



Helping Behavior Reinvisioned: A Meta-Analysis of Decades of Situational Psychology Research

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Abstract

Background: Why do people help each other? Early helping behavior studies pointed to situational factors as the sole explanations for helping behavior. The recognition of this predictive power led many social psychologists to largely abandon the study of character or personality as contributing factors. The situationist claim that situations are the *primary* determinants of helping behavior (Doris, 2002) is an empirical claim. The purpose of our research is to test this claim through a meta-analysis of the extant literature on the influence of situational factors on helping behavior.

Methods: A systematic review of the literature was performed to identify studies that described helping behavior. Studies were independently reviewed for prescribed inclusion/exclusion criteria of the citations, yielding a final sample of 281 studies. Overall agreement between coders fell in the near perfect category.

Results: We analyzed a total of 286 independent effect sizes from the 281 studies with a total of 46,705 participants. Overall analyses indicate a significant effect of situations on helping. Participants in the situations inducing helping condition revealed a rate of 2.27 to 1 under the random-effects model (95% CI [2.10, 2.46], $p < .001$) and 2.02 to 1 under the fixed-effects model (95% CI [1.93, 2.11], $p < .001$) when compared to participants in the control group. The overall analysis also indicates that 47.56% percent of participants helped in the control group. The results of this meta-analysis suggest that although situations are an important contributor to helping behavior, there is currently no empirical basis for believing that situational factors can account for all of the variation in behavior.

Conclusions: Contrary to situationist claims (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999, 2000), the extant empirical literature indicates that situational factors, while important in helping behavior research, are not determinative of helping behavior.

Introduction

- Decades of work in social psychology have established a link between various situational factors and helping
- Situationist scholars interpret this link to support causal determination of helping behavior by situational factors
- The study of character is thus reduced to a folk psychology notion and systematic, empirical observation is thought to pose serious problems for the study of character (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999, 2000)

Hypotheses:

- Situations will consistently affect the frequency of help given by participants
- Situations do not exert anything approaching full causal control of helping behavior
- Explicit requests for help will result in more helping than implicit requests
- Participants engaging in prior interactions with the person needing help will help more than participants who did not have prior interactions

Study Search

Initial Literature Search:

- PsychINFO and Proquest Dissertations and Theses using the keywords “help*,” “assist*,” “prosocial*,” “aid,” “altruist*,” and “bystander” joined together by the Boolean operator “or”

Additional Search Procedures

- Reference list of published meta-analyses
- Backwards search
- Search by expert contact
- Unpublished study search using listserv announcements

Inter-rater Reliability

- Each study was coded independently by two graduate students
- Agreement for all but three variables fell in the near perfect category ($\kappa = 0.81 - 1.00$)
- Physical presence of victim ($\kappa = 0.77$), Relationship to helpee ($\kappa = 0.62$), Assignment ($\kappa = 0.51$)

Statistical Analyses

- All statistical analyses were conducted using the metafor package in R statistical software
- Both fixed and random effects estimates are presented
- Effect sizes for all studies were calculated and converted to log odds ratios for analysis; they are converted back to odds ratios for presentation

Descriptive Statistics

Flow Chart for Study Search		General Characteristics of the Studies	
Characteristic	Number of studies (k)	Characteristic	Number of studies (k)
Initial Search	n = 24,512 articles	Year of report	
Non-relevant	= 23,896	1964-1969	13
Additional Search	= 134	1970-1979	122
Articles in Database	n = 750	1980-1989	71
Studies in Database	n = 1,166	1990-1999	11
Not Quantitative	= 3	2000-2009	44
Non-Experimental	= 132	2010-present	25
Non-adults	= 20	Source of study	
Non-behavioral Helping	= 322	Published (i.e., journal article)	252
Non-unilateral Helping	= 75	Unpublished (e.g., dissertations, theses)	34
No Control Group	= 248	Population sampled	
Non-original Data	= 23	College students	163
Insufficient Statistics	= 62	Other adults	123
Studies in Meta-analysis	n = 281	Participant assignment method	
Independent ES included	n = 286	Random	144
		Non-random	24
		Not informed	118
		Sample size	
		≤ 50	83
		51-100	101
		101-200	52
		200-999	44
		≥ 1000	6
		Situational manipulation	
		Inducing helping	175
		Inhibiting helping	111

