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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Learning not to help in Nanjing and London—Cultural elaboration of empathy in childhood

Anni Kajanus 

London School of Economics and Political Science,  
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

**Correspondence**

Anni Kajanus, London School of Economics and  
Political Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki  
00100, Finland.

Email: [anni.kajanus@helsinki.fi](mailto:anni.kajanus@helsinki.fi)

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**Abstract**

Helping is one of the key features of human sociality. The ethnographic record is pervaded by accounts of people doing things with and for each other from an early age. Developmental psychology has shown that by the time children begin to walk and talk, they already display helpful behavior in many situations. These findings suggest that the propensity to help is biologically based, rather than directly taught. While doing research on children's cooperation in Nanjing, China, and London, UK, it became clear to me that school-aged children were socialized into *not helping*, rather than helping. This raises the question: what are some of the cultural and psychological processes shaping this core human behavior? To address this, I bring together three levels of culturally grounded analysis: helping behaviors, the cognition of empathy, and its emotional underpinnings. Drawing on cultural ontologies of personhood, I show that in London, children are expected to be generally helpful, but not at a great cost to themselves, while in Nanjing, there is less emphasis on general helpfulness, but highly costly helping is expected in particular relationships.

**KEYWORDS**

child development, emotions, empathy, helping, personhood

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## INTRODUCTION

Anthropological and psychological research on children's helping has produced two robust findings. First, humans are remarkably helpful from very early on. A substantial body of experimental studies has shown that around one year of age, infants are already willing to help those around them in many ways (Tomasello, 2009; Warneken, 2016). Around the world, young children are so eager to pitch in that some communities prefer to curb this desire (Lancy, 2020). Second, not only the social conventions of helping but also its developmental trajectories are culturally shaped. Anthropological studies have shown that in less supportive cultural environments, the strong desire to help children start with is all but gone by middle childhood, while it continues to flourish in environments that highly value children's help and are tolerant of its early manifestations (Klein et al., 2008; Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009). Given that humans have the cognitive capacities and the psychological motivations (however diverse) to help others from early on in ontogeny, they must learn the culturally specific ways of helping, and perhaps even more importantly, *not* helping. During my fieldwork with seven- to nine-year-old school children in Nanjing, China, and London, UK, it became clear that the socialization process into helping was not primarily about learning to be helpful, which came easily. It was about learning not to help. While moral education in schools included a general narrative of being helpful, the routine adult interventions in the course of daily life were mostly prompted by children helping too much, in inappropriate ways, or helping the wrong people. The wrong kind of helping often stemmed from the disjuncture between the children's emotional impulses to help and the norms of helping.

Developmental psychology studies have found that while children start with a relatively indiscriminate motivation to help, later in ontogeny the motivation to help comes to be mediated by such considerations as reciprocity and the degree of shared cultural values and norms (Warneken, 2015; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). However, the majority of these studies have focused on early childhood and Euro-American middle-class populations. Ethnographic records of children's helping, reviewed by David Lancy (2020), give more insights into how exactly the trajectories of helping develop later in childhood, in diverse cultural-historical contexts. Few of these anthropological studies have helping in their analytical focus (with the notable exception of Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009), and mostly provide behavioral records. Lancy's (2020) own analysis focuses on the problem of how the biologically based helper stage, from fourteen months to around seven years (2020, p. 37), comes to be extinguished in societies that do not provide a trajectory for children to make real contributions to their family and community through work. Lancy calls for more experimental studies of the helper stage in indigenous communities, and more ethnographic studies of children's helping in WEIRD<sup>1</sup> societies (2020, pp. 182–83).

In light of these previous findings on children's helping and the lack of it, my observation that the schools in London and Nanjing were mainly socializing children into not helping seems less surprising. Psychologists have drawn their evidence from early childhood, and anthropologists mostly from home environments, but I argue that exploring socialization into helping in a formal school environment during middle childhood, six to ten years (Lancy, 2020, p. 31), can provide a valuable view into developmental trajectories in cultural context. At seven to nine years of age, the children in this research were at the early stages of formal schooling and coming to the end of their developmental helper stage (Lancy, 2020). Their empathic responses and the school norms about helping were often in conflict. Looking at both, the adult interventions and the children's responses reveal something about the precise cultural and psychological processes that shape trajectories of helping.

I will use empathy as the entry point to examine trajectories of helping, which will allow me to go beyond the analysis of behaviors toward a more comprehensive view of the cognitive and emotional processes involved. I will argue that it is not only the behavioral patterns of helping that are cultural, but also the empathic responses underlying them. Empathy's main triggering portal, identification (de Waal, 2008), is grounded on cultural ontologies of personhood, which in turn is connected to broad moral codes of relating to others that shape people's everyday ethics of helping. My key ethnographic finding can be summarized as follows: In Nanjing, the cultural ontology of personhood gives rise to

*costlier* forms of helping *particular* others, while in London, it gives rise to a more *generalized, but less costly* helpfulness.

## DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON HELPING

What exactly do we mean when we talk about helping? In developmental psychology, helping usually refers to acting on behalf of others without immediate personal gain, at a varying cost to the actor (Warneken et al., 2007). Further distinctions include for example, instrumental (action-based and goal-oriented), empathic (emotion-based), and altruistic (costly) helping (Svetlova et al., 2010). Anthropologists have tended to focus on long-term, sustained patterns of communal action, which makes it harder to define individual acts of helping as altruistic, as over time, the interests of community members intersect in various ways (Lancy, 2020). In psychology, in contrast, there has been an effort to distinguish altruistic helping from mutualism, that is engaging in collaboration that benefits everyone involved (Dovidio et al., 2017). From an evolutionary perspective, the mechanisms of both altruism and mutualism are of interest, but it is the former that presents a puzzle to be solved. The cognitive and psychological bases of helping behaviors have been widely debated. Similarly, to other mechanisms of cooperation, such as sharing and knowing the intentions of others, helping is founded on the ability to represent the internal states and goals of others, and to differentiate them from one's own, that is theory of mind (Bischof-Köhler, 1991; Mascolo & Fischer, 2007; Moore, 2007). Cognitive scientists Laura Schlingloff-Nemecz and colleagues have defined the mature concept of helping that adults, as opposed to very young children, have, as: "any action directed at increasing the utility of another goal-directed agent by intervening on that agent's action constraints." (Schlingloff-Nemecz et al., 2023, p. 69). The more motivationally oriented research on helping has connected it to the evolved substrate for altruism and empathy in humans (Tomasello, 2009; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992).

Audun Dahl and colleagues have challenged the emphasis on the natural propensity of infants to help (Warneken, 2015), which, they argue, should not lead us to ignore the role of scaffolding and socialization during early childhood (Dahl et al., 2017). Their work demonstrates that even in infancy, social context matters, and the helping behaviors of infants as young as under fifteen months old, are already shaped by daily interactions, and the propensity to help can increase with adult encouragement and scaffolding (Dahl et al., 2017, Dahl, 2018).

In recent models, the social cognitive skills and capacities required for helping on the one hand, and the psychological motivations to help on the other, have been brought together (Warneken, 2016). One of the challenges in experimental research with infants that aims to understand the developmental trajectory of helping has been to parse out the motivations behind helping behaviors. After all, it is difficult to know whether a one-year-old is helping a parent to empty the dishwasher because they are concerned over the needs of the parent, or because they enjoy the joint activity, are fascinated by the clatter of cups and plates, relish the praise that follows, or something else altogether (Svetlova et al., 2010). Nevertheless, experimental work that has controlled for rewards, praise, reputation, and social-norm adherence, has shown that infants sometimes help others simply out of altruistic concern, and the cognitive capacities and the psychological motivations to help develop early in ontogeny (Warneken, 2016). Helping is, therefore, an important mechanism of human cooperation, and has been included as such in the evolutionary frameworks of cooperation (Tomasello et al., 2012) and morality (Greene, 2013).

## CULTURALLY ELABORATED EMPATHY

The connection between helping and empathy is presumed in much of the work in both psychology and anthropology. From an evolutionary perspective, empathy might have evolved precisely as a proxy mechanism for altruistic helping (Hollan, 2012; de Waal, 2008). My first point is to emphasize that this

does not mean that empathy always results in acts of helping, or that all acts of helping are altruistic. But it might be that all acts of altruism, or even of helping, are grounded on some degree of empathy.

Psychological research shares an understanding of empathy as a way of knowing the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of another through a process of identification that has both emotional and cognitive dimensions (Hollan, 2012, p. 71). One of the models that anthropologists have found useful (Bubandt and Willerslev, 2015; Hollan, 2012) is the “Russian doll” -model of empathy by the primatologist Frans de Waal (2008). The layers of the Russian doll represent the evolutionary stages of empathy, the innermost layer being state-matching or emotional contagion. This process is automatic and unconscious, resulting from an activation of neural representations of similar states in the subject that are perceived in another. The second layer is concern for the well-being of the other, or sympathetic concern, which is grounded on the cognitive appraisal of the other’s situation. The outermost, and cognitively most complex, layer is empathic perspective-taking, which involves increasingly separating the self from the other. By taking the perspective of the other, a person attributes the emotional state induced in oneself to the other rather than the self. This perspective-taking and separation enables complex coordination of goals and actions, for example, directed altruistic helping. De Waal states that state-matching or sympathetic concern are not considered empathy on their own—empathy requires the cognitive process of perspective-taking. Perspective-taking without the emotional component is not empathy either. For de Waal, empathy in all its complexity, including emotional state-matching, concern over other’s well-being, and identification grounded on a separate sense of self, results in a person having an emotional stake in the well-being of another.

