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Popular Peers Promote Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

Dispositions for prosociality undergo major changes during adolescence, a period of increased sensitivity to peer influence and incipient internalization of societal norms. However, the proximate mechanisms favoring the development of prosocial preferences are poorly understood. Here, we show that high-status peers affect adolescents prosocial decision making. Participants repeatedly chose to either donate money to a charity or keep it for themselves and could revise their decision upon observing the (opposite) decisions of either a high-status or low-status peer from their classroom. Participants tended to conform to peer behavior, reversing their initial preference. Importantly, this pattern was especially strong when observing high-status peers, suggesting that norm signalling from high-status peers can be instrumental for the diffusion of prosocial behavior. Using a novel incentivized paradigm in a naturalistic setting, we provide experimental evidence for the role of high-status peers in the development of prosocial preferences and outline a potential path for interventions aimed at spreading prosocial norms.