Overall Analyses

Overall Effect and Tests of Main Hypotheses					
Variable	k	OR	95% CI		Q_{Between}
			LL	UL	
Overall model	286	2.27*** (2.02)***	2.10 (1.93)	2.46 (2.11)	
Situations inducing helping	175	2.06*** (1.89)***	1.89 (1.79)	2.25 (1.99)	
Situations inhibiting helping	111	2.61*** (2.29)***	2.25 (2.13)	3.03 (2.47)	
Salience of helping request					12.63*** (18.80)***
Explicit	107	1.90*** (1.83)***	1.71 (1.71)	2.12 (1.95)	
Implicit	169	2.61*** (2.22)***	2.33 (2.09)	2.92 (2.36)	
Relationship with helpee					0.26 (0.74)
Prior interaction	138	2.28*** (2.02)***	2.01 (1.89)	2.60 (2.16)	
No prior interaction	143	2.25*** (2.01)***	2.04 (1.90)	2.49 (2.13)	

Note. Fixed effects estimates are put in parentheses and random effects estimates are put outside of the parentheses.
*** $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Moderator Analyses

Moderator Analyses of Other Situational Variables					
Variable	k	OR	95% CI		Q_{Between}
			LL	UL	
Age of participants					
College students	163	2.52*** (2.23)***	2.23 (2.07)	2.84 (2.39)	
Other adults	123	2.00*** (1.91)***	1.83 (1.81)	2.20 (2.01)	
Type of help					4.88 (12.77)**
Money	40	2.10*** (1.88)***	1.73 (1.68)	2.54 (2.10)	
Time	232	2.33*** (2.05)***	2.13 (1.96)	2.54 (2.15)	
Productivity	9	1.55** (1.51)***	1.13 (1.16)	2.13 (1.95)	
Comfort	5	3.34** (3.62)***	1.29 (2.25)	8.66 (5.82)	
Voluntary participation					1.31 (3.55)
Voluntary	162	2.39*** (2.13)***	2.13 (1.99)	2.68 (2.28)	
Non-voluntary	124	2.14*** (1.95)***	1.92 (1.85)	2.37 (2.06)	
Remuneration					3.57 (10.28)*
Course credit	64	2.59*** (2.33)***	2.16 (2.09)	3.11 (2.60)	
Money	44	2.07*** (1.93)***	1.75 (1.69)	2.45 (2.19)	
Combination	171	2.24*** (1.98)***	2.02 (1.88)	2.49 (2.09)	
Neither/no information	4	1.66 (1.48)*	0.85 (1.01)	3.27 (2.16)	
Physical presence of victim					2.41 (1.99)
Physically present	232	2.36*** (2.05)***	2.15 (1.94)	2.59 (2.15)	
Not present	49	1.99*** (1.93)***	1.70 (1.78)	2.33 (2.10)	

Note. Fixed effects estimates are put in parentheses and random effects estimates are put outside of the parentheses.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Study/Design Characteristics Analyses

Moderator Analyses of Study/design Characteristics					
Variable	k	OR	95% CI		Q_{Between}
			LL	UL	
Publication type					
Journal articles	251	2.31*** (2.00)***	2.12 (1.91)	2.51 (2.09)	
Dissertations/theses	35	2.05*** (2.15)***	1.62 (1.92)	2.59 (2.40)	
Publication year					0.35 (17.30)***
Pre-1988	198	2.31*** (2.19)***	2.10 (2.07)	2.56 (2.32)	
1988-present	88	2.20*** (1.82)***	1.92 (1.71)	2.50 (1.94)	
Setting					2.20 (9.74)**
Laboratory	155	2.42*** (2.21)***	2.15 (2.05)	2.73 (2.38)	
Field	128	2.11*** (1.92)***	1.90 (1.82)	2.34 (2.03)	
Assignment					6.25* (4.85)
Random	144	2.38*** (2.08)***	2.13 (1.95)	2.67 (2.21)	
Non-random	24	1.67*** (1.76)***	1.27 (1.55)	2.19 (2.01)	
Not informed	118	2.29*** (2.02)***	2.04 (1.88)	2.58 (2.17)	

Note. Fixed effects estimates are put in parentheses and random effects estimates are put outside of the parentheses.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Conclusions

- Hypothesis 1** was supported. Situational inducement affects helping behavior at a rate of 2.27:1
 - Hypothesis 2** was also supported. Across control conditions 47.51% of participants helped, indicating a relatively high baseline for spontaneous helping
 - Hypothesis 3** was not supported. Implicit requests for help yielded increased helping
 - Hypothesis 4** was not supported. No differences were found based on prior interactions
 - Contra Doris (2002) and Harman (1999, 2000), the extant empirical literature does not provide conclusive evidence for the full causal determination of situations
 - Character cannot be eliminated as a possible explanation for why people helped when situations did not induce helping
 - Dichotomous views of situations and character are inaccurate
 - The deterministic language of nearly all studies of helping behavior should be reconsidered
- Acknowledgement:** This study was supported by a grant from the University of Miami Ethics Program and the Arsht Ethics Initiatives.