But humans do not go through life by being in a constant state of empathic response to the human and non-human others they encounter. Empathy is experienced with some more than with others and has a complete off switch. According to de Waal, this is possible because the main triggering portal of empathy is identification and the patterns of identification therefore shape experiences of empathy (de Waal, 2008). In other words, while the emotional resonance part of the empathetic response is quick and automatic, followed by a slower process of cognitive reasoning and judgment, empathy is not automatically triggered. People’s patterns of identification are profoundly shaped by their cultural environment, personal characteristics, roles, and life experiences. Paul Bloom has taken this partial nature of empathy as a key focus, to argue that as such, empathy provides for a poor moral compass. People tend to have more empathy towards those who are perceived as being close and similar to them, than those more at a distant or perceived as being different (Bloom, 2016).

As Hollan notes, anthropological contributions to research on the partiality of empathy are sorely needed, as “we need to identify and analyze more precisely and systematically the variety of cultural frameworks, social situations, and political-economic conditions, that tend to either suppress and inhibit basic empathy or amplify it into a frequent and reliable means of social knowing (Hollan, 2012, p. 76). Some headway toward this was made by the contributors to the edited volume *The Anthropology of Empathy* (Hollan & Throop, 2011), who provide ethnographic accounts of how processes akin to (but at times distinct from) empathy, are shaped by cultural frameworks of thinking and feeling, self and other, or emotion and action. For example, in several societies across the Pacific, emphatic-like responses revolve around active doing (Feinberg, 2011; Mageo, 2011; Throop, 2011; Lohmann, 2011). Due to a strong identification with the other, a person is compelled to do something, and the absence of such empathic acts calls into question the feeling of compassion, love, pity, or, as we may call it, empathy.

Anthropologists have also elaborated on the relationship between altruism and empathy, by pointing to the wealth of ethnographic evidence from societies that view reading the minds of others as immoral, impossible, or dangerous (Briggs, 1971; Robbins & Rumsey, 2008; Groark, 2008). Perhaps the most direct argument dislodging empathy from altruism has been made by Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev (2015), who call into question the automatic inclusion of the middle layer of de Waal’s (2008) Russian doll model. They suggest that emotional resonance and cognitive perspective-taking can come together without sympathetic concern, to form empathy. Furthermore, because empathy essentially involves maintaining a boundary between self and others, this perspective-taking can be harnessed for actions that range broadly in their motivation (e.g., the work of an ethnographer, mimesis in the course of hunting or torture).

Bubandt and Willerslev's argument is not novel per se, as most formal definitions of empathy emphasize its moral neutrality (Hollan 2012, p. 71), but it effectively makes the point that for empathy to be virtuous, let alone altruistic, it must lead to virtuous or altruistic actions.

In my view, the anthropological evidence presented here is not incongruous with a broad view of empathy as involving emotional resonance and cognitive perspective-taking, hinging on patterns of identification. The capacity and propensity for empathy are biologically based, but complex forms of empathy are culturally elaborated (Hollan, 2012). Considering that the triggering portal for empathy is identification (de Waal, 2008), I propose that the cultural ontologies of personhood, which in my field sites give grounds to either a more universalistic (in London) or particularistic (in Nanjing) moral code are particularly relevant here. Examining them helps to understand why the initial propensity to help starts to give way to different patterns of helping in adulthood. During ontogenetic development, the increasingly discriminative helping behaviors come to be grounded on a culturally elaborated complex empathy, which involves both emotional impulses and conscious processes of reasoning.

## FIELDWORK AND THE COMMUNITIES

My research is based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in two communities and schools in Nanjing (initial fieldwork 2015–2016 and further visits in 2017 and 2018); and 12 months of fieldwork (2017 to 2018) in one community and school in London. I have focused primarily on seven- to nine-year-old children. While none of these communities can easily be framed as WEIRD<sup>2</sup>, they share many of the characteristics that curb the desire to help in other societies (Lancy, 2020; Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009). Children spend most of their time in formal schooling and child-centered activities, and much of adult work happens out of sight.

In Nanjing, one of the schools is located in a semi-rural working-class community. It is of average quality by Chinese standards, and the families work in service and industry. The second school is a well-known elite school in a wealthy community. I lived in the second community for a total of nine months and divided my time between the schools. In each school, I spent my time in one classroom (thirty-five to forty children in each). Throughout the school year, I observed the daily classroom practice, play times, lunch, and after school clubs, and participated in trips and special events. I conducted in-depth interviews with the school leadership, teachers and teaching assistants. During further research visits (totaling 5 months) I lived in the first community with one of the families that participated in my research. I spent my time with the families outside of school, including daily dinners and social visits. I carried out in-depth interviews with five sets of parents in each community and accompanied two families on their week-long return visits to home villages. Toward the end of my fieldwork, I carried out developmental psychology experiments at the schools and local preschools, on morality and fairness (Kajanus et al., 2019), cooperation and competition (Kajanus, 2018, 2019), and hierarchical relations (Kajanus et al., 2020, Kajanus, 2024).

