaviour can be reflected in many ways and can have a wide range of outcomes. Though men show higher scores in prosocial behaviour but, women are seen as more enthusiastic nurturing, and empathetic based activities. These findings raise a need to explore further to investigate specific conditions under which men and women show different gender attributes. In addition, the study concludes that gender roles are key factors in shaping prosocial behaviours but, other than gender roles there are many other factors as well which help in shaping people's beahivours towards each other, and prosocial behaviour reflects more on the values of individuals and societal demands.

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