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
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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
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, Dovidio, Pliavin, & Schroeder, 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 supervened by an interactionist approach (Epstein & O’Brien, 1985; Fleeson & Noftle, 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., Fleeson, 2007). Graziano, Habashi, Sheeshe, 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 traits 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, 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 feedback).
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 Costa and McCrae’s (1992) NEO questionnaires—is .95 and .92 respectively (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Kindness was measured using the Kindness scale of the Values in Action Inventory (Peterson & Park, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The entire Values in Action Inventory was
administered to mask interest in kindness and reduce potential priming effects. The 5-item Kindness scale had an internal consistency of .79.

Participants’ mood was measured using a mood questionnaire adapted from Webster et al. (2006). The mood questionnaire contains a list of ten adjectives, five related to positive affect and five related to negative affect. Participants responded to the following stem using a seven-point Likert scale with “not at all” and “very much” as anchors: “regarding my performance on the Miller-Holt General IQ Aptitude Test, I feel…”. Items measuring negative affect on the Mood Questionnaire were reverse coded. The internal consistency of the Mood Questionnaire was .85.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Due to a recording error, six participants did not have the data for the number of pencils picked up and were excluded from analyses, resulting in a final sample of 115 participants. Additionally, one participant did not have data for the Agreeableness variable, and five did not have data for Kindness.

Participants’ scores on the Mood Questionnaire were tested in two ANOVAs with mood condition as the independent variable and positive and negative affect scores as dependent variables. The ANOVA for positive affect was significant, $F(2, 118) = 23.04, p < .01$. Significant post-hoc comparisons conducted using Tukey’s highly significant differences test indicated that participants in the positive mood condition experienced significantly greater positive affect than participants in the neutral ($d = 0.96$) and negative ($d = 1.44$) mood conditions. Participants in the neutral mood condition experienced significantly greater positive affect than participants in the negative mood condition ($d = 0.66$). The ANOVA for negative affect was likewise significant, $F(2, 118) = 26.43, p < .01$. Significant post-hoc comparisons conducted using Tukey’s highly
significant differences test indicated that participants in the negative mood condition experienced significantly greater negative affect than participants in the neutral ($d = 0.77$) and positive ($d = 1.72$) mood conditions. Participants in the neutral mood condition experienced significantly greater negative affect than participants in the positive mood condition ($d = 0.81$).

Relationships between demographic variables (i.e., gender, ethnicity, age) and key study variables (i.e., mood condition, Agreeableness, Kindness, helping) were tested. No relationships were significant ($p > .05$), excepting the relationship between gender and Agreeableness. However, as gender was not related to helping, this relationship was not included in subsequent analyses.

Hypothesis 1 was tested using a series of linear regression analyses (see Table 2). A simultaneous linear regression with Agreeableness and Kindness as predictor variables and the number of pencils picked up as the dependent variable was significant ($F(2, 107) = 5.02, p < .01, R^2 = .09$). The standardized beta for Kindness ($\beta = .30$) was significant ($t = 2.73, p < .01$), but the standardized beta for Agreeableness ($\beta = -.02$) was not ($t = -.14, p = .89$). Because Agreeableness and Kindness were significantly correlated ($r = .52, p < .01$), separate one-variable regression analyses were conducted to examine whether Agreeableness and Kindness alone were predictive of helping behavior. In a simple linear regression, Agreeableness was not predictive of helping behavior ($F(1, 108) = 2.44, p = .12, R^2 = .02$); however, in a similar simple linear regression, Kindness did predict helping behavior ($F(1, 108) = 10.12, p < .01, R^2 = .09$). Hypothesis 1a was not supported as Agreeableness was not significantly related to helping in any of the models tested. Hypothesis 1b was supported as Kindness was related to helping.

Hypothesis 2 was tested using a one-way ANOVA with feedback condition as the independent variable (positive, control, negative) and helping behavior as the dependent variable.
The ANOVA failed to reach significance \((F(2, 114) = .13, p = .87, \eta^2 < .01)\), indicating that there was no main effect for feedback conditions on helping. Because the overall ANOVA was non-significant, no further tests were conducted between the positive feedback and control conditions or the negative feedback and the control conditions. These results fail to support hypothesis 2 that there would be a main effect of feedback condition on helping.

In preparation for the analyses for hypothesis 3, feedback conditions were dummy coded into two separate variables such that in one (Positive), “0” corresponded to the control condition and “1” corresponded to the positive feedback condition, and in the other (Negative), “0” corresponded to the control condition and “1” corresponded to the negative feedback condition. Agreeableness and Kindness were centered and interaction terms were created by multiplying the centered variables by the dummy variables created for feedback condition.

Two separate linear regressions were conducted using feedback condition, either Kindness or Agreeableness, and the interaction term as predictors and helping behavior as the predicted variable (see Table 3). The regression model including Agreeableness was not significant \((F(5, 110) = 1.01, p = .41, R^2 = .04)\), but the model including Kindness was significant \((F(5, 105) = 2.91, p = .02, R^2 = .12)\). None of the standardized betas in the Kindness model were significant, although the betas for the interaction between Kindness and negative feedback \((\beta = .21, p = .10)\) and Kindness and positive feedback \((\beta = .27, p = .07)\) trended significance. These interactions are depicted graphically in Figure 1.

