



Challenging the Person/Situation Dichotomy: An Interactionist Explanation of Helping Behavior

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Abstract

The research question for this study is whether personality traits, character traits, situational factors, and their interactions are all necessary to explain helping behavior. A sample of 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 that participants helped retrieve in a "mishap" was the measure of observed helping. Kindness ($\beta = .30$) significantly predicted helping behavior, but neither mood condition nor Agreeableness was significantly related to helping. None of the interaction effects predicted were significant, although two trended significance ($p < .10$). These results indicate that a specific measure of a relevant character trait for helping behavior was a better predictor of observed helping than a specific, relevant personality trait. Future research on helping behavior should incorporate character traits.

Background

Personality vs. Character

- Because character is a morally evaluative concept, psychological trait research has focused almost entirely on personality (Nicholson, 1998)
- Many traits typically studied as personality traits often rely on morally relevant concepts in their measurement (John, 2008)

Situational Social Psychology

- Situational factors have consistently been linked with helping behavior (Lefevor, Fowers, Lang, & Cohen, 2014)
- Positive and negative mood have been linked with helping (Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1987; Carlson & Miller, 1988)

Interactionist Studies

- Fleeson and colleagues have used a density distribution model to find evidence for personality traits (e.g., Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009)
- Meindl, Jayawickreme, Furr, and Fleeson (2013) used Fleeson's model to find evidence for character traits
- Graziano, Habashi, Sheeshe, and Tobin (2007) found that agreeableness interacted with in/outgroup status to predict willingness to help

Hypotheses

- 1) Main effect for traits on helping
 - a) Main effect for Agreeableness
 - b) Main effect for Kindness
- 2) Main effect for situational factors on helping
 - a) Induced positive mood will help more than control
 - b) Induced negative mood will help less than control
- 3) Interaction effects between trait and situational factors
 - a) Interaction between Agreeableness and negative mood vs. control
 - b) Interaction between Kindness and negative mood vs. control
 - c) Interaction between Agreeableness and positive mood vs. control
 - d) Interaction between Kindness and positive mood vs. control

Methods

Intelligence Test:

- Miller-Holt General IQ Aptitude Test (Webster, Powel, Duvall, & Smith, 2006)
- 17-item test designed to be ambiguous so that the correct answer was not readily apparent
- Participants given bogus positive, neutral, or negative feedback to induce corresponding mood

Mood Questionnaire

- Manipulation check
- 10-items assessing mood (5 positive and 5 negative mood items)

Values in Action Inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

- 120-items inventory measuring 24 character strengths
- 6-item Kindness scale used in this study ($\alpha = .71$)

Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999)

- 44-item inventory includes five factors: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness
- 9-item Agreeableness scale used in this study ($\alpha = .79$)

Helping Assessment

- Experimenter "accidentally" knocked over a cup containing 20 pencils
- The number of pencils retrieved was recorded as the dependent variable

Participants were debriefed after completing the experiment, and none suspected the purpose of the study.

Manipulation Check

The ANOVA for mood condition was significant, $F(2, 118) = 29.23, p < .01$. Post-hoc comparisons were done using Tukey's HSD test. Participants in the positive feedback condition experienced significantly greater positive mood ($M = 19.76, SD = 6.07$) than participants in the neutral feedback condition ($M = 10.65, SD = 11.16$), with $M_D = 9.11$ ($SE = 2.51, p < .01, d = 1.01$). The positive feedback condition also had greater positive mood than the negative feedback condition ($M = .55, SD = 14.98$), with $M_D = 19.21$ ($SE = 2.51, p < .01, d = 1.68$). Participants in the neutral feedback condition experienced significantly greater positive mood than participants in the negative feedback condition ($M_D = 10.1, SE = 2.53, p < .01, d = .76$).

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics.

	n	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Dev	Statistic	Std. Dev
Kindness	115	2.20	5.00	4.32	0.56	-.97	.23	.96	.45
Agreeableness	120	2.00	5.00	3.92	0.64	-.60	.22	.08	.44
Pencils Picked up	117	0	16	9.35	3.70	-.96	.22	.77	.44

Main Effect of Mood

Analysis of Variance for Hypothesis 2.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Condition	3.81	2	1.91	.14	.87	< .01
Error	1580.82	114	13.87			
Total	1584.63	116				

Main Effects of Traits

Regression Analyses for Hypothesis 1.

Variable	B	t	p	Semi-partial correlation	F-value	p-value	R ²
Simultaneous model							
Agreeableness	-.02	-.14	.89	-.01	5.02	< .01	.09
Kindness	.30	2.73	< .01	.25			
Agreeableness only							
Agreeableness	.15	1.56	.12	.15	2.44	.12	.02
Kindness only							
Kindness	.29	3.18	< .01	.29	10.12	< .01	.09

Interaction Effects

Regression Analysis for Hypothesis 3.

Variable	β	t	p	F	p	R ²
Model						
Agreeableness	-.15	-.77	.44	1.01	.41	.04
Negative Feedback	-.05	-.46	.65			
Positive Feedback	-.05	-.46	.65			
Agreeableness x Neg	.25	1.81	.07			
Agreeableness x Pos	.18	1.61	.25			
Model						
Kindness	.01	.08	.94	2.91	.02	.12
Negative Feedback	-.10	-.91	.36			
Positive Feedback	-.04	-.37	.72			
Kindness x Neg	.21	1.67	.10			
Kindness x Pos	.27	1.81	.07			

Conclusions

- **Hypothesis 1** was partially supported. There was a significant main effect for Kindness but not for Agreeableness.
- **Hypothesis 2** was not supported. The main effect for the situational factors was not significant.
- **Hypothesis 3** was not supported. The model containing Kindness and the feedback condition interactions was significant. The interactions between Kindness and negative feedback as well as between Kindness and positive feedback trended significance. However, these interactions were not in the direction predicted. The model containing interactions between Agreeableness and feedback conditions was not significant.

Implications

- Kindness emerged as a better predictor of helping than Agreeableness. This may be due to the specificity of the measure. The correlation between character traits and behavior may be a fruitful area of future research.
- The interaction effects hypothesized were not significant, but two trended significant. These interactions may have been significant with a larger sample size. Further research examining these interactions with larger sample sizes and better measures could help clarify this effect.
- The main effect for feedback induced mood was not significant. This may be due to the low sensitivity of the specific helping behavior measure used. More research examining mood with more sensitive measures of helping will clarify the nature of this effect.