



Traits, situational factors, and their interactions as explanations of helping behavior



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ABSTRACT

This study is guided by the research question, are personality traits, character traits, situational factors, and their interaction all necessary to explain helping behavior? 121 undergraduates' scores on the Agreeableness scale of the Big Five Inventory and the Kindness scale of the Values in Action Inventory were examined in conjunction with experimentally induced positive, neutral, or negative mood via false feedback on a bogus intelligence test. The number of spilled pencils participants helped retrieve in a "mishap" was the measure of helping. Kindness significantly predicted helping behavior, but neither feedback condition nor Agreeableness was significantly related to helping. Interactions between Kindness, Agreeableness, and feedback conditions were non-significant. These results highlight a stronger contribution to helping behavior from the trait of Kindness than from the trait of Agreeableness and situational factors.

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1. Introduction

In view of the early disappointments in predicting behavior from personality variables (e.g., Allport & Vernon, 1933; Dudydcha, 1936; Hartshorne & May, 1928; Newcomb, 1929), Mischel (1968) suggested that although *some* predictions could be made from traits, *the most powerful* ones would likely be made by taking situational factors into account. Following Mischel's observation, hundreds of studies have investigated the relationships between various situational factors and spontaneous helping behavior in short-term exchanges (hereafter referred to simply as helping behavior). Many situational factors have been found to affect helping behavior, including number of bystanders present (Fischer et al., 2011), mood (Carlson & Miller, 1987; Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988), the ambiguity of the helping situation (Clark & Word, 1974), perceived deviance of the person needing help (Bridges & Clark, 2000), noise (Matthews & Canon, 1975), and temperature (Schneider, Lesko, & Garrett, 1980). Taken together, these studies illuminate the undeniable impact of situational factors on helping behavior (Lefevor, Fowers, Ahn, Lang, & Cohen, 2015).

Helping behavior has also been studied from a personality framework but typically in the context of volunteering and prosociality because these behaviors appear more consistent with traits (Penner, Dovidio, Pliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Several trait variables have been linked to volunteering and prosociality such as helpfulness (Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007), honesty-humility (Hilbig, Zettler, Leist, & Heysdasch,

2012), Agreeableness (Caprara, Alessandri, di Giunta, Panerai, & Eisenberg, 2010; Volk, Thöni, & Ruigrok, 2011) and altruistic motives (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). This distinction of kinds of helping behaviors has led to two parallel but related research traditions within helping research with social psychologists typically conducting experimental studies of spontaneous helping behavior (e.g., Fischer et al., 2011) and personality psychologists typically conducting self-report studies of volunteering and prosocial behavior (Penner et al., 2005; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). Though this de facto divide is intelligible historically, there is no theoretical or empirical basis for excluding trait psychology from the study of spontaneous helping behavior. It seems reasonable to us that traits are just as likely to be a source of spontaneous helping as of volunteering. We suggest, in addition, that it is important to examine the influence of traits in research on observed helping behavior because participants consistently over-report prosocial behavior (Batson, 1991; Galen, 2012; Wilson, 2002). Experimental paradigms for studying spontaneous helping are well suited to this task.

Recently, the long-standing dichotomy between trait and situational explanations of behavior among personality and social psychologists has been largely superseded by an interactionist approach (Epstein & O'Brien, 1985; Flesson & Nofle, 2008). Publication trends in personality and social psychology research indicate that the person-situation question is increasingly discussed more as an interaction rather than as a dichotomy (Webster, 2009). Despite this conceptual shift, there is surprisingly little empirical work exploring the interaction between trait and situational variables on helping behavior.

Empirical explorations of the interaction between traits and situations and their impact on helping behavior to date have focused primarily on the trait of Agreeableness as a predictor of helping (e.g., Flesson,

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2007). Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, and Tobin (2007) pioneered an interactionist study of traits and situational factors and found main effects for traits, situations, and an interaction effect between the two.

Although Agreeableness is clearly related to helping (Caprara et al., 2010; Volk et al., 2011), it is a very broad trait that includes multiple facets. Some of the facets may be directly related to helping behavior (e.g., altruism, tender-mindedness) and some may not be directly related to helping (e.g., straightforwardness, trust, modesty, and compliance; Costa & McCrae, 1992). In contrast, a more focused, unidimensional trait such as Kindness may be more directly related to helping, which would be consistent with Paunonen and Ashton's (2001) results indicating greater behavioral predictions with specific than with general factors.

