

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN HELPING BEHAVIOR

A Senior Honors Thesis

By

JENNIFER LEE TACKETT

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

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April 2000

Group: Psychology II

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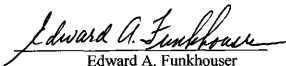
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April 2000

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ABSTRACT

Individual Differences in Helping Behavior. (April 2000)

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This study examined the relations among the personality dimension of agreeableness, empathy and prosocial behavior. College students ($N=210$) were randomly assigned to either a high or low empathy condition in which they listened to the story of a fellow student in need. After listening to the situation described in a supposed radio broadcast, participants were given an opportunity to help. Outcomes suggest individual differences in empathy and emotionality. Results were discussed in terms of agreeableness as a predictor of emotion variables.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in memory of my brother, Joshua Lee Tackett, who has blessed my perspective of life with meaning, purpose, and strength.

“All I have ever done for you, is to outlive you. But that is much.”

-Edna St. Vincent Millay

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In addition, I would like to thank the members of Dr. Graziano's Research Team for their important help in several of the necessary aspects in executing this research. I would especially like to acknowledge Julie Ferguson and Kristi Stewart for their unequalled contribution and personal investment in keeping this project running smoothly and in keeping me sane. Other team members who made significant gains towards the progress of this project are Kristen Anton, Kristy Schumacher and Tim Willis.

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INTRODUCTION

Prosocial behavior is a kind of glue that holds relationships and groups together. These behaviors allow humans to live in harsh physical and social ecologies and overcome obstacles that no individual could surmount alone. Yet the processes underlying prosocial behavior are not well understood. One important contributor is empathy. Empathy is an emotional state that is activated in certain people when they observe another person in distress (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

Empathy has been examined in the past, but researchers have overlooked the impact of individual differences. One potentially important individual difference is the personality dimension of agreeableness. Graziano and Eisenberg (1997) suggested that there are probably important links between emotional/motivational processes and individual differences in agreeableness. Further research by Wiggins (1991) argued that communion, a major motivational system, underlies interpersonal behavior. Communion, defined as the striving for intimacy, union, and solidarity with others, can be mapped onto the Big Five dimension of agreeableness (Graziano, 1994). It is plausible that this motivational system is related to individual differences in empathic responses. The empathy-altruism hypothesis (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978) rests on the idea that “empathy – defined as an other-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another person – can evoke motivation to help that person”

This thesis follows the style and format of *Journal of Personality*.

(p. 52). Further, Graziano (1994) noted that an agreeableness-like dimension seems to be pervasive in social perception and cognition. Smooth interactions with others would indicate that individuals higher in agreeableness are successful at empathizing, or taking the place of the other.

In analyzing agreeableness, Graziano and Eisenberg (1997) defined prosocial behavior as voluntary behavior intended to benefit another, without regard to motivation. They examined the role of dispositional factors in prosocial behavior. One related theory is the idea that there are stable individual differences in prosocial responding which may be explained by heritability of empathy and prosocial tendencies. Another correlate is research indicating a social learning basis of relatively enduring individual differences in prosocial behavior (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Many studies have indicated that there is moderate stability in individuals' prosocial responding after the preschool years (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Block & Block, 1973; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977; Eisenberg et al., 1987). Associations also were made between prosocial behavior and person-centered variables when considering altruistic behavior (Rholes & Bailey, 1983).

Early studies of the empathy-altruism hypothesis showed that in highly empathic individuals, helping is high regardless of the ease of escaping their arousal by escaping exposure to the suffering victim (Batson et al., 1981; Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983; Fultz, Batson, Fortenbach, McCarthy, & Varney, 1986). In one paradigm used to test an egoistic alternative to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, Batson et al. (1988) had college students listen to a plea for help by a fellow college

more helping behavior than will individuals in the low empathy condition. Third, we hypothesize that high-agreeable persons will help more than low agreeable persons when they are induced to empathize with a victim. That is, we hypothesize an agreeableness X empathy interaction. Finally, we also hypothesize that females will demonstrate more helping behavior than will males.

METHOD

Overview

To probe these hypotheses, a 2 (Agreeableness) X 2 (Sex) X 2 (Empathy) factorial design will be used. Research participants will be randomly assigned to one of two empathy conditions.

