Would You Help? College Students' Perceptions of Helping Behaviors

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Article Info	Abstract
	During classroom discussions on prosocial behavior among undergraduate college students, focus groups have indicated that prosocial and altruistic behaviors did not develop during college but were perceived to develop later in adulthood. Participants (n=107) were instructed to read a scenario and respond if they would or would not intervene and provide a rationale. In conclusion, the majority of respondents stated that they would not intervene which was closely followed by respondents who would intervene posting similar concerns of the latter group (respondents who would not help) but also added commentary about compassion and moral concerns. A third group of respondents who were uncommitted to help or not help also posting similar concerns resembling bystander effect. Rationale of responses included the potential of negative influence incurred from helping such as embarrassment, aggression from the victim, and a lack of knowledge to feel comfortable in handling distress. All three groups of respondents posted comments of egotistical helping; therefore, the focus groups could be correct in their perceptions that altruistic helping does not develop in college but later in adulthood. Again, future research and civic social movements can ethically normalize the practice of helping into society.

Introduction

Researchers have investigated the dynamics of helping behavior ranging from the rationale for helping, exploring antecedents in the decision-making process of helpers who choose whether to intervene or not, and cost/rewards involved in varying levels of the victim's distress. In helping behavior literature, distinctions have been made regarding prosocial behavior which can include any voluntary cooperative or friendly behavior to assist another person or group, egoistic helping behavior which is motivated by self-centered motives or self-interest in addition to having concern for others, and altruistic behavior which requires that the motivation for assisting another(s) be primarily for the well-being of the other person even at a cost to oneself (Psychology, n.d.; Stukas & Clary, 2012). Pure altruism is "acting with the goal of benefitting another" (Piliavin & Charng, 1990) which combines behavioral and motivational elements without reference to oneself (Wittek & Bekkers, 2015).

In attempting to understand the dynamics of altruistic helping which comes at a cost to self, theoretical approaches have provided the framework structured from evolutionary and genetic explanations, cultural approaches, and psychological explanations. For example, evolutionary approaches proposed that humans were

naturally inclined to help others and were most likely to help those who would pass on the altruistic helper's own genes or similar genes, and thus, promoted the family lineage (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Additionally, there was evidence that genotype influenced temperament, which in turn, manifested a direct influence on both problematic and prosocial behaviors in children (DiLalla, Mullineaux, & Elam, 2008). Thus, there could be genetic influence involved in altruistic helping.

Because helping behaviors were instrumental for humankind survival and evolvement, it would be logical to consider that helping behaviors should be taught and behaviorally reinforced in the family system. Another broad interpretation for cultural and individual characteristic was that people were more likely to comply with social norms and promoted the socialization process of incorporating helping behavior and empathy practices into child rearing within family dynamics. Research provided evidence that the shared family environment has an important influence on prosocial behaviors in children (DiLalla, Mullineaux, & Elam, 2008). In fact, Piotrowski et al. (2015) reported on studies regarding the influence of parents' behavior as well as gaming videos upon children's prosocial development. Padilla-Walker et al. (2024) showed a positive relationship with the parents' modeling of empathy and prosocial behaviors as well as the influence of socially focused media upon children's learned prosocial development. Gentile et al. (2009) found that playing video games in which the characters modeled prosocial behavior increased prosocial behaviors on a short-term and long-term basis. Saleem et al. (2012) noted similar findings of a positive relationship between video game play with prosocial behaviors among adolescents. Sequentially, people learned which behaviors produced rewards and which brought costs, beginning with parental teaching and modeling and the continuation through friends and others (Pavey et al., 2012).

To dissect the dynamics of helping, Pearce and Amato (1980) classified forms of helping into three dimensions of planned, serious vs nonserious need, and giving of the help on either informal or direct levels by the helper; this framework allowed one to perceive the complexity inherent in helping. This may also facilitate understanding as to the rationale for an individual's choice whether to help or not as well as the extent or how much to help. In addition to this intricacy, social psychologists acknowledged social norms which could be included in the helping dynamics. For example, the norm of reciprocity indirectly conveyed that people were most likely to help those who have helped them in the past or could in the future. In addition, the norm of equity suggested that if people were perceived as being recipients of getting more or less than what was fair among the community, then people, as helpers or non-helpers, would respond to balance the inequity. And yet, if the norm of equity warranted inaccessible repose, people would blame the victim for his or her own misfortune, to pursue their perception of a balanced world. The third major social norm related to helping behavior was the norm of social responsibility. In general, people believed that they were responsible for helping certain subgroups such as children, the elderly, poor of health, etc., who displayed an apparent need for help or were dependent on others. Also, while people would generally follow the norm of social responsibility in most cases, they would *not* follow it if they believed the person to be helped caused his or her own dilemma, and thus, the situation became a "life lesson" from which he or she needed to learn to make better choices in the future (Psychology, n.d.). For example, Piliavin and Piliavin (1972) found that an individual who appeared ill was more likely to receive help from someone than an individual who appeared drunk. Greitemeyer et al. (2003) found that an

acquaintance who was not responsible for his/her crisis would likely receive help as opposed to a sibling who was indeed responsible for his/her plight when the context was not considered an emergency. However, on the other hand, an emergency context has shown to alter the helpers' perceptions, and the sibling who was responsible his his/her own plight would likely receive help over the acquaintance.