The school in London is located in a partly gentrified neighborhood of mixed housing. The Ofsted rating of the school is Good (on the scale of Outstanding, Good, Satisfactory, and Inadequate). The children attending the school come from a mix of working-class and middle-class backgrounds, and the school is ethnically and racially diverse. During the year of fieldwork, my children attended the school, and I was involved in the community as a parent and a researcher. I spent five months in one classroom of twenty-eight children. I carried out daily participant observation throughout the school day, including classes, lunch, and playtime, and joined other carers and children at the park after school. I took part in school trips, playdates, birthday parties, and social visits, and conducted interviews with the school leadership, teachers, teaching assistants, and five sets of parents. At the end of my fieldwork, I carried out experimental research on children's understanding of hierarchical relations (Kajanus et al., 2020; Kajanus, 2024).

## CULTURAL ONTOLOGIES OF PERSONHOOD AND HELPING

The general definition of helping as acting on behalf of someone covers forms of action that vary in terms of distribution of agency. This becomes clear when comparing the different colloquial uses of the verbs *bang* and *help* in China and the UK respectively. In China, helping generally means taking on a task completely, or replacing the helpee in a role or an activity. In the UK, it usually means engaging in a joint activity for the benefit of the helpee. When the intention is to ask the helper to take on a task completely, the commonly used phrase is not “Can you help me do X?”, but rather, “Can you do X for me?” In contrast, when you are asked for help in Chinese, you grab the entire box, not only the other end. The common request from parents to children in Nanjing, “Can you help me do your homework” would not make much sense in English. Of course, the English language does not lack ways of asking people to do favors, and the Chinese language has several ways of asking to complete a task jointly. But I suggest that this difference is, at a minimum, illustrative of two important differences in the broad cultural models for helping, that are available for my research participants in Nanjing and London. The first, I argue, has to do with the cost of helping the actor incurs, and the second with the degree to which the recipient of the help matters. Compared to the UK, requests for help in China generally involve a higher cost. People are expected to go out of their way to help others in their networks, but there is a lower expectation for general helpfulness. In the UK, people are expected to be generally helpful across the board, but their helping behaviors tend to be less costly than in China.

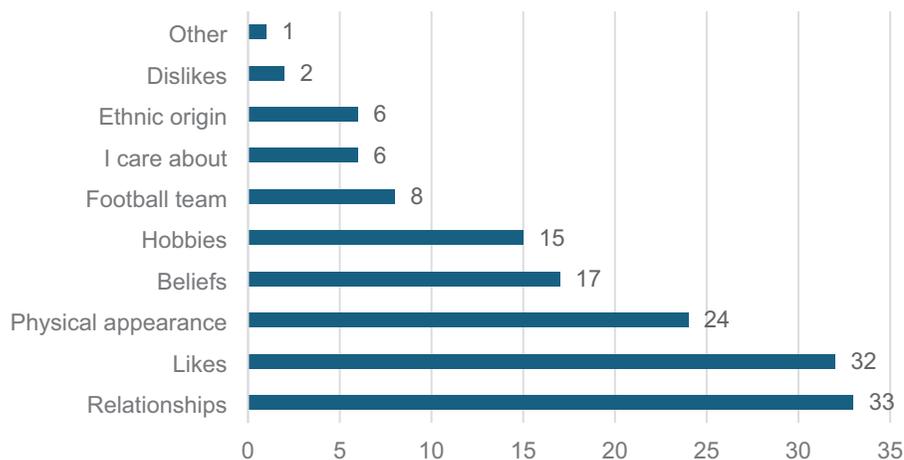
Examining how these broad differences in the patterns of helping are embedded in ideas about personhood, I find Fei Xiaotong’s (Fei et al., 1992 [1947]) classic analysis of egocentrism and individualism helpful. Fei argued that individualism, as he observed it mostly in the Anglo-American context, emphasizes membership in abstract groups (e.g., nation, humanity) and individual agency derives from the equal rights the group membership warrants. In egocentrism, which he used to broadly characterize Chinese sociality, concrete relationships between people are emphasized, and individual agency derives from relative positioning in these overlapping egocentric circles. These patterns of sociality give rise to universalistic and particularistic moral codes respectively. While individualism has the decentered perspective of the individual, and status is defined relative to abstract collective, egocentric status is primarily defined relative to ego, and individuals are unequal. Fei’s model of individualism and egocentrism has been subject to debate and reinterpretation (for a summary, see Feuchtwang & Bruckermann, 2016). While its early interpretations connected it to a simplistic individualism–collectivism distinction, in later developments this has been replaced by more sophisticated analyses of the variance of either vertical or horizontal emphasis in the collectivist and individualist orientations in different Chinese and Euro-American contexts (Triandis, 1995; Shavitt et al., 2011). In addition, the primacy of abstract groups as a source of individual agency can be defined as categorical collectivism, in contrast to the relational collectivism of Chinese egocentric social circles made of concrete relationships (Herrmann-Pillath, 2016; Chen, 2010). These debates continue to point to the relevance of the distinguishing elements of the original analysis, while no longer dichotomizing cultures. Collectivist, relational, and categorical elements can come together in various forms, on a continuum.

