

Helping the needy helps the self

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A 2 (help present vs. help absent) by 2 (high- vs. low-need potential recipient) design explored the effects of helping a high- or a low-need other on the donor's self-evaluation. The results indicated that there were more beneficial self-related consequences associated with helping high- than helping low-need others. The conceptual and applied implications of the data are discussed.

In recent years, psychologists have focused increased attention on various aspects of prosocial or "helping" behavior. Most of this research has been concerned with specifying the conditions under which individuals are more or less likely to extend a "helping hand" to the needy (e.g., Berkowitz, 1972). While the factors that lead an individual to help another have received considerable research interest, the effect of giving aid on the donor's self-perception remains virtually unexplored. Conceptually, research in this area is needed to fill an important gap in our knowledge about helping relationships. On an applied level, studying the effects of helping others for the donor's self-concept could have clinical/therapeutic implications.

Previous research on the consequences of helping for donor self-perception has been primarily anecdotal in nature and suggests that when the recipient is perceived to have a high need state, providing help is a self-enhancing experience. For example, interview data collected by Fellner and Marshall (1970) indicates that kidney donors evidenced enhanced self-esteem as long as 15 months after the donation. However, these and corroborating anecdotal data are not conclusive in two respects. First, because of the descriptive nature of the studies, the findings do not permit a causal inference concerning the relationship between help giving and donor self-evaluation. Second, it is still an open question whether any prosocial act or only help directed toward a high-need recipient (e.g., a kidney donation) will enhance

the donor's feelings of self-worth. Thus, the major purpose of the present experiment is to provide an initial causal statement concerning the interactive effects of helping and recipient need state on donor self-perception.

One formulation that may be used as a predictive framework in the present context is role theory, as discussed by Sarbin and Allen (1968). According to the theory, enactment of a role produces changes in self-concept in a direction consistent with the role. Thus, for example, playing the "role" of helper with its positive, altruistic elements should lead to enhanced self-concept. However, since individuals who help high-need recipients may perceive their roles differently from those who help low-need recipients, recipient need state may moderate the aforementioned relationship. Specifically, past experimental work suggests that donors of aid to high-need others perceive their roles as more helpful and altruistic than do donors of aid to low-need others (e.g., Leeds, 1963; Thompson, Strobe, & Schopler, 1971). Hence, the former individuals may be more likely to experience enhanced self-perceptions than are the latter individuals.

The above prediction is also in line with theory concerning the role of the social responsibility norm in helping relationships. Specifically, Berkowitz (1972) maintains that a social responsibility norm, which states that we should help others who depend on us and who need our help, is internalized in Western society. Since it is well accepted that conforming to internalized norms leads to positive self-regard, it may be predicted that helping others would lead to an enhanced self-concept. Further, because aid to a high-need recipient can be viewed as more congruent with the specifics of the social responsibility norm than aid to a low-need recipient, the positive effects of helping should be more intense in

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this case. Thus, in the present context, analyses based on role theory and consideration of the social responsibility norm support converging predictions. In effect, it is hypothesized that giving aid will constitute a self-enhancing experience for the donor and that this will be moderated by the recipient's need state.

METHOD

Subjects

Sixty-five female undergraduate students participated in an experimental session 15 min in length. Subjects were run with a same-sex confederate, and they served in the experiment in partial fulfillment of a course requirement.¹

Design

To test the effects of giving help to a high- or low-need recipient on the donor's self-perceptions, a 2 (help present vs. help absent) by 2 (high-need confederate vs. low-need confederate) factorial design was employed.

Procedure

The experiment was presented to subjects as a scale-validation study. Upon her arrival at the laboratory, each subject was escorted to a room in which she was told to wait until a second subject arrived. Following a short delay, the subject heard the experimenter greet the second subject (who was actually a confederate), and the experimenter then led the confederate to the same waiting room.