Piliavin's theoretical model of arousal-cost-reward explained that when an individual perceived another person in distress such as in an illness or emergency situation, that individual could feel empathy and arousal as well as unpleasant feelings due to the distress and were more likely to respond in order to address their own feelings and alleviate the sense of ill feelings. However, in Piliavin et al. (1969) subway study in which a confederate victim with a cane collapsed in a moving subway car and either "bled" from the mouth or did not, results indicated that the "bleeding" victim received significantly slower help and less frequently. Consequently, if the costs of helping were too high, bystanders would reinterpret the situation to justify not helping at all. For some, fleeing the situation which was causing their distress would resolve their discomfort (Piliavin et al., 1981).

Dovidio et al. (2006) proposed that if the needed help was of relatively low cost in terms of time, money, resources, or risk, then help would more likely be given. Thus, the helper's decision to intervene was usually accompanied by personal costs such as possible personal injury, the physical and mental effort put forth on behalf of the victim, and the potential embarrassment of the initial and post intervention. Thus, costs to the helper seemed to be a component in the helper's decision-making process. When the costs to the victim in distress were high but the costs for the helper were low, potential helpers were likely to directly intervene. On the other hand, the more dangerous or costly it could become to the helper, the less likely potential helpers would directly help but could be inclined to seek assistance from public safety officers or authorities on behalf of the victim. However, in ambiguous situations in which the cost to the helper was high and the cost to the victim was low, there was a tendency for people to often leave the scene or deny that there was ever a need for help. Thus, this decision-making process which promoted avoidance or denial of perceiving help as even being needed has promoted research known as bystander effect.

Bystander Effect

In defining the context of a distressful situation, not only could the situation be ambiguous in which bystanders would lack salience and concrete knowledge of the situation, potential helpers themselves could be "ambiguous" towards interacting with people. Potential helpers would have to decide whether this situation was one which actually required help from them personally. If other people were in close proximity, the potential helper could assume that someone else *could* help, thereby relieving the potential helper of responsibility, and thus, as a bystander could choose not to intervene. This phenomenon is known as diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latané, 1968). A related phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance would occur when potential helpers relied on the opinions and reactions of other surrounding individuals to define the situation and determine if intervention was necessary, and thus, could erroneously conclude that intervention was not necessary when help was actually needed (Latané & Darley, 1970). Thus, when people used the *inactions* of others to define their own course of action, the resulting pluralistic ignorance leads to less help being given (Poepsel & Schroeder, 2024). However,

Fischer et al. (2006) hypothesized that the classic bystander effect does not occur in more dangerous situations which unfold faster and were more clearly recognized as an emergency. Results supported that a participant, whether alone or with bystanders, would likely help the victim in situations with high potential danger.

Another factor to consider is the salience of the request for help. Rogers et al. (1982) found that salience increased the helper's internal attribution to respond and increased the helper's willingness to help, but help was hindered or inhibited in ambiguous situations when salience was not evident. Kayser et al. (2010) research concurred and revealed that moral courage, relative to helping-situations, was associated with conditions of higher costs for the helper and with a higher salience of societal norms.

Purpose of the Study

People may encounter distressful or conflictual situations which harbor unclear boundaries or solutions. Oftentimes, people are in a quandary in deciding whether to become engaged or not in the distressful situation. There has been a tendency for people to refrain from proactively intervening because they become anxious and intimidated by their lack of knowledge of a correct resolution to guarantee a positive outcome for the person(s) in distress as well as themselves. In addition, the decision of whether to intervene or not, may be influenced by personal conflicting variables such as values, social norms, personal characteristics, and past experiences. Poepsel and Schroeder (2024) wrote that people often overestimated their willingness to help others in need especially when they were asked about a hypothetical situation rather than encountering a situation in reality.

During classroom discussions on prosocial behavior among undergraduate college students, focus groups have indicated that prosocial and altruistic behaviors do not develop during college but were perceived to develop later in adulthood, especially during parenthood, when the effort of "giving was perceived as more meaningful and necessary." Rather, college was a time for self-exploration and evolvement as an individual (egotistic prominence). In fact, sociologists attributed collegiate attitudes reflective of self-involvement as associated with the Generation Me paradigm. Perhaps the socialization of college life was more reflective of preparing an individual for maturation, a career, and becoming a contributing member of society versus having awareness of one's intra and interconnection to others and the environment.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ascertain the perceptions of helping behaviors among college students (pre-COVID). Specifically, participants would be asked to read a scenario, identify if they would or would not intervene to help, and provide a rationale for their decision. Based on the focus groups' discussion that prosocial and altruistic behaviors were not developed in college but later in adulthood, the null hypothesis would be used to represent that the majority of respondents would not help.

