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The Effect of Negative Impressions on Helping Behaviour of Highly Empathetic People

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### Abstract

Previous research has shown that high-empathy individuals usually help more than low-empathy individuals, but it is unclear whether or not a highly empathetic person's helping behaviour is influenced by a negative impression. The effect of a negative impression on the helping behaviour of highly empathetic people is analyzed. Participants completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to identify their empathy level. High (20) and low (20) empathy university students watched a video of a confederate acting to give either a positive or negative impression, after which participants were given an opportunity to help the person in the video. There was no difference between the helping behaviour of high-empathy people and low-empathy people. While these results are inconsistent with previous research, further investigation should be done using participants who are naturally high and low in empathy to help assess factors influencing helping behaviours.

### The Effect of Negative Impressions on Helping Behaviour of Highly Empathetic People

Studies in the field of bystander apathy have shown that individuals are less likely to help in an emergency if there are others present. Bystander apathy theory asserts that the more people present in an emergency situation, which clearly requires an intervention, the less likely people are to intervene (Levine, 1999). Bystander apathy can be generalized to situations of low to high risk, spanning from classroom bullying to murder. Often in real-life scenarios a person in need has no relationship to the bystander(s), which points out a potential intrinsic motivator for helping: relationship to the victim.

In a field study, Levine (1999) points out that a perceived relationship to a person in need can cause people not to act. A two year old boy, James Bulger, was abducted from his mother by two boys, both the age of 10. The boys walked James around his town of Liverpool for approximately two and a half hours before murdering him along a railway line. During this time no one came to help the little boy. There were at least 38 people who had come into contact with the boys during their walk, yet no one intervened (Levine, 1999). This non-intervention was attributed to a “family” scenario; bystanders reported that they thought the boys were older brothers of James, and did not want to intrude on a family situation. The lack of previous interaction the bystanders had with James was attributed to them not helping, and although the “family” scenario was blamed for the lack of intervention, people should intervene when they feel someone is in need, regardless of the perceived relationship—and Levine notes that this typically only occurs with a prior relationship to the victim.

Field examples like the one of James Bulger indicate a possible explanation of why people are reluctant to help—they do not have a prior bond with the person in need. It is noted by Bar, Neta, and Linz (2006) that first impressions are made within the first 39s of seeing someone. Therefore even a very brief interaction with a person before they are in need of help could result in a higher willingness of a bystander(s) to help because of this prior, though limited, bond with the person. A bond between people is usually a result of sharing something in common. If a bystander was, at one time, in the same situation as the person in need, would they then have intrinsic motivation, such as empathy, and help the person in need?

### *Empathy Increases Helping*

Do individual levels of empathy predict the probability of helping? Empathy can be described as understanding and or identifying with another persons situation and feelings (American Heritage Dictionary, 2008). Fultz, Batson, Fortenbach, McCarthy, and Varney (1986) showed that there was a high correlation among a person's score on the Situational Empathy Index and their indication of willingness to help. The authors tested the theory that empathy causes increased helping. Participants read two letters involving a student from their university who was sad and felt very much lost in the university setting. After reading the two letters the participants filled out a self-report emotional response that consisted of 28 adjectives describing emotions; six adjectives reflecting empathy in response to another's need. The participants rated the extent to which they were now experiencing each emotion after reading the letters. The participants were then informed that they could meet and spend time with the distressed

student as part of a long-term study on forming relationships. Devotion of time was considered a form of helping.

Those who scored high in empathy wanted to help the distressed student much more frequently than those who scored low in empathy. Based on the results of this study it could be predicted that a person who is high in empathy should then offer more help than a person who is low in empathy. In simply reading about a person in need, participants were able to form an impression of the person they were reading about, and perhaps based on their own formed impression, choose whether or not they were going to later help that person.

### *Impressions*

Is there a relationship between first impressions and helping? Jacobson (1944) commented that first impressions largely affect how a person is accepted in society by others. A favorable impression usually results in acceptance or a desire for further contact while a negative impression evokes the opposite reaction. With a positive impression a person would therefore expect to receive more help due to the fact that further contact is desired. A negative impression would be thought to hinder one's willingness to help due to the fact that further contact is not desired.

Schwartz, Friedlander, and Tedeschi (1986) found that intrinsic reasons for seeking help resulted in a more positive impression of a person, than providing extrinsic reasons, and when an intrinsic reason was given, people were more willing to help. An intrinsic reason is when a person provides internal reasons for seeking help, (e.g., "I am doing bad in math and would like a tutor."), while an extrinsic reason is when a person provides external reasons for seeking help, (e.g., "My mother thinks I am doing bad in

math and she wants me to get a tutor.”). Counselors heard one of two different stimulus tapes: half heard an intrinsic reason for seeking help from a client (e.g., “I thought that talking this over with a counselor might help.”), and the other half heard an extrinsic reason for seeking help (e.g., “I came in to get a letter to give to the Dean saying I talked to a counselor about this.”). Counselors were reported as viewing the client who gave intrinsic reasons for seeking help as more motivated and more favorable than did subjects in the extrinsic condition, and as a result counselors were more willing to offer help, commenting that the help would be better received. It appears that people who ask for help while maintaining intrinsic reasons for doing so will receive help more frequently than people who ask for help while maintaining extrinsic reasons for doing so.

Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, and Ortiz (2007) show the importance of impression formation in relation to helping. Sixty undergraduate students were asked to take the perspective of the reader (high-empathy condition), or to remain objective (low-empathy condition). Participants were presented with either a positive or negative perspective on an individual (Brian) whom they were reading about. The participants were later given the choice to help Brian. Results found that when participants were given a negative impression of Brian they valued him less and did not help him as much as the group given the positive perspective, regardless of their level of empathy. This study tried to manipulate empathy, as opposed to taking the natural empathy levels of participants—would the outcome be different if natural levels of empathy were used?

Are high-empathy individuals more helpful regardless of the type of first impression? This question is the basis of the experiment to follow. This study tries to identify a difference between high and low-empathy participants in their relation to

helping. High-empathy people are thought to help more than low-empathy people (Batson, et al., 1997, Fultz, Batson, Fortenbach, McCarthy, & Varney, 1986), but there is no direct link between impression formation and empathy level towards helping. It has also been found that a positive first impression evokes more help than a negative first impression (Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007). When a persons natural empathy levels are taken, as opposed to trying to manipulate empathy, participants who are high in empathy should view a person more positively than participants low in empathy and because so help more.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Sixty Algoma University College students volunteered for the first phase of the study. Empathy levels were measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and the 20 highest (high-empathy) and 20 lowest (low-empathy) scorers continued with the second phase of the study (40 participants in total). Some volunteers were given marks towards course credit.

For the second phase of the study participants were divided into 2 groups: high-empathy or low-empathy, and were randomly assigned to one of 2 levels in each group: positive impression or negative impression. It should be noted that out of the 40 participants asked to come back for the second phase of the study, only 23 participants were willing to participate.

#### *Materials*

The IRI questionnaire was administered to each participant in the selection process. The questionnaire had attached numbers on the top left hand corner. The

numbers were later used as a code for the participant to be contacted for the second phase of the study.

For the second phase of the study a video camera was used to tape the confederate. The confederate was the same person for the negative and positive impression scenario, thus reducing control issues. The confederate was taped in front of a solid dark-blue background, wearing a solid white-t-shirt. The confederate asked the viewing audience for help in regards to his thesis study on memory. A study by Schwartz, Friedlander, and Tedeschi (1986) showed that intrinsic reasons for seeking help are better received by participants than extrinsic reasons, and therefore the confederate “Jack” gives intrinsic reasons for needing help in the positive impression group, and extrinsic reasons for needing help in the negative impression group.

The thesis students were asked to give their opinion of the confederate’s impression in each scenario. Each video impression received unanimous consensus that the desired impression was achieved in each scenario, and both video tapes were used for the following study. The purpose of this pre-video examination was to verify that the confederate was manipulating impression (positive and negative).

### *Procedure*

For the selection process each participant was asked to fill out a standard consent form, which indicated that they may be selected for the later study, after which each participant was handed the IRI, face down. The participants were given a pen, and instructed to sit at an available study desk and fill out the index. The participants were also informed that when they had completed the index, to return it face down to the desk where the experimenter was seated, and they would receive a receipt denoting that they



had participated in the study. The participant's code was written on their receipt, so they would later be contacted by code, as opposed to name.

For those chosen for the second phase of the study, the participants entered a classroom in Algoma University College individually and were seated in front of a computer. The experimenter showed each participant how to start the video. Prior to viewing the video, participants were told that the experimenter was helping out another psychology thesis student who was currently on exchange and asked if the experimenter could help collect feedback for his study. The participants then viewed either the negative or positive impression video. In each video the confederate said roughly the same script, asking for help with his study on memory, but in the negative impression video he did so with a straight face and no expression in his voice. In the positive impression video the confederate was pleasant and smiling. After viewing the video and closing the computer, the experimenter handed the participant a two page questionnaire asking each participant to first read the instructions and then continue.

The two page questionnaire consisted of 10 questions on the first page directed towards assessing each participant's level of helping. The second page asked a series of questions aimed at assessing each participant's impression of the confederate. The participants were told that this information would be given to the man on the video. The second page questionnaire gave specific instruction not to turn back to the first page. Participants turned the papers face down when they were done filling the questionnaires out.