4. Discussion

4.1 Implications for the study of traits

To our knowledge, this is the first study to establish a relationship between trait kindness and observed helping behavior. The results are consistent with the theoretical conception of the
VIA scales as measures of specific character traits expected to correlate with behavior (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Agreeableness, however, was not significantly related to helping behavior. In contrast to the VIA scales, agreeableness is best understood as a broad trait that includes aspects such as straightforwardness, modesty, trust, compliance, altruism, and tender-mindedness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The contrast in specificity is a likely explanation for why kindness emerged as a better predictor of helping than agreeableness (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001). The results of the present study suggest that the more specific trait of kindness may be more relevant in the study of helping behavior than the broader trait of agreeableness.

This is also the first study to our knowledge to examine agreeableness and kindness in the context of observed helping behavior. Agreeableness has been found to correlate significantly with self-reported willingness to help a stranger in distress (Graziano et al., 2007), self-reported prosocial orientation (Caprara et al., 2010), and self-reported volunteering (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005). In the present study, agreeableness was not related to observed helping behavior. Agreeableness may thus be related to self-reported measures of helping more strongly than observed helping. Further research is needed to investigate the relationship between agreeableness and self-reported and observed helping behavior.

4.2 Implications for the study of situational factors

Though no significant differences were found across the feedback conditions and helping in the present study, the lack of effects has implications for the study of situational factors. A multitude of studies have established significant effects for mood manipulations on helping behavior (Carlson et al., 1987; Carlson & Miller, 1988). In the present study, the manipulation check indicated that mood was successfully manipulated, as attested by Cohen’s $d$ values.
between feedback groups between .66 and 1.44 for positive affect and between .77 and 1.72 for negative affect.

The lack of significant effects may have been due to the use of a less sensitive dependent variable. Though effects for mood manipulations on observed helping behavior have been consistently found (Lefevor et al., 2015), the interaction between the mood condition and the specific measure of helping used has been shown to affect rates of helping (Lefevor & Ahn, 2015). A careful analysis of the methods section of studies that measure helping as retrieving dropped items indicates that typically a confederate of the researcher dropped the items (Batson, Coke, Chard, Smith, & Taliafero, 1979; Dovidio & Campbell, 1983; Dovidio & Morris, 1975; Greitemeyer, 2009; Katzev, Edelsack, Steinmetz, Walker, & Wright, 1978; Ruiz & Tanaka, 2001; Van den Bos, Müller, & van Bussel, 2009), meaning that there was no interaction between the participant and the person requesting help prior to the critical incident. Some studies using dropped items as the primary measure of helping have been conducted in public places (Brockner, Altman, & Chalek, 1982; Cunningham, 1978), which may mitigate the impact of perceived expectation on helping. Studies with researchers dropping items have also found insignificant effects (Bell & Doyle, 1983). Because of the time spent with the experimenter in the room prior to the critical incident, participants may have felt increased expectation to help, which could have made the measure of helping a less sensitive measure. Future interactionist studies should employ a more sensitive measure of helping.

4.3 Implications for the study of trait x situation interactions

None of the interaction effects were significant, which may be a result of the limitations of the dependent variable discussed previously. In other studies investigating interaction effects between traits and situational factors (e.g., Graziano et al., 2007), there was a main effect for
both traits and situational factors in addition to an interaction effect. However, in the present study, there was no main effect for feedback condition on helping behavior. The insensitivity of the dependent variable may have also made it more difficult to discern interaction effects. Additional research is needed to specify and verify potential interaction effects.

4.4 Limitations

The study has several limitations including being the first study to measure character traits, personality traits, feedback conditions, and their interactions. Further, the unusual ethnic composition of the sample, the use of an artificial laboratory setting, and the short-term design of the study limit broad applicability of study results. Many of these limitations could be addressed by replication of the study in diverse contexts using different measures of the independent and dependent variables.

5. Conclusions and Future Directions

We designed the present study to understand the role of personality traits, character traits, feedback conditions, and their interactions on helping behavior. This was the first exploration, to our knowledge, of the interaction between traits and a situational factor on observed helping behavior. In the present study, kindness but not agreeableness was significantly related to helping behavior, providing evidence that kindness, often seen as a character trait, is at least as important in predicting observed helping behavior as agreeableness. Future studies should investigate the interaction between kindness, agreeableness, and feedback condition using a more sensitive measure of observed helping behavior such as emergency helping, or helping with an unappealing task. Future studies could use both observed helping behavior and willingness to help in order to understand if agreeableness and kindness correlate differently with different measures of helping.
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

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<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<th>Skewness Std. Dev</th>
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<th>Kurtosis Std. Dev</th>
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Table 2. Regression Analyses for Hypothesis 1.

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Table 3. Regression Analyses for Hypothesis 3.

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


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).