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8   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.

Keywords: person vs. situation debate, situational factor, personality trait, character trait, helping

behavior

Traits, Situational Factors, and their Interactions as Explanations of Helping Behavior

1.   Introduction

In view of the early disappointments in predicting behavior from personality variables

(e.g., Allport & Vernon, 1933; Dudycha, 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 (Finklestein & Brannick, 2007), honesty-

humility (Hillbig, Zettler, Leist, & Heysdasch, 2013), 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

70   conducting experimental studies of spontaneous helping behavior (e.g., Fischer et al., 2011) and

71   personality psychologists typically conducting self-report studies of volunteering and prosocial

72   behavior (Penner, Dovidio, Pliavin, & Schroeder, 2005; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). Though

73   this *de facto* divide is intelligible historically, there is no theoretical or empirical basis for

74   excluding trait psychology from the study of spontaneous helping behavior. It seems reasonable

75   to us that traits are just as likely to be a source of spontaneous helping as of volunteering. We

76   suggest, in addition, that it is important to examine the influence of traits in research on observed

77   helping behavior because participants consistently over-report prosocial behavior (Batson, 1991;

78   Galen, 2012; Wilson, 2002). Experimental paradigms for studying spontaneous helping are well

79   suited to this task.

80   Recently, the long-standing dichotomy between trait and situational explanations of

81   behavior among personality and social psychologists has been largely supervened by an

82   interactionist approach (Epstein & O'Brien, 1985; Fleeson & Noftle, 2008). Publication trends in

83   personality and social psychology research indicate that the person-situation question is

84   increasingly discussed more as an interaction rather than as a dichotomy (Webster, 2009).

85   Despite this conceptual shift, there is surprisingly little empirical work exploring the interaction

86   between trait and situational variables on helping behavior.

87   Empirical explorations of the interaction between traits and situations and their impact on

88   helping behavior to date have focused primarily on the trait of Agreeableness as a predictor of

89   helping (e.g., Fleeson, 2007). Graziano, Habashi, Sheeshe, and Tobin (2007) pioneered an

90   interactionist study of traits and situational factors and found main effects for traits, situations,

91   and an interaction effect between the two.

92   Although Agreeableness is clearly related to helping (Caprara et al., 2010; Volk et al.,

93 2011), it is a very broad trait that includes multiple facets. Some of the facets may be directly

94 related to helping behavior (e.g., altruism, tender-mindedness) and some may not be directly

95 related to helping (e.g., straightforwardness, trust, modesty, and compliance; Costa & McCrae,

96 1992). In contrast, a more focused, unidimensional trait such as Kindness may be more directly

97 related to helping, which would be consistent with Paunonen and Ashton's (2001) results

98 indicating greater behavioral predictions with specific than with general factors.

99   Some may object that kindness is an unsuitable construct for research because it is an

100 evaluative trait. This thinking harks back to Allport (1937), who distinguished between character

101 traits[1] as consistent, reliable, morally praiseworthy patterns of behavior and personality traits,

102 which he saw as stable traits that do not entail an evaluative component. Because character was

103 considered more subjective and evaluative, psychological research has largely focused on

104 personality since then (Nicholson, 1998), placing morally-evaluative traits "outside" the purview

105 of personality psychology. The ability to take a morally neutral approach to traits, however, has

106 been called into question (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Sugarman, 2009) and

107 "personality" traits (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness) have been shown to rely on morally

108 relevant concepts (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Thus, the distinction between personality and

109 character traits may not be a fruitful way to determine the validity of a trait or its relevance to

110 behavior. Our study is not premised on making a firm distinction between personality and

111 character traits. In the end, the predictive value of a variable is an empirical question, and ruling

112 out potentially useful predictors a priori does not seem to be a reasonable way to conduct

113 research.