Following the paradigm used by Batson, et al. (1988), participants will be asked to listen to a pilot tape for an ongoing project for pilot testing new programs for the Texas A&M campus radio station. They will be asked to adopt a particular listening perspective and reactions will be measured by questionnaires. As with Batson's model, they will be given two letters, ostensibly one from the professor running the study and one from Katie. The letter from the professor will explain his sudden realization at the opportunity for students participating in the study to help Katie. Participants may choose to complete a form delegating the amount of time they would be willing to help.

Participants

A total of 210 participants (83 males, 127 females) took part in the study in exchange for partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement. The student participants were drawn from a population of students previously assessed on the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) questionnaire for the five factor structural approach. From the full distribution of scores in group testing, student participants who fell within the top quarter and bottom quarter on agreeableness were contacted by phone and asked to participate in the study.

Procedure

During the telephone solicitation, a research assistant who was blind to all pretest agreeableness scores, instructed one student participant per session to report for a study examining reactions to a listening task. When participants arrived, they were asked to read and sign a statement of informed consent. Once consent was obtained, half of the participant completed the John & Srivastava (1999) Big Five Inventory for the five-factor model. This questionnaire was counterbalanced such that the other half of the participants completed it following the study.

Based on the Batson, et al. (1988) paradigm, participants were then told that they are going to listen to a recording which is part of a project to test new programs for the Texas A&M campus radio station. They were asked to adopt a particular listening perspective, which is the empathy manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two empathy conditions, low or high. Consistent with Batson's manipulation, participants in the low-empathy condition were asked to focus on the technical aspects of the broadcast. In the high-empathy condition, they were asked to concentrate on the feelings of the person being interviewed.

As with the Batson, et al. (1988) model, participants heard a tape-recorded interview with a senior at Texas A&M named Katie. Katie's parents and sister have recently been killed in an automobile accident. Katie's parents didn't have life insurance, and she is struggling to take care of her younger brother and sister while finishing her last year in school. If she doesn't graduate, she will have to put her siblings up for adoption.

After listening to the tape, the experimenter would prepare to hand out the reaction questionnaires only to realize that there had been a problem with the copying, following the Batson, et al. (1988) paradigm. While s/he goes to retrieve more copies, the participants were asked to read two letters, one from the professor in charge of the study and one from Katie. As with Batson's manipulation, the letter from the professor communicated his sudden realization that this study might be an opportunity for students to help Katie out. He asked Katie to write a letter explaining things the students could do to help, such as babysitting her siblings, helping around the house, and assisting her with a fundraising project.

Enclosed with the letters was a response form. Participants could indicate whether they wished to help Katie and if so, how many hours they would like to volunteer: 1 to 2, 3 to 5, 6 to 8, or 9 to 10 hr. It was made clear to the students that their experimental credit for participating in the study did not depend on whether or not they help. Those volunteering to help Katie completed a schedule of available hours and included their student ID number and phone number.

After completing the response form, the experimenter handed out the reaction questionnaire to the radio program. Items were included on this questionnaire to check the effectiveness of the empathy manipulation. Finally, the participants were fully debriefed, thanked for their participation, pledged to confidentiality about the procedures, and excused.

RESULTS

Empathy Manipulation

A significant main effect was found for listening perspective on the self-report of amount of focus on the emotional aspects of the broadcast, $F(1,210)=11.50, p<.001$, such that participants given the feeling perspective ($N=101, M=7.79, SD=0.98$) reported more of a focus on the emotional aspects than did those given the technical perspective ($N=111, M=6.96, SD=1.81$). In addition, there was also a significant effect for listening perspective and the amount of focus on the technical aspects of the broadcast, $F(1,210)=110.85, p<.001$, such that participants given the feeling perspective ($N=101, M=3.94, SD=2.08$) reported less of a focus on the technical aspects than did those given the technical perspective ($N=111, M=6.70, SD=1.62$). See Figure 1.

Empathy-Related Dependent Variables

Results of a repeated-measures ANOVA indicate significant effects for agreeableness and the following dependent variables: whether Katie deserved help, $F(1,208)=10.30, p<.001$, whether TAMU students should help Katie, $F(1,209)=5.26, p<.02$, how much they were affected by the broadcast emotionally, $F(1,210)=19.14, p=.0001$, how great was Katie's need, $F(1,210)=6.75, p=.01$, how much they liked Katie, $F(1,210)=9.48, p=.002$, and how similar they felt they were to Katie, $F(1,210)=16.15, p=.0001$. See Figure 2. The current results do not support the first hypothesis that agreeableness is a significant predictor of helping behavior.