The broad cultural ontologies of personhood I observed in London and Nanjing, and the moral codes they give rise to, corresponded with Fei’s basic distinction between egocentrism and individualism. For my interlocutors in Nanjing, being a good person and living an ethical life was primarily achieved through appropriate ways of relating to and interacting with *particular others*. As I have argued elsewhere (Kajanus, 2024), in contrast to this broadly particularistic moral code, the broadly universalistic moral code in the London school maintained that a person must behave morally towards *all others*, regardless of their status or relationship. This moral principle is grounded on the universalistic idea of a shared unique personhood (Mauss, 1985).

The idea of a unique, autonomous individual, a moral agent bounded by their body (Smith, 2012), was paramount in the London school. Everyone is equal because everyone is a unique person. Illustrative of this is the assignment given to the children during a Philosophy for Children class on bullying. Ms.

**TABLE 1** Identity assignment, London School (assignments n: 20, items n: 144).

### Identity assignment, London School



Edwards started the class by saying: “Today we’ll be talking about what is bullying” but proceeded to talk about identity. “We’re all different, let’s think about what makes you, you.” She distributed sheets of paper with an outline of a human body and wrote three words on the whiteboard: looks, hobbies, and beliefs. Following her instructions, children discussed in pairs and populated the outline with things that made them unique. “Write it *inside* the person, if you then run out of room, you can go around the person”, Ms. Edwards instructed, and soon enough, these persons with clear bodily boundaries were filled with unique substances such as: “I am very pretty”, “I am a Rasta”, “I believe in Santa a little”, “My favorite hobby is football”, and “My thumb is very weird”. Ms. Edwards further encouraged the children to think about what they liked and felt passionate about. Likes and passions, such as: “I like school trips”, “I like burgers”, and “I like to sing” became some of the most frequently included items (Table 1). “We could sit here all day talking about ourselves”, Ms. Edwards laughed but finished the class by hammering home the core anti-bullying message: when we understand that everyone is unique, we understand that everyone is equal. On the wall of the classroom, Dr Seuss, a popular character from classic children’s books, reminded us: “Today you are YOU, that is truer than true. There is NO ONE alive who is YOUER than YOU.”

Interestingly, of the item categories the children used to fill in their persons, the most frequently included was relationships (24 mentions of family, seven of friends, two other), even though relationships were not mentioned in the teacher’s instructions (Table 1). These items included lists of family members (e.g., “I have three sisters”), and diverse statements, such as “My dad and I like to wrestle”, “My mum is alone looking after six children”, “I care about my family because they care about me.” It was clear that the assignment about what makes you unique turned the children’s attention, among other things, to their closest relationships. This points to two things. First, cultural ontologies are only ever shared to a degree, as they are learned through shared experiences and individual life experiences vary (Chapin, 2014). As mentioned, the school was highly diverse, and the centrality of relationships to individual identity is bound to vary in the homes of first- and second-generation immigrants of for example, Jamaican, Somali, Irish, and Turkish backgrounds. Second, emphasis on the unique and autonomous quality of the bounded individual does not exclude relationships. Rather, a successful development into mature personhood is grounded on a secure attachment, which enables a gradual separation from significant others, towards becoming an independent, moral person who autonomously relates to other such agents around them (Keller, 2021).

This emphasis on equality based on the uniqueness and boundedness of a person was reflected by the central values promoted by the school, such as respect and individual voice (Kajanus, 2024). In contrast,

in the schools in Nanjing, the children learned that personhood is less about being something and more about doing. Moreover, it was about acting in accordance with social roles and status relationships.

In his recent analysis of personhood in China, Yan Yunxiang (2017) highlights the notion of doing person, *zuoren*. He argues that personhood in China is as much an action of doing, as it is a state of being. Doing **person** is a moral journey, in which the moralist **self-controls** the **individual** desires, cultivating relationships by putting the needs and feelings of others before one's own. Doing personhood is also about *proactively* helping others on their journey towards their personhood. A five-year-old girl in Nanjing gave an example of this when I asked her about when she has helped another child<sup>3</sup>:

My friend Hao Hao didn't do what the teacher told him to, so the teacher criticized him. I helped him, I said: you are wrong. I reminded him to not do wrong. Then the teacher stopped criticizing him and praised him.