114   In the present study, we examine how the personality trait of agreeableness, the character

115   trait of kindness, the situational factor of induced mood, and their interactions affect observed,

116   spontaneous helping behavior. We studied the traits of agreeableness and kindness because they

117   are among the traits most consistently studied in relation to helping behavior. Induced mood was

118   selected as a situational factor because there have been hundreds of studies linking induced mood

119   with rates of helping behavior and it is amenable to manipulation in a controlled setting. Because

120   this study is the first of its kind, we approached the hypotheses and data analysis in a stepwise

121   manner to test first for main effects, then for interactions. We hypothesized that:

122   Hypothesis 1: Relevant traits will predict helping. We hypothesized separate, significant

123   effects for (1a) agreeableness and (1b) kindness on helping behavior.

124   Hypothesis 2: There would be a significant main effect for situational factors on helping

125   behavior such that (2a) individuals in the positive feedback condition would help more than

126   individuals in the control condition and that (2b) individuals in the negative feedback condition

127   would help less than individuals in the control condition.

128   Hypothesis 3: There would be significant interaction effects between traits and situational

129   factors on helping. Specifically, we hypothesized that (3a) individuals high in agreeableness

130   would help more than those low in agreeableness in both negative feedback and control

131   conditions, but that the magnitude of this difference would be greater in the negative feedback

132   condition. Additionally, we hypothesized that (3b) individuals high in agreeableness would help

133   more than those low in agreeableness in both positive feedback and control conditions, but that

134   the magnitude of this difference would be greater in the positive feedback condition. We also

135   hypothesized parallel interactions of kindness and the experimental conditions (3c and 3d).

136   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, Powel, 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, 2007; 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

160   feedback). The experimenter then left the room to retrieve the results of the trait measures and to

161   allow participants time to read the feedback form.

162   The experimenter returned to the room and administered the mood manipulation check

163   questionnaire to the participants. Once participants completed the manipulation check, the

164   experimenter reached to retrieve it from the participant and "accidentally" knocked over a cup of

165   20 pencils situated on the edge of the researcher's desk. The experimenter muttered under his

166   breath, looked down while shaking his head, and began to retrieve the pencils at the rate of one

167   pencil per second. The number of pencils retrieved by participants was recorded.

168   Participants were debriefed following a funnel debriefing model to probe for suspicion

169   and were thanked for their help. Participants were asked not to reveal the true nature and design

170   of the study until the completion of the study. All participants completed the experiment within

171   three months to decrease the probability that information about the study would be leaked. No

172   participants reported having heard about the nature of the study prior to participation.

173   **2.3 Instrumentation**

174   Agreeableness was measured using the Agreeableness scale of the Big Five Inventory

175   (John & Srivastava, 1999). The entire Big Five Inventory was administered to mask interest in

176   Agreeableness and reduce potential priming effects. Internal consistency for Agreeableness in

177   this study was .77. Concurrent validity with other established measures of agreeableness—

178   Goldberg's (1992) trait descriptive adjectives and Costa and McCrae's (1992) NEO

179   questionnaires—is .95 and .92 respectively (John & Srivastava, 1999).

180   Kindness was measured using the Kindness scale of the Values in Action Inventory 120

181   (Peterson & Park, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The entire Values in Action Inventory was

182   administered to mask interest in kindness and reduce potential priming effects. The 5-item

183   Kindness scale had an internal consistency of .79.

184   Participants' mood was measured using a mood questionnaire adapted from Webster et

185   al. (2006). The mood questionnaire contains a list of ten adjectives, five related to positive affect

186   and five related to negative affect. Participants responded to the following stem using a seven-

187   point Likert scale with "not at all" and "very much" as anchors: "regarding my performance on

188   the Miller-Holt General IQ Aptitude Test, I feel…". Items measuring negative affect on the

189   Mood Questionnaire were reverse coded. The internal consistency of the Mood Questionnaire

190   was .85.