The first questionnaire was designed to assess the participant's helpfulness level. The questionnaire asked participants to state their opinion on questions based on a scale

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ranging from 1 (“Absolutely No”) to 6 (“Absolutely Yes”). The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions each asking for a different level of helping, (e.g., “How willing would you be to agree to pass out sign-up sheets for his study on memory in a class you are enrolled in?”). A total of 7 questions were used to test helpfulness. There were two filler questions, which emphasized participation in the confederate’s thesis study, and were not calculated in the total helpfulness score. The questions were added to increase the believability of the confederate’s situation. Therefore the highest helpfulness score attained could be 42.

The second questionnaire was attached to the back of the first questionnaire. There were specific instructions on the second questionnaire which asked participants not to look at the first questionnaire while filling out the second. The questionnaire asked participants to rate questions on the same scale as the one for the first questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions. Five questions were used to measure the impression conveyed by the confederate to the participant (e.g., “Did you find him nice?”); the subsequent 5 questions were used as filler. In relation to a positive impression a possible high score of 30 could be attained.

Typically bystanders in experimental situations have no prior connection with the person in need (Levine, 1999), and therefore a question was incorporated at the end of the second study asking whether or not the participant knew the man on the video tape. If they did know the confederate their results were not to be used. When the questionnaires were flipped face down, they were collected and the experimenter gave each participant a debriefing form, which indicated that there was slight deception and that the man in the video is an actor and does not require help.

## Results

Response to the helpfulness questionnaire indicated that participants were not more willing to help the confederate in the positive impression scenario. No participant indicated knowing the confederate and therefore all the results were used ( $N = 23$ ). A factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there was no effect found between the impression level (positive or negative) and amount of helping  $F(1, 19) = 0.186$ ,  $p = 0.946$ . Although not significant this finding was not attributed to the different empathy groups; there was a significant difference between the scores of the participants in the negative impression group and the positive impression group. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant higher level of empathy in the high-empathy group ( $M = 24.4$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) than the low-empathy group ( $M = 12.6$ ,  $SD = 3.47$ ),  $t(38) = 13.42$ ,  $p = 0.007$ . There was a significant difference between the average empathy scores in each group, and because so the lack of significance in my overall results is not due to a lack of difference between the groups themselves.

Response to the impression questionnaire indicated that the confederate was perceived roughly the same in each impression scenario. The lack of significance in overall results may be due to the fact that the confederate did not accurately manipulate each impression. An additional independent samples t-test found that the positive impression level rated the confederate slightly more positively ( $M = 24.85$ ,  $SD = 6.66$ ) than the negative impression level ( $M = 23.6$ ,  $SD = 5.44$ ),  $t(21) = 0.49$ ,  $p = 0.636$ , however not significantly so. These results help to explain why the high-empathy group did not help more in the positive scenario than the negative one, for the confederate did not accurately manipulate each impression.

### Discussion

Results of this experiment did not provide support for the idea that high-empathy people help more than low-empathy people when the impression of the person in need is positive. As revealed in the study by Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, and Ortiz (2007), when participants are told to take either a negative or positive perspective of a person, the positive perspective will result in more helping than the negative perspective, regardless of a person's empathy level. These results were not duplicated however, but an intrinsic difference was taken in this study: participants were left to take their own perspective of the confederate as opposed to being told to take a certain perspective. The intention of the study was to render accurate results in relation to real-life helping situations, and therefore participants could not have been told to take a specific perspective; asking participants to take a specific perspective is manipulating their empathy level, which is not done in a real-world situation. It is possible that manipulating empathy levels may have led to the significant results in the study by Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, and Ortiz (2007), which may not have occurred if the actual empathy levels of participants were used.

A crucial aspect of this study involved the accurate manipulation of impressions to assess real empathy levels and helping. However, the confederate did not accurately manipulate each impression; the positive impression scenario was only rated slightly more positive than the negative impression scenario. In the future in order to aid in the manipulation of impression a confederate should appear in person so that the impression is stronger and lasts longer. The confederate was thought to be a fellow Algoma thesis student, and therefore could have received more helpfulness strictly because of the

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affiliate connection between the confederate and the participant with the university itself, regardless of the impression he did convey.

In regards to participants and overall group totals, there were not enough participants to produce significant results (N=23). The outcome of having more participants in the study would not necessarily produce significant results, but should produce a greater relationship between impression and empathy towards helping. Having a larger participant sample to select from would render more representative results, true of the larger population.

The relationship between impression and helping has real-world applications. Negative impressions hinder the willingness for people to help. While much research suggests that a person's empathy level is a good predictor of whether or not they will help, the focus towards the influence of impression on this relationship is not clearly established. If people are aware of the importance of first impressions in relation to helping, some people may change the way they interact with others, if not for anything other than their future benefit. However, if people can in some way differentiate their helping levels, to ignore impressions, the helping rates of bystanders should go up, helping to eliminate situations of distress for many.

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