Egotism in Disguise: Unveiling Helping Behavior Motivated by Appearance

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Abstract

The current study will examine the influential relationship between the helper and the one being assisted during prosocial helping behavior. This will explore how one's appearance can impact the desire to engage in communal-oriented or exchange-oriented helping. This study will also address how the location of the action will be an influential factor in the underlying motivation. Helping behavior will be defined as holding the door open for myself, dressed as an 'attractive' authority figure or an 'unattractive' student. This study will be done through an observational design in four separate trials: helping an attractive authority figure in a public setting, helping an attractive authority figure in a private setting, helping an unattractive student in a public space, and helping an unattractive student in a private space. Each trial will have ten participants varying in age, gender, and ethnic background, with each trial lasting a few minutes. When encountering an attractive authority figure in a private and public setting, I predict a significant relationship between high exchange-oriented, egoistic helping behavior levels.

Keywords: Prosocial helping behavior, Egoism, Appearance, Communal and Exchange Orientation

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Prosocial helping behaviors are “social communicative acts intended for the well-being of others, without immediate personal benefit” (Hepach et al., 2013). To engage in prosocial behavior, one must act out of selflessness and serve one of three communicative functions: informative helping, instrumental helping, or empathetic helping (Greenslade & Coggins, 2022). However, literature has addressed outside factors that lead to helping, such as egoistic motives rooted in superficial desire. Despite the research that has explored this outlier in helping behavior, there is a lack of exploration that discusses what influences individuals to have this selfish approach. Additionally, literature has discussed how more attractive individuals tend to be portrayed as more dominant or successful, influencing others to gain recognition (Rahal et al., 2021). There is no current research that meshes these two ideas together. Therefore, the current study will explore how individuals who engage in egoistic helping behavior do it due to the influence of somebody’s social status and attractiveness.

The Empathy Altruism Hypothesis and Signaling

Sympathy is the intertwined feeling of understanding with another human being. When an individual feels sympathy for somebody, they usually engage in thoughts of remorse, wanting to relieve distress. Sympathy is a core factor in Daniel Batson’s (1981) empathy-altruism hypothesis (Baldner et al., 2020). When engaging in empathy, an individual has personal experience that can relate to the source of distress; the motivation behind why some people help others is sometimes centered around relatability. The altruistic feeling of sorrow has been shown to increase the desire to help others, even outgroup members; the distress from the target can motivate the observer to help (Baldner et al., 2020; Hoffman, 1981; Piliavin & Piliavin,

1973). Within this hypothesis, a helping goal is developed from sympathy. However, research has indicated that the goal can also be developed from a superficial state of mind, even with sympathy present (Baldner et al., 2020). For example, an individual's reason for helping can be driven by appearing helpful and relieving their distress rather than a genuine desire to relieve someone else suffering. Batson also discusses this phenomenon: he discovered superficial helping, egotism, and signaling when conducting studies focused on empathetic altruism (Baldner et al., 2020). Superficial helping and Egotism go hand in hand to explain that others help out-group members for their benefit. Thus, the prosocial behavior is not prosocial, making it superficial when the reason is directed internally rather than externally. In addition, signaling is when you engage in helping behavior, knowing you will be looked at as a helpful and caring person (Baldner et al., 2020).

Exchange and Communal Orientation

When helping others, individuals can be communal-oriented or exchange-oriented in their behaviors. Communal-oriented (CO) people help others without expecting anything in return, and exchange-oriented (EO) people are concerned with reciprocity (Tianyuan et al., 2022). In situations where individuals encounter the opportunity to help, CO or EO depends on the context. For example, when someone is helping a stranger, EO is more regularly adapted due to being primed with power and self-interest (Chen et al., 2001; Tianyuan et al. et al., 2022). To maintain an equilibrium within everyday interactions and society, people gravitate toward EO to provide balanced exchanges.

The Role of Physical Attractiveness, Status, and Helping Others

Recent literature states that the social hierarchy of a person can influence an individual's view of them. People judge somebody’s social status based on physical

appearance, specifically attractiveness and dominance (Rahal et al., 2021). How physically appealing one is to others can convey a discouraging message of conflict and possible competition for resources (Archie et al., 2012; Rahal et al., 2021). However, this implicit attitude toward somebody develops the idea that they are higher on the social hierarchy. This can open the opportunity for an individual to want to gain recognition or status from them. Research has indicated that less attractive or dominant individuals are treated differently and report a lower social status than peers (Rahal et al., 2021).

