

Helping as a Function of Feeling State and Nature of the Helping Behavior¹

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The proposition that positive feelings increase helping because they increase the perception of personal power implies that if the person prefers not to help, positive feelings would decrease helping. This was tested in an experiment that varied feelings and pleasantness of the helping task. False meter feedback was used to manipulate feelings, and an indirect check on the manipulation showed that it was effective in varying feelings. As expected from the notion that positive feelings allow the person to feel free to refuse to help, there was an interaction between feelings and pleasantness of the helping task; positive feelings produced less helping than neutral or negative feelings when the helping task was unpleasant.

A number of studies have found that positive feelings lead to increased helping (Aderman, 1972; Isen, 1970; Isen & Levin, 1972; Moore, Underwood, & Rosenhan, 1973). One possible reason that a person who is feeling good is more likely to provide help is that positive feelings may enhance the person's perception of personal power or competence (Aderman, 1972; Isen, 1970). People who are feeling good may exaggerate their sense of control over the environment and may feel less vulnerable to opposition or failure. They may experience less concern that their attempt to help might be ineffective or badly received. This could increase their inclination to help, if helping is restricted by such concern.

¹This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

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The proposition that increased helping when feelings are positive results from increased freedom to act in whatever way the person desires at the time implies that if conditions are such that the person prefers not to help, the person feeling good would feel more free to refuse to help. Positive feelings would result in decreased helping if the help were something the person regarded as unpleasant. An experiment was conducted to test this notion.

The pleasantness of the help was varied by asking subjects to read either pleasant or unpleasant mood statements, as in the study by Isen and Simmons (1978), which tested a similar hypothesis in a different setting with a different manipulation of feelings. Feelings were varied through the use of false meter feedback, as in the research by Mills, Jellison, and Kennedy (1976), so that the manipulation of feelings would be as pure as possible. In order to check on the success of the feelings manipulation, ratings of the pleasantness of ambiguous scenes were obtained. Previous research by Isen and Shalke (1977) showed that ambiguous scenes were rated as more pleasant when positive feelings were induced by finding a dime, the same procedure that has been shown to increase helping (Isen and Levin, 1972). The rating of ambiguous scenes is an unobtrusive measure of feelings that is not subject to experimenter demand.

METHOD

The subjects were 96 females in introductory psychology who received extra credit toward their course grade for their participation. They were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions: positive feelings-pleasant help, neutral feelings-pleasant help, negative feelings-pleasant help, positive feelings-unpleasant help, neutral feelings-unpleasant help, negative feelings-unpleasant help.

When the subject arrived at the laboratory, the experimenter explained that the purpose of the study was to test the effects upon visual perception of a new vitamin, vitamin J, also known as septin. Subjects were told that although the primary purpose of septin was to help the body break down cholesterol, it also seemed to help people perceive things better and a grant had been received to investigate its effects on perception.

The subject was asked if she objected to taking a capsule of septin and, if she had no objection (none did), was given a release form to sign. The experimenter explained that after the subject had taken the vitamin she would perform a series of visual perception tasks. She was to be tested after just one application of septin; other subjects would be tested after various numbers of applications.

After the subject swallowed the capsule (actually a placebo), the experimenter mentioned that septin metabolized very quickly and that it was important to begin the perception tasks as soon as possible after the septin took effect. To subjects in the positive and negative feelings conditions, the experimenter said that in the past some people had reported that septin made them feel more alert, more relaxed, and pretty good in general, while others had said it made them feel somewhat nervous and irritable and unpleasant in general. He did not specify which of the two effects should be expected. Subjects in the positive and negative feelings conditions were told that the effect on mood would be used to indicate when the vitamin was beginning to take effect. The time it took varied from person to person and in order to find out when it did a physiograph machine, which could detect changes in a person's mood state, would be used.

A meter that was supposedly attached to the physiograph was on a table in front of the subject. The face of the meter was divided into five zones: a “++” zone, a “+” zone, a neutral zone, a “-” zone, and a “--” zone. The experimenter explained that the physiograph was the most sensitive and accurate instrument available to psychologists to measure a person's positive and negative mood states and that it could detect very minute changes in the amount of electrical activity in the central nervous system around the area known as the reticular formation.

The experimenter touched the back of the subject's neck, explaining that the reticular formation, a part of the brain where the upper spinal cord and the brainstem joined together, was right about there. The amount of electrical activity in that area was a very accurate indicator of a person's mood state. Whenever a pleasant mood state or an unpleasant mood state developed there would be changes in the amount of electrical activity that could be picked up by the physiograph. As the experimenter taped the electrodes to the back of the subject's neck, he assured the subject that the electrodes operated on a very small amount of current and she would not be able to feel anything while the machine was running.