The different emphasis on personhood as a state of being, and an action of doing has the implication that helping is part of being a good person in London and becoming a good person in Nanjing. In London, being generally helpful to non-specific others *demonstrates* the moral character of a person, whose moral agency derives from the intrinsic value attributed to all members of the group (humans), and the capacity for moral deliberation and empathy all humans, and only humans, have. This is different from helping in Nanjing, which actively *makes* a moral person, through costly interactions with specific others.

Then of course there is history. China has been undergoing a drastic sociomoral transformation and Fei's analysis predates the enormous nation-building project that followed the Communist takeover in 1949 and continues in Xi Jinping's China. The moral education of school children revolves around conceptions of how to be a good child, student, and citizen. Thinking too much (*xiang tai duo*) is connected to outdated, paternalistic moral models of sociality, including being too calculative in one's moral judgments about helping. However, through their participation in the actual social practices of their families and their networks, children in this research learned that relations based on social roles and status matter immensely (Kajanus, 2024). Doing personhood is, after all, about family, emotional ties, and about public recognition. This dynamic was well articulated by Ms. Wu, the Head Teacher of a preschool where I conducted research. Ms. Wu had clear, detailed ideas about the children's social and cognitive development, family lives, pedagogy and learning, and was happy to share them with me during quiet hours in the teacher's lounge. Prosociality is increasingly emphasized in the moral education of Chinese schoolchildren, due to concern over the impact that growing up without siblings has on the generation of only children (Xu 2019; 2017). But during one of our lengthy conversations, I asked Ms. Wu to explain how people are prompted to help or not help others, and rather than going into the ethics of empathy, she surprised me by giving a very sophisticated account of the different degrees of role and status-based closeness, obligations, and benefits, that need to be considered. Knowing someone's roots, *zhigen zhidi*, is of crucial importance in decisions about helping.

This idea is also reflected in the stories that repeatedly circulate in the media and people's conversations about how helping a stranger can lead to trouble. Saving a stranger from drowning, helping a child who is lost, or an elderly person who has fallen, is dangerous. At the center of these narratives is the case of Peng Yu and Ms. Xu, which occurred in Nanjing in 2006, and became the subject of a national media frenzy (Huang, 2015). Ms. Xu, an elderly woman who was helped to the hospital after falling by a young man called Peng Yu, sued him for personal injury compensation, arguing that he had caused the fall. The Nanjing court eventually held Peng Yu liable for damages, on the reasoning that a person would not go to such lengths to help a stranger, had they not, in fact, caused the accident. Several similar court rulings across the country followed this case, and media reports both of old people trying to sue their helpers and of people in dire need being ignored by passersby generated heated debates. In the words of the Head Teacher Ms. Wu, "When a stranger needs your help, you must stop and think, is this going to be a disaster for me?" This narrative is of course connected to a number of things, including the low level of social trust in post-reform China (Yan, 2020) and the judicial system that prioritizes compensation for victims (Huang,

2015). However, its prevalence in popular discourse also points to the centrality of the particularistic moral code of helping.

In contrast to this is the universalistic moral code for helping in the London school, well-articulated by the story of *Androcles and the Lion* (a 1912 play written by George Bernard Shaw), which the Headmaster shared with the entire school in one of the assemblies I attended weekly with the children of my classroom. *Androcles* is a runaway slave who helps a wounded lion while hiding in the forest. When captured and sent to the Colosseum to be killed with other Christians, he is saved because the lion set upon him turns out to be the same one, he had helped.

Now there could be no way on earth that *Androcles* could ever have imagined that by looking after that lion in the forest, the lion would end up looking after him. And there is absolutely no way we can begin to imagine who we need to respect, and that one day they might need to respect us back, help us. Have a think for that now. Who are you going to help today? That maybe today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, or ten years' time will help you back. That's quite some thought, isn't it?

In the London school, the virtue of being helpful was part of the explicit, institutionalized ethical framework grounded on a universalistic moral code. That is, being helpful and caring has intrinsic value that is independent of the outcomes of the act of giving help or from the characteristics of the recipient. However, self-interest is an acknowledged part of the ethical framework, to the extent that it is explicitly articulated in moral education. Receiving help makes the recipient *feel* good, which increases generous spirit at a generalized societal level, which in turn will also benefit the helper. Anyone, however unlikely, is a potential future partner in reciprocal cooperation and therefore should be helped. Even though the ethical frameworks in Nanjing and London schools differed in terms of their particularistic and universalistic orientations, they both included active calculations of self-interest.