The Current Study

A vast amount of research focuses on helping behavior in the context of helping for egoistic motives vs. altruism. However, limited studies focus on the influential relationship between the helper and the one being assisted. Adding to this, when helping in public, an individual often receives personal benefits such as recognition, praise, and a boost to self-esteem (Siem, 2019). The literature merely addresses the importance of location. However, there needs to be more mention about how it is intertwined with who the helper is, who is being assisted, and the relationship between them. The gap in the literature led to this experimental study. Thus, the present study will examine what factors lead to prosocial behavior and if the motive can be entirely altruistic. This study will also examine the role of the helper concerning the location and the person being assisted and whether the status of the person being aided motivates (or not) the behavior. The following research questions will be explored:

1. Do individuals engage in more empathetic and communal-oriented helping, thinking the person is of equal status?

2. How is sympathy reflected through exchange-oriented helping when individuals think the person is an attractive authority figure?
3. Can prosocial helping behavior exist without some egoistic motive when surrounded by others or authority?

Based on the aforementioned literature, I predict that individuals will not want to engage in communal-oriented acts if they are of equal status and have no attractive characteristics. Individuals will engage more in exchange-oriented behaviors with sympathy when the assistant is not of equal status and is interpreted as an attractive authority figure. Moreover, the location with more bystanders will produce a higher rate of helping behavior due to the opportunity to boost self-esteem and recognition from a higher-ranked individual.

Method

Participants

The current study will use participants from the University of Hartford campus. Outside participation is involuntary but not harmful because this study is observationally conducted. Thus, Participants will be randomly selected and will vary in gender, ethnicity, and age. On the other hand, I will be the primary participant who undergoes variable manipulation of appearance. Demographics will be reported on each participant.

Design and Procedure

The current study will be observational-based. I will be going to the Gengras Student Union's main entrance and the west side entrance to Hillyer Hall. Upon arrival, I will wear two types of clothing: business and casual. The business attire includes a blazer, slacks, heeled boots, a nice purse, a clipboard, a lanyard, and makeup. Dressing in business wear will assert dominance, a higher-ranking position than a student, and higher attractiveness. The casual

attire will resemble an average college student: sweatpants, slippers, a hoodie, a jacket, a backpack, and a baseball hat. Casual wear will resemble an equal status with the lower attractiveness of a student. I will go to each location twice, dressed differently on the same day (Wednesday) at the same time (12:40). To account for extraneous variables, I will ensure that I conduct this on days with similar weather (not raining). During this time, I will be walking behind a student with a five-second delay and observing if they hold the door for me. I will observe if the student waits, holds the door open, and conclude if the appearance variable is influential. Moreover, I will observe if the location's visibility (if others are watching) corresponds to the person's desire to help. Holding the door open will be defined as a pause in the students walking, fully extending their arms on the door, and waiting until I grab the door behind them.

Results

This study aimed to grasp the possibility of helping behavior being motivated by altruistic tendencies. Moreover, it examined the role of the helper concerning the location and the person being assisted and whether the status of the person being aided motivated the desire to help. The following research questions were addressed: Do individuals engage in more empathetic and communal-oriented helping, thinking the victim is of equal status? How is sympathy reflected through exchange-oriented helping when individuals think the victim is an attractive authority figure?

Furthermore, can prosocial helping behavior exist without an egoistic motive when surrounded by others or authority? The hypothesis following these questions was that individuals would not want to engage in communal-oriented acts if the person is of equal status with no attractive characteristics. Individuals will engage more in exchange-oriented behaviors with sympathy when the assistant is not of equal status and is interpreted as an attractive authority figure.

Lastly, the location with more bystanders will produce a higher rate of helping behavior due to the opportunity to boost self-esteem and recognition from a higher-ranked individual.