Sex Differences

There was a significant effect for sex on helping, $F(1,205)=13.61, p<.001$, such that females ($M=2.11, SD=2.53$) volunteered to work more hours than did males ($M=1.12, SD=1.59$). See Figure 3.

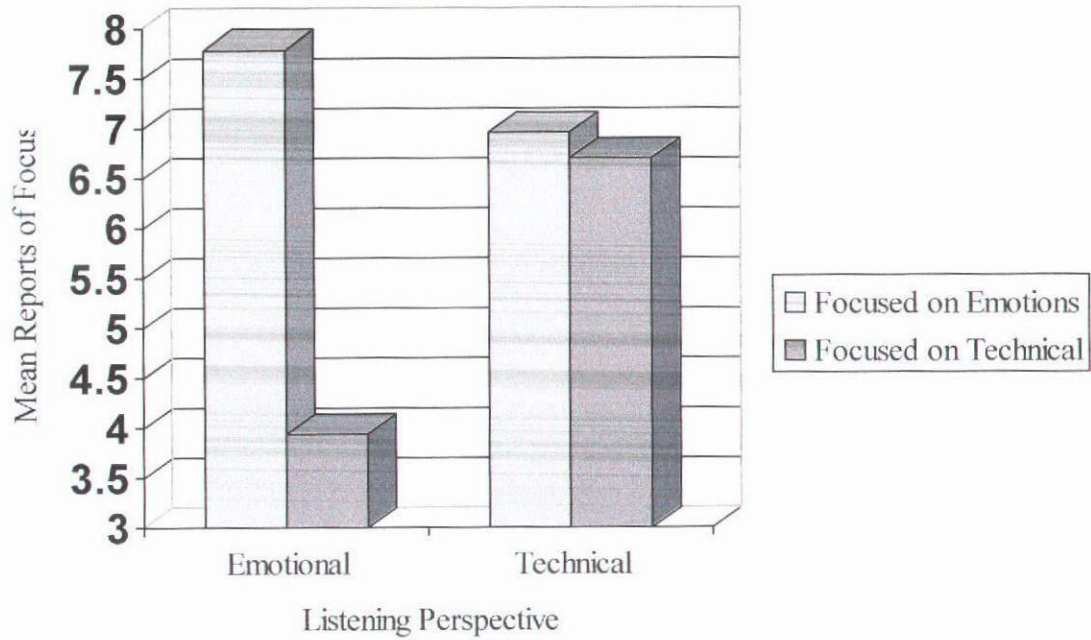


Figure 1
Mean Reports of Focus by Listening Perspective

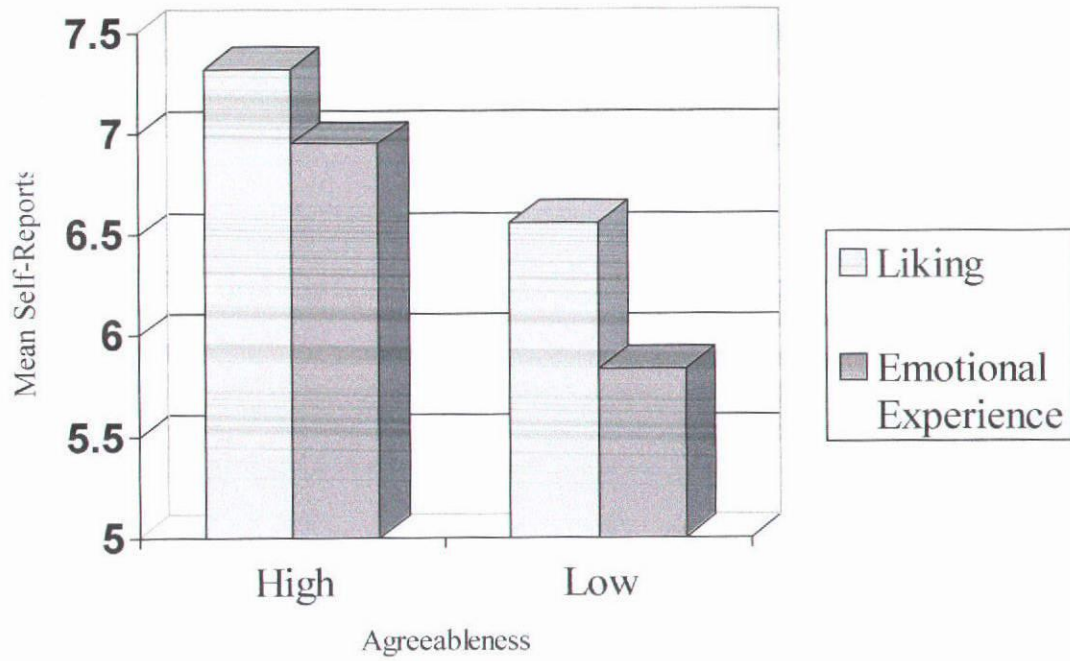


Figure 2
Mean Reports of Liking and Emotional Experience

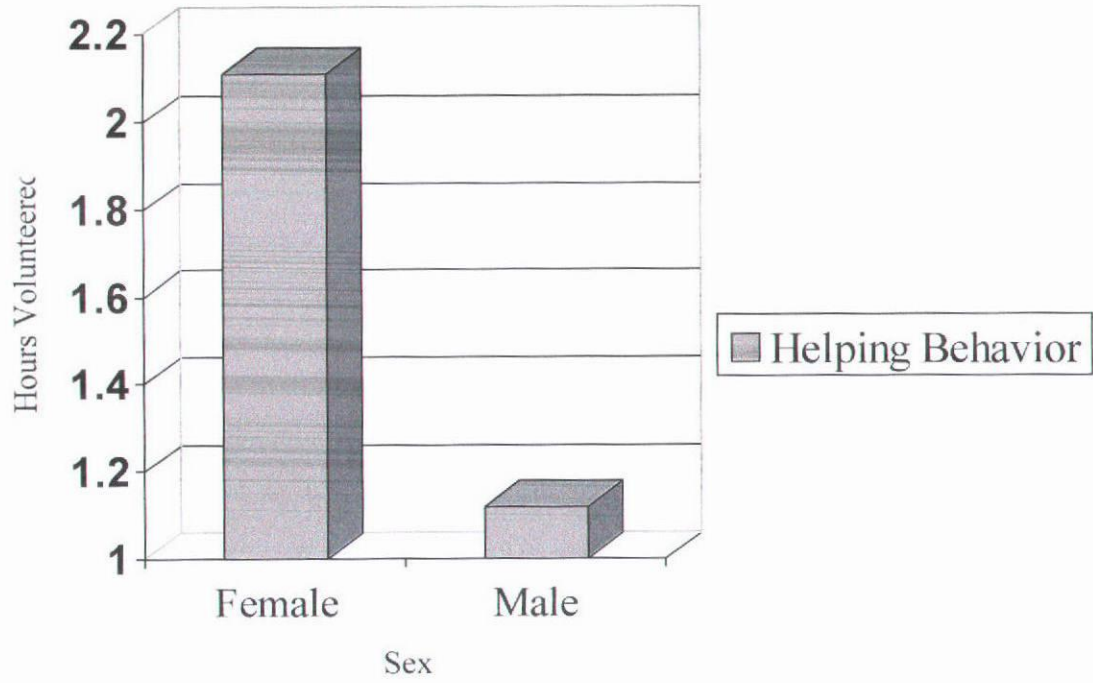


Figure 3
Mean Number of Hours Offered to Volunteer
By Males and Females

SUMMARY

Our results indicate that agreeableness may be a predictor of empathy, such that subjects falling higher on the agreeableness dimension tend to give more positive ratings on a wide range of empathy-related questions. High-agreeable subjects thought Katie deserved help, that TAMU students should help Katie, they were emotionally affected by the broadcast, they thought that Katie's need was greater, they liked Katie more, and they felt more similar to Katie. Consistent with our hypothesis and previous research (Davis, 1980), the phenomenon of empathy appears to be related to the personality dimension of agreeableness. Consistent with our hypotheses, the empathy manipulation worked and females volunteered more time to helping than did males.

The puzzling result is that altruism seems to not be predicted by agreeableness, even though it predicts empathy. This finding, or lack of connection, may be examined in future studies. Several possible explanations could be explored. It is possible that the Batson scenario may be asking too much of students, by requiring the intimacy of face-to-face contact with the victim, volunteering time rather than other means of support, and dealing with a complete stranger. Further research could introduce different options in helping and specifically explore direct vs. indirect helping and time vs. material donations. By delving into the more minute details of these sensitive relationships, the possibility of agreeableness as an indirect predictor of empathy can be more thoroughly examined.

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