## CONTROLLING EMOTIONAL IMPULSES

I now want to come back to the role of emotions in decisions about helping. Children's decisions to help and not help involved a range of emotional motivations, from sympathetic concern to frustration or pride. The much-used frameworks for moral emotions (Fessler & Haley, 2003; Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2003), thus seemed inadequate. Helping was sometimes, but not always, grounded on moral judgment. Moreover, these frameworks do not provide much space for examining how not only reasoning, but also emotional impulses are culturally shaped. The model for empathy enables a more nuanced analysis across the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of helping.

The ethical frameworks in the schools in Nanjing and London emphasized the value of emotions motivating help. Nurturing help of younger children and responding empathetically to the needs and feelings of others were encouraged in both places. It is also important to note that the importance of knowing someone's roots, *zhigen zhidi*, in no way diminishes the centrality of emotions in helping. As Ms. Wu clearly explained to me, roots and emotions are connected. A person's background, *jiating beijing*, which consists of their family, social circle, and home education, lays the basis for their moral character. A person whose quality, *suzhi*, is high, or in other words, is doing personhood well, will *feel* generous when asked for help and grateful when receiving it, and will understand the dynamics of reciprocity and obligations in their hierarchical social networks. A person of low quality will *feel* entitled to unreasonable favors, resentful when help is not immediately reciprocated, or selfish when asked for a costly favor. Knowing someone's roots is important, not only for their correct social positioning relative to ego but for assessing whether their moral dispositions will give rise to appropriate emotional responses to situations of helping.

This brings me to my final point: the culturally elaborated complex empathy, which gives rise to acts of helping, is not an internally consistent emotional-cognitive response. While the first step of immediate emotional resonance is fast and automatic, the following steps of the empathetic process can take a number

of different directions, in terms of: identification with the other, concern with their wellbeing, the cognitive process of perspective-taking and reasoning that draws from cultural ontologies; the subsequent emotional trajectories that may involve a range non-sympathetic emotions such as frustration and pride; and the actual lived ethical practice. There is abundant potential for misalignments in this process. The emotional impulse to help might conflict with the complex norms. Help can be performed begrudgingly, without a genuine concern for the wellbeing of the recipient. The emotions that motivate the helping act might not stem from the initial state-matching and can be anything from shame to loyalty, from resentment to honor. Furthermore, complex empathy and decision about helping are part of the broader dynamics of partial cooperation, through connections to mechanisms such as partner choice based on reputation, which enable humans everywhere to distinguish between good and bad social partners.

One example of such internal misalignment of emphatic response is children's paternalistic helping which has been noted by psychologists (Martin et al., 2016; Martin & Olson, 2013). Imposing help on a reluctant or openly hostile helpee was a common occurrence among the children in this research. When asking children to give examples of situations in which one should not help, one eight-year-old girl in London put it aptly: "When they're yelling 'leave me alone!'". Not interfering in other people's business and not imposing your help when it's not needed or wanted, were the most common examples the children in London gave.

In Nanjing, the most common example the children gave was that bad people (*huairen*) should not be helped. While *huairen* generally refers to people of bad moral character, it is safe to assume that when explicitly questioned about helping, at least some of the children's responses were influenced by the highly prevalent discourse of getting into trouble when helping strangers. Notably, the Peng Yu case took place in Nanjing, and a common lament around these conversations was, "Either old people have become bad, or bad people have become old" (*shi laoren bian huai le, baishi huairen bian lao le*) (Huang, 2015). A category of particular others, old people, who, according to the central moral principle of filial piety, *xiao* (Kajanus, 2024), stand as the most deserving of help, have mixed with the most underserving category, bad people. Even when you feel like helping, you should stop and think, "Is this going to be a disaster for me?" In Nanjing, allowing emotions to guide decisions to help was in some cases also interpreted as nonconformist. An example of this is when one helpful boy was criticized for his eagerness to help the Art Teacher, he particularly liked. He was told by the teacher not to elevate himself above others by doing special tasks, rather than being part of the group.

The challenges of managing the emotional impulses to help and tuning into the complex norms of helping and not helping in a particular situation are further illustrated by the following example from the school in London.

For an activity to drill multiplication tables, Ms. Edwards has given each child a piece of paper with a number on it. She calls a table and asks the children to raise their hands if their number is in it. After their number has been correctly located in the table, the child gets to sit down. The children are standing by their desks mostly in silence, but when a classmate is slow in responding, some eagerly jump in to call on their behalf. Ms. Edwards curbs this overly helpful behavior: "Ayan, you need to worry about Ayan. Everyone worry about yourselves, not about others." This works until the table of three is called. In the group of five desks by the windows, children are leaning in to see Kesha's number. Her number is six, and the others are quietly trying to signal to Kesha to raise her hand. Her hand stays down, and while Ms. Edwards stays oblivious to the silent frustration building up in the corner, David cannot help but get up and go over to Kesha. "It's three times two, say three times two", he whispers, but Kesha keeps staring ahead in silence. David steps behind her, puts his hands on her shoulders in a manner I often see him comfort and encourage his five-year-old sister, and continues to quietly urge Kesha to raise her hand. When Kesha does not move, David sighs in frustration and returns to his seat.