In order to convince the subject that the physiograph really worked, the experimenter mentioned that it was very sensitive and had to be calibrated for each person. To do this he had a tape recording of a very unpleasant sound. If the physiograph was calibrated properly, the subject's physiological reaction to the unpleasant stimulation should cause the needle to move into the negative region of the meter. When the sound ceased, the subject should feel better and the needle should move into the positive region. After the “calibration” was completed, the subject was to watch her meter and let the experimenter know when the septin began to take effect.

The experimenter played a loud, screeching sound; a second experimenter, who was observing through a one-way vision window, turned a dial

causing the needle on the subject's meter to jump to the --- zone. After the sound terminated, the needle moved to the + zone. The first experimenter commented that it looked as if the meter was properly adjusted. In order that the second experimenter, who would later collect the dependent measure, would not know to which of the feeling conditions the subject was assigned, the second experimenter actually turned two dials, only one of which had been connected to the subject's meter by the first experimenter prior to the session.

Following the "calibration," the first experimenter retired to the back of the room. After a few moments the meter on the subject's dial began to move. For subjects in the positive feeling conditions the needle slowly moved to the ++ zone. For subjects in the negative feeling conditions the needle slowly moved to the -- zone.

The subjects in the neutral feelings conditions were not told anything about mood changes but only that septin could cause changes in the amount of electrical activity in the central nervous system around the reticular formation. As far as they were concerned, the zones in the meter had nothing to do with mood but were simply an aid in registering electrical activity. Otherwise, the procedure was the same as in the positive and negative feeling conditions.

When the subject told the experimenter that the vitamin had begun to take effect, the experimenter removed the electrodes and introduced the perceptual tasks. The first task involved viewing a series of 16 slides that had been selected as being ambiguous in pleasantness based on ratings by subjects in an earlier study (Isen & Shalcker, 1977). Each slide was presented for 12 seconds, and the subject rated how pleasant or unpleasant the scene depicted in the slide seemed on a scale from -10 (very unpleasant) to +10 (very pleasant).

Following two irrelevant perceptual tasks involving estimation of dots and lines, which were included to maintain the credibility of the ostensible purpose of the experiment, the experimenter pretended to look for something in a file cabinet. As he was explaining that he would have to get some cards for another task from a lab downstairs, there was a knock on the door. The experimenter called out, "Just a minute," finished what he had been saying, and opened the door.

The second experimenter was at the door. She excused herself for interrupting and asked if she could get some materials that had been left in the room. The first experimenter replied that it would be OK since he had to leave anyway. After mentioning to the subject that he would be back in a few minutes, the first experimenter departed. The second experimenter looked through a file cabinet and removed three loose-leaf notebooks. She began to leave and then, as if as an afterthought, turned to the subject and

said she would like to ask her something. She said she was planning a study on group discussion and wanted to have people read some statements to see if the statements would stimulate group discussions. Before she could begin, she explained, she had to get some idea of what people thought of these statements.

To subjects in the pleasant help conditions she added, "I've had quite a few people read them and so far almost everyone has said they are pretty cheerful and they make them feel happy." To subjects in the unpleasant help conditions she said, "I've had quite a few people read them and so far almost everyone has said they are pretty gloomy and they make them feel depressed." For all subjects, she went on to say, "I just need a few more people to read some. I was wondering if you'd be willing to read some. There is one statement on each page. You can read as many as you'd like and then tell me what you think."

If the subject agreed to help, the second experimenter handed her a book of statements. Those in the pleasant help conditions were given a book containing 50 of the positive mood statements (Velten, 1967) used by Aderman (1972). In the unpleasant help conditions the book contained 50 of the negative Velten mood statements. The experimenter kept track of the number of statements the subject read.

A short time after the second experimenter left, the first experimenter returned with some cards and administered another perceptual task, involving recognition thresholds. After this task was completed, the experimenter casually said, "There's something more to this experiment than I've told you so far. I am curious, do you have any idea what that might be?" The responses of five persons indicated suspicion of the procedure, and they were not included as subjects. Two doubted the description of the capsule, two thought the second experimenter might have been a part of the experiment, and one did not believe the description of the meter. One was run under the positive feelings-pleasant help condition, one under the negative feelings-pleasant help condition, one under the positive feelings-unpleasant help condition, and two under the negative feelings-unpleasant help condition.

Finally, the true purpose was fully explained and the subject was given credit and thanked for her participation.

RESULTS

A check on the manipulation of feelings is provided by the ratings of the pleasantness of the slides. The means for the manipulation check for the experimental conditions are presented in Table I. From Table I it can be

Table I. Means for the Check on the Manipulation of Feelings^a

Helping task	Feelings		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Pleasant	2.5	1.4	.9
Unpleasant	2.3	1.6	.6

^a*N* equals 16 per cell.

seen that the scores for the manipulation check were more positive in the positive feeling conditions than in the neutral feelings conditions and less positive in the negative feelings conditions than in the neutral feelings conditions. The ratings of the slides were equivalent for the pleasant and unpleasant help conditions, which had not yet been introduced at the time the measure was taken.