Independent Manipulations

Help present/help absent. In the help-present condition, the confederate dropped a folder containing a 50-page uncollated manuscript as she was ushered into the room in which the subject was waiting. Previous training insured that the manuscript was scattered over a large area of the floor and that the incident had the appearance of an accident. Upon observing the confederate drop the folder, the experimenter noted that he was on a tight time schedule and further stated, "Would you please get it back in order and tell me when you are done. I'll be outside making the final preparations for the experiment." (The experimenter's tone in his interaction with the confederate could best be described as "businesslike.") Although no overt request for help was made by either the confederate or the experimenter, all but four of the subjects helped the confederate.² While the subject was helping, the confederate engaged her in a standard "small-talk" dialogue. After the manuscript was gathered and collated, the experimenter, who was waiting outside, entered immediately to inhibit further interaction.

In the help-absent control condition, the confederate did not drop the manuscript. To control for effects due to differential information or familiarity, the experimenter left the room for the same length of time and under the same pretense as in "help-present" conditions, and the confederate engaged the subject in the same "small-talk" conversation.

High- vs. low-need confederate. In the high need-state condition, the confederate's arm was in a sling, and it appeared to be sprained. This high-need manipulation was especially relevant to the present experimental context, since the confederate appeared severely handicapped for the task of gathering and collating the manuscript by herself. In the low-need condition, the confederate did not have any apparent handicap that could have made the task of picking up and ordering the manuscript difficult. Verbal debriefings indicated that the need-state manipulation was perceived as we intended.³

Dependent Measure

Following the manipulation of the two experimental factors (described above), the experimenter escorted the subject and the confederate to separate cubicles to participate in what the sub-

ject perceived to be the experiment for which she had signed up (i.e., the scale-validation study). In actuality, the scales that the subjects filled out constituted a dependent measure that assessed the effects of helping a high- or a low-need recipient on the donor's social self-esteem. The details of this measure are presented below.

Measure of social self-esteem. This index was constructed to measure feelings of self-worth in a social context. It consists of six 7-point bipolar adjective scales (i.e., socially competent/socially incompetent, important to others/unimportant to others, warm-cold, nice-awful, accepted-rejected, useful-useless), on which subjects are asked to indicate their self-perceptions. The scales are highly intercorrelated ($r \geq .6$) and are added to yield a single measure of social self-esteem that can range from 6 (lowest) to 42 (highest).⁴

RESULTS

A 2 (help present vs. help absent) by 2 (high- vs. low-need confederate) univariate ANOVA was performed on the summed measure of social self-esteem. The analysis revealed no significant main effects for helping or for recipient need state; however, an interaction was observed between the two experimental factors [$F(1,61) = 6.36, p < .01$]. Duncan multiple-range tests on the interaction means revealed that, as hypothesized, there were more beneficial self-related consequences for helping high- than helping low-need others. Specifically, comparisons indicated that subjects who helped a high-need recipient had more positive ratings of social self-esteem than did those in the high-need aid-absent control condition. Helping a high-need recipient also led to higher social self-esteem ratings than did aiding or not aiding a low-need recipient. In contrast, subjects who helped low-need recipients did not differ in ratings of social self-esteem from those in the low-need help-absent control condition. There were no differences between the high- and low-need aid-absent control conditions. (See Table 1.)

DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates experimentally that the recipient's need state can moderate the consequences of giving aid for the donor's self-concept. This finding may be interpreted both in terms of role theory (Sarbin & Allen, 1968) and Berkowitz' (1972) conceptualization of the "social responsibility norm" in helping relationships. It should be noted that interpreting the results in terms of these two formulations should not be viewed as contradictory. In effect, both suggest that it is through self-observation that the helper derives the meaning of his or her behavior and arrives at conclusions about himself or herself.