191   3.   Results

192   Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Due to a recording error, six participants

193   did not have the data for the number of pencils picked up and were excluded from analyses,

194   resulting in a final sample of 115 participants. Additionally, one participant did not have data for

195   the Agreeableness variable, and five did not have data for Kindness.

196   Participants' scores on the Mood Questionnaire were tested in two ANOVAs with mood

197   condition as the independent variable and positive and negative affect scores as dependent

198   variables. The ANOVA for positive affect was significant, $F(2, 118) = 23.04$, $p < .01$. Significant

199   post-hoc comparisons conducted using Tukey's highly significant differences test indicated that

200   participants in the positive mood condition experienced significantly greater positive affect than

201   participants in the neutral ($d = 0.96$) and negative ($d = 1.44$) mood conditions. Participants in the

202   neutral mood condition experienced significantly greater positive affect than participants in the

203   negative mood condition ($d = 0.66$). The ANOVA for negative affect was likewise significant,

204     $F(2, 118) = 26.43$, $p < .01$. Significant post-hoc comparisons conducted using Tukey's highly

205   significant differences test indicated that participants in the negative mood condition experienced

206   significantly greater negative affect than participants in the neutral ($d = 0.77$) and positive ($d =$

207   1.72) mood conditions. Participants in the neutral mood condition experienced significantly

208   greater negative affect than participants in the positive mood condition ($d = 0.81$).

209   Relationships between demographic variables (i.e., gender, ethnicity, age) and key study

210   variables (i.e., mood condition, Agreeableness, Kindness, helping) were tested. No relationships

211   were significant ($p > .05$), excepting the relationship between gender and Agreeableness.

212   However, as gender was not related to helping, this relationship was not included in subsequent

213   analyses.

214   Hypothesis 1 was tested using a series of linear regression analyses (see Table 2). A

215   simultaneous linear regression with Agreeableness and Kindness as predictor variables and the

216   number of pencils picked up as the dependent variable was significant ($F(2, 107) = 5.02$, $p < .01$,

217    $R^2 = .09$). The standardized beta for Kindness ($\beta = .30$) was significant ($t = 2.73$, $p < .01$), but the

218   standardized beta for Agreeableness ($\beta = -.02$) was not ($t = -.14$, $p = .89$). Because Agreeableness

219   and Kindness were significantly correlated ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), separate one-variable regression

220   analyses were conducted to examine whether Agreeableness and Kindness alone were predictive

221   of helping behavior. In a simple linear regression, Agreeableness was not predictive of helping

222   behavior ($F(1, 108) = 2.44$, $p = .12$, $R^2 = .02$); however, in a similar simple linear regression,

223   Kindness did predict helping behavior ($F(1, 108) = 10.12$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .09$). Hypothesis 1a was

224   not supported as Agreeableness was not significantly related to helping in any of the models

225   tested. Hypothesis 1b was supported as Kindness was related to helping.

226   Hypothesis 2 was tested using a one-way ANOVA with feedback condition as the

227   independent variable (positive, control, negative) and helping behavior as the dependent variable.

228   The ANOVA failed to reach significance ($F(2, 114) = .13$, $p = .87$, $\eta^2 < .01$), indicating that there

229   was no main effect for feedback conditions on helping. Because the overall ANOVA was non-

230   significant, no further tests were conducted between the positive feedback and control conditions

231   or the negative feedback and the control conditions. These results fail to support hypothesis 2

232   that there would be a main effect of feedback condition on helping.

233   In preparation for the analyses for hypothesis 3, feedback conditions were dummy coded

234   into two separate variables such that in one (Positive), "0" corresponded to the control condition

235   and "1" corresponded to the positive feedback condition, and in the other (Negative), "0"

236   corresponded to the control condition and "1" corresponded to the negative feedback condition.

237   Agreeableness and Kindness were centered and interaction terms were created by multiplying the

238   centered variables by the dummy variables created for feedback condition.

