Agreeable personalities are more likely to help strangers

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Prosocial behaviors, such as willingness to help others, may be linked to specific personalities. Based on new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, agreeableness is one of the better predictors of prosocial behavior.

The motivations behind a person's prosocial behaviors, whether helping a stranger passed out on the street or volunteering time for someone who has recently lost their parents, are extremely complex. What motivates people to help in some instances and not others, or to help certain people and not other people, can be due to a myriad of reasons.

"It is common for persons to experience distress on seeing a victim in need of help. That distress can lead some people to escape, and to run away from the victim," says lead author Meara Habashi (University of Iowa). "But distress does not need to block helping because it may be one first-appearing aspect of empathy. Distress can actually contribute to helping, but the way it contributes depends on personality."

One major path linking personality to helping runs through empathy.

By experimentally manipulating empathy, Habashi and colleagues William Graziano (Purdue University) and Ann Hoover (University of South Carolina Upstate) show that agreeableness is the dimension of personality most closely associated with emotional reactions to victims in need of help and people's willingness to help.

As with most scientific research, this is a step toward understanding a complex set of behaviors and decision making. The study is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.*

The Experiments

Looking at the "Big Five" model of personality traits, which include extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness, the researchers wanted to develop a model to better understand the links between personality types and prosocial, or helpful, behaviors and ultimately understand what shapes the "Prosocial" personality.

"Past research on the Prosocial Personality looked at a variety of smaller personality traits, one at a time," says Habashi. "We believe our research is the first to examine the Prosocial Personality by focusing on general personality dimensions, systematically."

In the first set of experiments, the researchers applied two different vignettes for their studies. In one, college students listened to a radio story about another college student who recently lost her parents and was now taking care of her siblings, and how or if they would assist with time or a small donation. In the second story, researchers asked participants (203 U.S. Citizens, over half of whom were women) to imagine going to a friend's speech, but while running late to the talk they encounter someone slumped on the ground not moving.

Each group was asked to rate their prosocial emotions, including empathic concern and distress. They were also asked to report how they would or would not help the individuals presented in the scenarios.

To analyze the results, the team developed models that used all of the Big Five dimensions of personality to examine prosocial emotions and

behavior in a single model.

To manipulate empathy, the follow-up studies focused on how people responded when they took or ignored the perspective of the victim, in this case the college student who lost her parents. Of 233 college students, the researchers found correlations with empathy in those with high agreeableness or neuroticism. However only those high in agreeableness would volunteer their time for the victim.

Conducting the study online with 158 U.S. Citizens an additional study focused on participants' willingness to donate money to the victim and found similar results.

Those high in neuroticism though were more focused on themselves and less likely to intervene, whether through offering their time or donating a small sum of money, according to the researchers.

Based on these results, people who are low in agreeableness are not necessarily less empathetic than others, they simply may need more reminders when it comes to generating empathic concern.

"Personality matters," states Habashi. "It matters in how we structure our request for help, and it matters in how we respond to that request."

"Helping is a result of several different processes running in sequence," says Habashi. "Each process contributes something different. The way we ask for help -perspective taking—can influence our chances for getting it."

These studies focused on one aspect of prosocial behaviors: helping a stranger. Prosocial behaviors can vary widely including volunteering, cooperation within groups, and participating in community actions.

The authors also note that this is only looking at a lab setting, but it does replicate findings conducted by others in terms of linking prosocial behaviors and personality.

"Future research should focus on identifying personality correlates of all types of prosocial responses," summarizes Habashi.

  More information: Meara Habashi, William Graziano, and Ann Hoover Searching for the Prosocial Personality: A Big Five Approach to linking Personality and Prosocial Behavior, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, DOI: 10.1177/0146167216652859

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