According to role theory, the helper may be viewed as

Table 1
Social Self-Esteem

	High Need	Low Need
Aid	36.7 ^a	33.7 ^b
No Aid	32.7 ^b	34.3 ^{a,b}

Note—Means with common subscripts do not differ at the .05 level by the Duncan multiple-range procedure. The means for the aid/high-need and no-aid/low-need cells differ at $p < .09$.

reaching conclusions about her role as a function of the perceived altruistic value of her behavior. Perceptions about the role then lead to corresponding changes in self-image. In effect, when the recipient had a high need for aid, the helper could view her role as significant (cf. Leeds, 1963; Thompson et al., 1971), which led to enhanced social self-esteem. In contrast, when the helper judged the recipient to be in a low need state, she may have perceived her role as trivial; hence helping did not affect her self-concept.

The findings are also congruent with predictions based on Berkowitz' (1972) conceptualization of the social responsibility norm in helping contexts. Specifically, it seems likely that helping a high-need recipient is more congruent with the norm (which states that we should help others who depend on us and need our help) than is helping a low-need recipient. Thus, since compliance with an internal standard is more apparent for subjects who help a high-need other than for subjects who help a low-need other, enhanced ratings of self-worth are evidenced only in the former condition.

There are several boundary conditions that should be mentioned with regard to the observed pattern of results. First, in this study, no explicit request was made for the subject to help (either by the confederate or the experimenter), so that subjects could infer that their behavior was dispositionally caused. Hence, the generalizability of the findings to a setting in which there are differential constraints on the donor's behavior remains uncertain. It should be noted, however, that assertions by Uranowitz (1975) suggest that the present pattern of effects might be reversed when the donor is under very high situational constraints to help. A second potential boundary condition is the fact that only female subjects were used.

In addition to the conceptual implications discussed above, the present study has applied significance. In a practical sense, the research suggests that encouraging individuals to adopt helping roles may be an effective means of raising self-esteem. However, it would seem that such roles should not be merely symbolic but must also be perceived as significant (and possibly freely chosen) if positive effects are to occur. Recent work with tutors in cross-age tutoring situations illustrates the potential for the strategic use of helping roles as a therapeutic device. In several such experiments, it has been found that allowing "problem" children to adopt the role of tutor for younger children leads to improved tutor self-esteem, academic performance, and behavior. In fact, some of these studies find more positive effects for the tutors than for the children being assisted (see Allen, 1976).

Another implication of these findings relates to research within the domain of recipient reactions to aid (e.g., Fisher & Nadler, 1976). In past work in this area, it has been found that individuals with high, persistent self-esteem experience aid as more self-threatening than do people with low self-esteem (Nadler, Altman, & Fisher, 1979; Nadler, Fisher, & Streufert, 1976; Tessler & Schwartz, 1972). In addition, it appears that aid that is self-threatening (but not debilitating) may lead to recipient self-help as an alternative to future dependency, whereas aid that is supportive tends to beget more dependency (Fisher & Nadler, 1976). This suggests that low self-esteem individuals (who are less likely to perceive aid as threatening than are high self-esteem individuals) may be less likely to respond to dependency situations by engaging in self-help. In accordance with the above lines of reasoning, it would seem that one way to induce more constructive reactions (e.g., self-help rather than dependency) in low self-esteem individuals would be to raise their self-concept, at least for a particular domain of performance. Based on the present findings, one way to raise situational self-esteem may be to have low self-concept individuals engage in appropriate helping roles. While the above analysis is admittedly highly speculative, it has been supported, in part, by recent pilot work (Fisher & Carli, Note 1).

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NOTES

1. Four different female confederates, all blind to the experimental hypotheses, were employed in this study. Responses did not vary for the different confederates.
2. Refusal to offer help occurred with equal frequency in each condition. Analyses run with and without these individuals did not differ.
3. Confederates were trained to behave in a uniform manner in all of the experimental conditions and they kept all aspects of their behavior (e.g., eye contact) constant, with the exception of the two experimental manipulations. Independent ratings during pilot work verified that this was the case.
4. This dependent measure was followed by several additional measures that are not related to the focus of this paper. These data are discussed elsewhere (Fisher, Nadler, & Hart, Note 2).

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