239   Two separate linear regressions were conducted using feedback condition, either

240   Kindness or Agreeableness, and the interaction term as predictors and helping behavior as the

241   predicted variable (see Table 3). The regression model including Agreeableness was not

242   significant ($F(5, 110) = 1.01$, $p = .41$, $R^2 = .04$), but the model including Kindness was

243   significant ($F(5, 105) = 2.91$, $p = .02$, $R^2 = .12$). None of the standardized betas in the Kindness

244   model were significant, although the betas for the interaction between Kindness and negative

245   feedback ($\beta = .21$, $p = .10$) and Kindness and positive feedback ($\beta = .27$, $p = .07$) trended

246   significance. These interactions are depicted graphically in Figure 1.

4. Discussion

248   **4.1 Implications for the study of traits**

249   To our knowledge, this is the first study to establish a relationship between trait kindness

250   and observed helping behavior. The results are consistent with the theoretical conception of the

251   VIA scales as measures of specific character traits expected to correlate with behavior (Peterson

252   & Seligman, 2004). Agreeableness, however, was not significantly related to helping behavior.

253   In contrast to the VIA scales, agreeableness is best understood as a broad trait that includes

254   aspects such as straightforwardness, modesty, trust, compliance, altruism, and tender-mindedness

255   (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The contrast in specificity is a likely explanation for why kindness

256   emerged as a better predictor of helping than agreeableness (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001). The

257   results of the present study suggest that the more specific trait of kindness may be *more* relevant

258   in the study of helping behavior than the broader trait of agreeableness.

259   This is also the first study to our knowledge to examine agreeableness and kindness in the

260   context of *observed* helping behavior. Agreeableness has been found to correlate significantly

261   with self-reported willingness to help a stranger in distress (Graziano et al., 2007), self-reported

262   prosocial orientation (Caprara et al., 2010), and self-reported volunteering (Carlo, Okun, Knight,

263   & de Guzman, 2005). In the present study, agreeableness was not related to observed helping

264   behavior. Agreeableness may thus be related to self-reported measures of helping more strongly

265   than observed helping. Further research is needed investigate the relationship between

266   agreeableness and self-reported and observed helping behavior.

267   **4.2 Implications for the study of situational factors**

268   Though no significant differences were found across the feedback conditions and helping

269   in the present study, the lack of effects has implications for the study of situational factors. A

270   multitude of studies have established significant effects for mood manipulations on helping

271   behavior (Carlson et al., 1987; Carlson & Miller, 1988). In the present study, the manipulation

272   check indicated that mood was successfully manipulated, as attested by Cohen's *d* values

273   between feedback groups between .66 and 1.44 for positive affect and between .77 and 1.72 for

274   negative affect.

275   The lack of significant effects may have been due to the use of a less sensitive dependent

276   variable. Though effects for mood manipulations on observed helping behavior have been

277   consistently found (Lefevor et al., 2015), the interaction between the mood condition and the

278   specific measure of helping used has been shown to affect rates of helping (Lefevor & Ahn,

279   2015). A careful analysis of the methods section of studies that measure helping as retrieving

280   dropped items indicates that typically a confederate of the researcher dropped the items (Batson,

281   Coke, Chard, Smith, & Taliafero, 1979; Dovidio & Campbell, 1983; Dovidio & Morris, 1975;

282   Greitemeyer, 2009; Katzev, Edelsack, Steinmetz, Walker, & Wright, 1978; Ruiz & Tanaka,

283   2001; Van den Bos, Müller, & van Bussel, 2009), meaning that there was no interaction between

284   the participant and the person requesting help prior to the critical incident. Some studies using

285   dropped items as the primary measure of helping have been conducted in public places

286   (Brockner, Altman, & Chalek, 1982; Cunningham, 1978), which may mitigate the impact of

287   perceived expectation on helping. Studies with researchers dropping items have also found

288   insignificant effects (Bell & Doyle, 1983). Because of the time spent with the experimenter in

289   the room prior to the critical incident, participants may have felt increased expectation to help,

290   which could have made the measure of helping a less sensitive measure. Future interactionist

291   studies should employ a more sensitive measure of helping.