An analysis of variance of the manipulation check revealed that a main effect of feelings was significant ($F(2,90) = 21.76, p < .001$). A planned comparison of the difference between the positive feelings condition and the neutral feelings condition revealed that this difference was significant ($F(1,90) = 14.0, p < .001$). Also, a planned comparison of the difference between the negative feelings condition and the neutral feelings conditions reached significance ($F(1,90) = 8.1, p < .01$). The ratings of the pleasantness of the slides provide evidence that the manipulation of feelings was effective.

The number of statements the subject read constituted the measure of helping. Means for the measure of helping for the experimental conditions are presented in Table II. It can be seen from Table II that helping was greater in the pleasant help conditions than in the unpleasant help conditions. Within the pleasant help conditions, helping was approximately the same in the different feelings conditions. Within the unpleasant help conditions, the level of helping was lower in the positive feelings condition than in the neutral feelings and the negative feelings conditions.

Table II. Means for the Measure of Helping^a

Helping task	Feelings		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Pleasant	32.3	31.9	37.4
Unpleasant	12.4	25.3	28.1

^a*N* equals 16 per cell.

Table III. Number of Subjects per Condition with Helping Scores Above the Median^a

Helping task	Feelings		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Pleasant	12	10	12
Unpleasant	1	7	7

^a*N* equals 16 per cell.

The distributions of helping scores departed markedly from normality, e.g., they were skewed in different directions in different conditions. Because there was no transformation that would restore normality, statistical significance was tested with the use of chi square. For each subject it was determined whether her helping score was above or below the median of the helping scores of all subjects combined. The number of subjects in the different conditions with helping scores above the grand median is presented in Table III. The effect of pleasantness of the help was tested by combining the data across the three feelings conditions and was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 20.88, p < .001$). In order to test the interaction between feelings and pleasantness of the help, the method of partitioning χ^2 for detecting partial association in three-way contingency tables suggested by Goodman (1969) was used. The result of this test indicated that the interaction was significant ($\chi^2(2) = 6.30, p < .05$). The positive feelings-unpleasant help condition was compared with the neutral feelings-unpleasant help condition and the difference was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 4.17, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the experiment show that, as expected from the notion that positive feelings enhance the perception of personal power and allow the person to feel free to refuse to help, and consistent with the results of the study by Isen and Simmons (1978), positive feelings led to less help than neutral or negative feelings when the helping task was potentially unpleasant. The results from the check on the manipulation of feelings indicate that the false meter feedback was effective in manipulating feelings and that feelings were more positive in the positive feelings condition than in the neutral and negative feelings conditions.

The prediction that help would be greater in the positive feelings-pleasant help condition than in the neutral feelings-pleasant help condition was not supported. It is possible that the subjects in the pleasant help con-

ditions did not regard the help as uniformly pleasant. While the statements were pleasant, the subjects might have felt somewhat apprehensive about reading them because they feared that the first experimenter would return and be offended by their becoming involved in another activity in the middle of his experiment. This could explain why helping was not enhanced by positive feelings in the pleasant help conditions.

There were no differences in help between the negative feelings and the neutral feelings conditions, even though the evidence from the check on the manipulation of feelings indicates that feelings were more positive in the neutral feelings conditions than in the negative feelings conditions. A possible reason for the failure to find a difference between the negative and neutral feelings conditions is that negative feelings may not affect the perception of personal power. While persons feeling good may feel more able to refuse to help, persons feeling bad may not feel less able to refuse.

It should be mentioned that the finding that positive feelings decreased help when the help was unpleasant could have occurred not only because good feelings increase the perception of personal power but also because persons who are feeling good are concerned about preserving their mood and will avoid activities that they expect would destroy their good feelings. Such an assumption is conceptually similar to the idea of Cialdini and his colleagues (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973; Cialdini & Kendrick, 1976) that a person in a bad mood will help in order to improve his mood.

An explanation in terms of expectations about how the helping would change feelings would seem to lead to the prediction that helping would be greater in the negative feelings-pleasant help condition than in the neutral feelings-pleasant help condition. This was not found; however, as previously mentioned, it is possible that in the pleasant help conditions the help was not unambiguously pleasant. The change of feelings interpretation would not make the prediction that good feelings would increase help when the helping behavior is pleasant, and thus is unable to account for the previous research that has shown that positive feelings enhance helping.

It is clear from the present research that the effect of feelings on helping depends on the nature of the help and that under some conditions positive feelings will decrease helping behavior. If the helping task is unpleasant, people will be less likely to help when they are feeling good.

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