Some may object that Kindness is an unsuitable construct for research because it is an evaluative trait. This thinking harks back to Allport (1937), who distinguished between character traits¹ as consistent, reliable, morally praiseworthy patterns of behavior and personality traits, which he saw as stable traits that do not entail an evaluative component. Because character was considered more subjective and evaluative, psychological research has largely focused on personality since then (Nicholson, 1998), placing morally-evaluative traits “outside” the purview of personality psychology. The ability to take a morally neutral approach to traits, however, has been called into question (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Sugarman, 2009) and “personality” traits (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness) have been shown to rely on morally relevant concepts (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Thus, the distinction between personality and character traits may not be a fruitful way to determine the validity of a trait or its relevance to behavior. Our study is not premised on making a firm distinction between personality and character traits. In the end, the predictive value of a variable is an empirical question, and ruling out potentially useful predictors a priori does not seem to be a reasonable way to conduct research.

In the present study, we examine how the personality trait of Agreeableness, the character trait of Kindness, the situational factor of induced mood, and their interactions affect observed, spontaneous helping behavior. We studied the traits of Agreeableness and Kindness because they are among the traits most consistently studied in relation to helping behavior. Induced mood was selected as a situational factor because there have been hundreds of studies linking induced mood with rates of helping behavior and it is amenable to manipulation in a controlled setting. Because this study is the first of its kind, we approached the hypotheses and data analysis in a stepwise manner to test first for main effects, then for interactions. We hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1. : Relevant traits will predict helping. We hypothesized separate, significant effects for (1a) Agreeableness and (1b) Kindness on helping behavior.

Hypothesis 2. : There would be a significant main effect for situational factors on helping behavior such that (2a) individuals in the positive feedback condition would help more than individuals in the control condition and that (2b) individuals in the negative feedback condition would help less than individuals in the control condition.

Hypothesis 3. : There would be significant interaction effects between traits and situational factors on helping. Specifically, we hypothesized that (3a) individuals high in Agreeableness would help more than those low in Agreeableness in both negative feedback and control conditions, but that the magnitude of this difference would be greater in the negative feedback condition. Additionally, we hypothesized that (3b) individuals high in Agreeableness would help more than those low in Agreeableness in both positive feedback and control conditions, but that the magnitude of this difference would be greater in the

positive feedback condition. We also hypothesized parallel interactions of Kindness and the experimental conditions (3c and 3d).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

We recruited 121 undergraduate students at a private university in the southeastern United States to participate in exchange for course credit. The sample was 59% female with a mean age of 20.82 ($SD = 2.64$), ranging from 18 to 45. Participants primarily identified as White, non-Latino (58.7%), though the sample was ethnically diverse with participants identifying as Latino (15.7%), Asian (6.7%), non-Caribbean Black (8.3%), Caribbean Black (7.4%), and biracial (2.5%). One participant failed to report ethnicity.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were told that researchers were interested in the relationship between personality and intelligence. Participants completed the 17-item Miller-Holt IQ General Aptitude Test (Webster, Powell, Duvall, & Smith, 2006), a bogus measure of intelligence designed such that the “correct” answer would not be readily apparent and could be contested. Participants were told that the Miller-Holt is an unbiased measure of intelligence that requires minimal verbal skills and that scores on the Miller-Holt are correlated with outcomes such as employability, earning potential, and social intelligence. After completing the Miller-Holt, participants completed the Values in Action Inventory-120 (Peterson & Park, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the 44-item Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) electronically.

Participants were randomly assigned to feedback conditions. Feedback forms were prepared ahead of time to enable experimenter blindness to the participants' experimental condition. Participants were provided a score of 10/17 on the Miller-Holt and were informed that this meant that they had either performed better than 85% of college students (positive feedback), worse than 85% of college students (negative feedback), or that normative data had yet to be collected and thus the meaning of their score was difficult to interpret (neutral feedback). The experimenter then left the room to retrieve the results of the trait measures and to allow participants time to read the feedback form.

The experimenter returned to the room and administered the mood manipulation check questionnaire to the participants. Once participants completed the manipulation check, the experimenter reached to retrieve it from the participant and “accidentally” knocked over a cup of 20 pencils situated on the edge of the researcher's desk. The experimenter muttered under his breath, looked down while shaking his head, and began to retrieve the pencils at the rate of one pencil per second. The number of pencils retrieved by participants was recorded.

Participants were debriefed following a funnel debriefing model to probe for suspicion and were thanked for their help. Participants were asked not to reveal the true nature and design of the study until the completion of the study. All participants completed the experiment within three months to decrease the probability that information about the study would be leaked. No participants reported having heard about the nature of the study prior to participation.

2.3. Instrumentation

Agreeableness was measured using the Agreeableness scale of the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). The entire Big Five Inventory was administered to mask interest in Agreeableness and reduce potential priming effects. Internal consistency for Agreeableness in this study was .77. Concurrent validity with other established measures of Agreeableness—Goldberg's (1992) trait descriptive adjectives and

¹ The terms “character trait,” “character strength,” and “virtue” are used virtually synonymously in the virtue ethics and positive psychology literatures. We have opted for the term “character trait” because kindness is generally seen as a trait-like feature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

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