292   **4.3 Implications for the study of trait x situation interactions**

293   None of the interaction effects were significant, which may be a result of the limitations

294   of the dependent variable discussed previously. In other studies investigating interaction effects

295   between traits and situational factors (e.g., Graziano et al., 2007), there was a main effect for

296   both traits and situational factors in addition to an interaction effect. However, in the present

297   study, there was no main effect for feedback condition on helping behavior. The insensitivity of

298   the dependent variable may have also made it more difficult to discern interaction effects.

299   Additional research is needed to specify and verify potential interaction effects.

300   **4.4 Limitations**

301   The study has several limitations including being the first study to measure character

302   traits, personality traits, feedback conditions, and their interactions. Further, the unusual ethnic

303   composition of the sample, the use of an artificial laboratory setting, and the short-term design of

304   the study limit broad applicability of study results. Many of these limitations could be addressed

305   by replication of the study in diverse contexts using different measures of the independent and

306   dependent variables.

307   **5.   Conclusions and Future Directions**

308   We designed the present study to understand the role of personality traits, character traits,

309   feedback conditions, and their interactions on helping behavior. This was the first exploration, to

310   our knowledge, of the interaction between traits and a situational factor on *observed* helping

311   behavior. In the present study, kindness but not agreeableness was significantly related to

312   helping behavior, providing evidence that kindness, often seen as a character trait, is at least as

313   important in predicting observed helping behavior as agreeableness. Future studies should

314   investigate the interaction between kindness, agreeableness, and feedback condition using a more

315   sensitive measure of observed helping behavior such as emergency helping, or helping with an

316   unappealing task. Future studies could use both observed helping behavior and willingness to

317   help in order to understand if agreeableness and kindness correlate differently with different

318   measures of helping.

319

320   Tables and Figures

321   *Table 1*. Descriptive Statistics.

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	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

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325   *Table 2*. Regression Analyses for Hypothesis 1.

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

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328 *Table 3.* Regression Analyses for Hypothesis 3.

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

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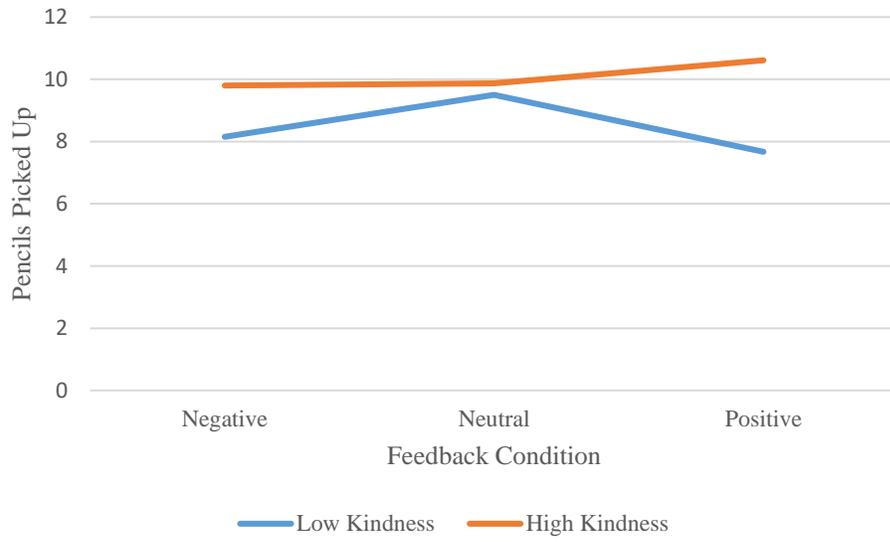
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332   *Figure 1*. The Interaction between Kindness and Feedback on Helping Behavior.

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[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).