Table 1: Helping an attractive authority figure in a public setting

Location	**Participant**	**Weather**	**Time of day**	**Appearance**	**Yes/no**
GSU	1: Female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	2: Female, Black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	3: Male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	4: Male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	5: Male, Hispanic	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	6: Female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	7: female, White	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	8: male, Black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	9: female, Hispanic	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
GSU	10: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes

Table 2: Helping an attractive authority figure in a private setting

Location	**Participant**	**Weather**	**Time of day**	**Appearance**	**Yes/no**
Side of Hillyer Hall	1: female, Indian	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes

Side of Hillyer Hall	2: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	3: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	4: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	5: Male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	6: male, black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	7: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	8: female, black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	9: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	10: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Attractive/ authority	yes

Table 3: Helping an unattractive student in a public space

Location	**Participant**	**Weather**	**Time of day**	**Appearance**	**Yes/no**
GSU	1: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
GSU	2: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
GSU	3: female, black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
GSU	4: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
GSU	5: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no

GSU	6: male, Indian	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
GSU	7: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
GSU	8: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
GSU	9: male, Hispanic	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
GSU	10: female, Hispanic	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no

Table 4: Helping an unattractive student in a private space

Location	**Participant**	**Weather**	**Time of day**	**Appearance**	**Yes/no**
Side of Hillyer Hall	1: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
Side of Hillyer Hall	2: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
Side of Hillyer Hall	3: female, black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	no
Side of Hillyer Hall	4: female, black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	5: female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	6: male, black	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	7: male, Hispanic	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	8: Female, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes
Side of Hillyer Hall	9: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes

Side of Hillyer Hall	10: male, white	Partly sunny	12:40pm	Unattractive/ student	yes

Discussion

My hypothesis is deemed accurate: individuals engaged in more exchanged-oriented behaviors with superficial sympathy when helping an attractive authority figure. Tables 1 and 2 concluded that 100 percent of participants held the door open in a private and public setting. This reflects that no matter the demographic, even with no bystanders boosting self-esteem, an individual still feels inclined to help someone with the implicit desire of recognition of the person's status. On the other hand, the location did affect the results of helping behavior, whether it was egoistic or selfless: In table three, participants engaged in helping an unattractive person. This data concludes that the positive bystander effect is in place: the more people around, the greater the desire to help, except in trial number four. In this trial, no people were around while helping an unattractive student, which created a 70:30 ratio of yes- no for holding the door. This indicates that bystanders will only sometimes produce a higher rate of helping behavior, demonstrating the opposite of the bystander effect: the fewer people around increase people's desire to help since they are deemed responsible for the outcome of the suffering of others. Even though others are not around to boost self-esteem, the responsibility falls on the individual, which can create an internal rather than external motivation for boosting self-esteem and recognition. This trial created an outlier in the data and hypothesis to prove that communal-oriented helping can still occur with those of equal status even when not surrounded by others. Other than this trial, hypotheses were created with a 60:40 ratio, as shown in Table 3, where only some individuals helped students of equal status, even in highly populated areas.

This study has limitations that should be discussed. First and foremost, the bystander effect could have decreased one's desire to help in the trials in a crowded setting. This can be

seen in Table 3, where 60% of participants did not help. In addition, in that same trial, 40% of individuals engaged in helping behavior; however, all those individuals were men. Current research suggests that males are more likely to help females than other males (Bordens, 2022).

Moreover, considering I am female, acting as the control group decreases internal validity since no man was demonstrating the same experiment to compare results. Next, the need to explore cultural differences could also decrease internal validity. Due to this study using participants of different ethnic backgrounds, there should be awareness of different cultural practices and norms regarding altruism. Lastly, even though ecological validity is high due to an observational design, there is no substantial way to measure the true motives of someone's behavior just through observation. For example, personality characteristics can come into play, such as knowing if someone is in a rush and has no time to spare to help someone.

Future research should consider the variable of gender influence on helping behavior. Conducting this study with a male researcher and a female researcher will limit gaps in data and solidify the results of biases toward helping the same or opposite gender. Next, future study designs should incorporate participants more actively to better grasp the motive (or lack of) behind helping (or not). The study should still be observational to ensure ecological validity, but once someone holds or does not hold the door, the researcher should stop them and conduct a short interview. Doing this allows one to understand personality or cultural differences that could have influenced the decision.

Conclusion

This study served the purpose of unfolding the motivation behind helping behavior and how the location and the relationship between the helper and the assisted influence decision-making. Results indicated that pro-social helping behavior cannot exist without some egoistic motive. Even when helping someone of equal status in a private setting, exchange-oriented behavior takes place with superficial sympathy, and it is even more prominent when

encountering an attractive authority figure in a public setting. These findings contribute to existing literature due to the exploration of appearance being the variable behind the motivation for helping somebody. The appearance and status of the individual being assisted need to be improved in previous research, but it is essential to address this to comprehend influential factors.

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