Almost 80 years ago, Hartshorne and May (1928) failed to find much evidence of
underlying consistency in children’s prosocial actions. Since then, dispositional
approaches to prosocial behavior have not had an easy time. Indeed, when the
situationist revolution swept social psychology in the early 1970s, following
Mischel’s (1968) famous critique of personality research, one of the first victims was
the notion there was such a thing as an altruistic personality. This idea was then
especially banished from mainstream research on prosocial behavior. Despite a long,
furtive existence on the margins of prosocial behavior research, dispositional
approaches survived and, in recent years, have resurfaced with a good measure of
acceptance and respectability. This happened in part because the zeitgeist in social
psychology changed, but a more direct cause was empirical evidence that consistently
showed the importance of dispositional variables in explanations of prosocial actions.

My lecture and chapter will examine dispositional variables and how they
interact with situational variables to affect prosocial behavior. I will begin with a brief
historical overview of attempts to identify dispositional correlates of prosocial actions
and critically discuss the quality of these attempts. This discussion will include a
theoretical consideration of how person and situation variables interact to determine
social behaviors, and an examination of the person, the situation, and prosocial
behavior from the multilevel perspective on prosocial actions proposed by Penner,
Dovidio, Piliavin, and Schroeder (2005). The major portion of the presentation will
concern whether there are, indeed, personal attributes or dispositions that are
consistently associated with a broad range of prosocial actions; that is, whether there
is such a thing as a “prosocial personality.” This discussion will rely heavily on my
own work with volunteers and paid employees, and more recently, with parents of pediatric cancer patients. However, I will also draw on other research, such as: studies of holocaust rescuers (e.g., Fagin-Jones & Midlarsky, 2007; Oliner & Oliner 1988), the big five personality factors associated with prosocial motivations (e.g., Graziano et al., 2007), and the development of prosocial tendencies in children (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2002). I will argue that there is such a thing as a prosocial personality, but I will also propose that it is best understood and utilized within an interactionist, multilevel approach to the study of prosocial behavior. I will conclude with suggestions for future research that addresses important new issues in prosocial behavior.