This brief interaction in the classroom is a typical example of the children trying to tune in to what kind of help is allowed in a particular situation. They successfully curbed their desire to help after being disciplined. In Kesha's case, the impulse to help was harder to control. Kesha was one of the several children in the classroom with a Special Educational Needs (SEN) status, and her classmates were accustomed to helping and accommodating her in their educational and play activities. In fact, Ms. Edwards told me, she had seated Kesha with children who were "quite caring so they can help her a bit." While most of the children were able to give up on their attempts to help Kesha, David could not resist the impulse to help. His helping was overenthusiastic by the school's standards, but not by his home standards. As noted, David had a younger sister whom he was very caring towards. His helping can be interpreted as extending this nurturing care to Kesha, who had been positioned in need of special support from her classmates. While it is difficult to name with confidence the emotions that played a role in David's decision to help (e.g., sympathy, compassion, frustration), it was clear that both Kesha's perceived need for help and her refusal to accept it elicited an emotional response.

According to the broad moral code in the London school, to be a good person one should be helpful, and everyone has the right to be helped. However, other values came to be intertwined in the ethics of helping. As children's learning was measured individually, they should not get help from others (except in specific contexts, which were plenty). There was also a strong emphasis on self-reliance that should not be hampered by enabling helping. For example, a child should learn to put on their coat without help from adults or peers. Finally, a principle of partiality that children started to learn with age was that help should be, after all, deserved. An example of this is the idea that someone who is in trouble due to their own fault does not deserve to be helped. The principle of partiality in London emphasized the moral characteristics of the recipient, differing from the emphasis in Nanjing on the relationship between the recipient and the helper. Knowing something about the recipient was therefore important in both places, but while in Nanjing, even a stranger in a virtuous category, *old people*, could pose a risk, in London, an unassuming recipient might have hidden qualities and rendered them deserving of help and respect. This point was highlighted in the London school through moral stories of virtuous people (e.g., a war veteran, or a talented artist), who were ignored by others who did not recognize them (Kajanus, 2024).

These institutionalized norms of the school were shared by the children to varying degrees. At times they came into conflict with other, more important norms, and the children quite routinely helped classmates less committed to the pursuit of self-sufficiency of putting their coat on or supported friends who got into arguments due to their own fault.

## CONCLUSION

I have integrated approaches from psychology and anthropology to advocate for the value of interdisciplinarity in advancing our understanding of the origins and ontogeny of human social behavior. In a critical dialogue with psychological studies of empathy, helping, and cooperation, I have argued that empathy likely underlies all forms of helping (e.g., altruistic, mutualistic, strategic, and paternalistic) and the entire process is profoundly cultural. While emotional resonance (state-matching) is necessary for recognition and direction of attention, it can be followed by any number of emotional impulses and responses. Feeling the frustration of a friend struggling with their coat zipper can be followed by sympathetic concern, anxiety in anticipation of their meltdown, and so on. These emotional responses are as much part of the culturally shaped process of empathy, as the ontologies of personhood that trigger empathy with some more than others, or cognitive reasoning drawing from explicit cultural codes and frameworks.

Unlike most studies up to date, I have focused on the social and cultural processes that shape children's helping trajectories during middle childhood in formal school environments. The school in London was highly diverse in terms of class, race, and ethnicity. In Nanjing, one of the schools was an elite institution, while the other served a working-class community on the margins of the city. This variance in children's home backgrounds influenced their early socialization into helping. But even with the diversity, at a school level, the cultural frameworks were salient enough, of helping as demonstrating the intrinsic

value of you and me as persons (London) and helping as doing something for you, as I emerge as a person (Nanjing). The children in this research varied in their commitments to the project of becoming a good person or demonstrating being one, but what many of them shared was the struggle to align emotional impulses to help with the norms of helping. A focus on this transitional stage of childhood provided for a detailed understanding of how distinct patterns of partial helping emerged in these two communities, thus contributing to the broader debates of partiality of empathy and the cognitive-emotional side of human prosociality.

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## ETHICS STATEMENT

Approval was obtained from the LSE Research Ethics Committee.

## ORCID

Anni Kajanus  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7942-6308>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (Henrich et al., 2010)

<sup>2</sup>While the concept has pervaded culturally oriented psychology, it remains too simplistic to capture most anthropological comparisons.

<sup>3</sup>Towards the end of my ethnographic fieldwork, I asked all children in the participating classrooms in Nanjing and London standardised questions about helping, including the following: (1) Can you give me an example of when you have helped someone? (2) Are there any situations where you should not help a person? (3) Can you give me an example?

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