Methodology

Participants (n=107) were instructed to read a scenario and respond if they would or would not intervene and provide a rationale. Specifically, the scenario represented a male student who was sitting in the classroom prior

to class and was engaged in three increasing levels of distress: 1) body language of head bent down and lost in thought, 2) redden eyes representative of tears or stress, and 3) physically digging into an arm. After reading the scenario, respondents were asked to specify if they would intervene or not and describe their rationale. The following scenario was given to participants to read:

> *Coming to class early, you notice a student sitting with his head bent down, lost in thought, and you sense that something is wrong.*
> *After a few minutes, you notice the student's eyes are red.*
> *After a few minutes later, you notice that the student is now digging at his arm.*

After reading the scenario, respondents were asked to specify if they would intervene or not and describe reasons influencing their decision. Out of the total responses (n = 107), the majority of respondents stated that they would not intervene (n = 40, 37%) (see Table 1), closely followed by respondents who stated that they would intervene in a near 50-50 split (n = 37, 35%) (see Table 2), and lastly, respondents, who took a neutral position of "maybe" even though the instructions did not offer a neutral response (n = 30, 28%) (see Table 3), composed a third group.

Table 1 indicated the number of responses and rationale listed for respondents (n = 40, 37%), who indicated that they would not intervene. The majority of respondents indicated that the intensity of the situation and the lack of knowledge of the best solution stimulated debilitating anxiety, and thus, respondents indicated a preference to wait for another person or teacher (bystander effect). The responses were predominately reflective of egoistic helping.

Table 1. No, I would not intervene.

At Distress Level 1: The male student having head bent down and lost in thought:

Number of responses	Rationale
3	No, I would allow him to have privacy to solve his problems himself
3	No, I would be disturbing this person

At Distress Level 2: The male student had reddened eyes:

6	No, this is none of my business
3	No, I do not know what to do and I could make the situation worse
2	No, I would wait for a teacher or another person
2	No, I think the situation is too socially awkward and embarrassing
1	No, I do not want to be around a negative person
1	No, not everybody wants help; I would respect his privacy
1	No, but I think it is best for someone to intervene after class

At Distress Level 3: The male student is digging at his arm:

17	No, I would feel too anxious
13	No, I do not know what to do and I could make the situation worse
13	No, I would wait for a teacher or another person

Table 1. No, I would not intervene.

10	No, this is none of my business
5	No, this is none of my business, and I would respect his privacy
4	No, I am female and would feel uncomfortable helping a male
3	No, I think the situation is too socially awkward and embarrassing
2	No, he may become physically aggressive, and I am concerned for safety of both/self/other students

Table 2 indicated the number of responses and rationale listed for respondents (n = 37, 35%), who indicated that they would intervene. The majority of respondents indicated that they would intervene at Distress Level 3 of student digging at his arm by simply asking if the student was ok.

Table 2. Yes, I would intervene.

At Distress Level 1: The male student having head bent down and lost in thought:

Number of responses	Rationale
3	Yes, I would ask, "Are you ok?" If he responds calmly, I would continue talking with him
2	Yes, but after class to avoid embarrassment
1	Yes, he is visibly distressed
1	Yes, although I am concerned about his possible aggressive or unwanted response towards me
1	Yes, I would ask, "Are you ok?"
1	Yes, I don't know the best approach, but I will help
1	Yes, even though this is socially awkward and embarrassing

At Distress Level 2: The male student had reddened eyes:

5	Yes, I would ask, "Are you ok?"
3	Yes, I would ask, "Are you ok?" If he responds calmly, I would continue talking with him
2	Yes, I would help even though this is socially awkward and embarrassing
2	Yes, I would have compassion; I would regret not helping; I would want someone to help me if I were in need
2	Yes, I would have compassion, but I would be cautious how he could respond to me
1	Yes, I would have compassion, and it is morally correct to help
1	Yes, I would have compassion
1	Yes, I would offer referrals for help
1	Yes, but I am concerned about his possible aggressive or unwanted response towards me
1	Yes, but I could make the situation worse
1	Yes, but I would wait for a teacher or another person
1	Yes, I would pray

Table 2. Yes, I would intervene.

At Distress Level 3: The male student is digging at his arm:	
14	Yes, I would ask, "Are you ok?"
8	Yes, although I would be anxious and cautious
6	Yes, I would ask, "Are you ok?" If he responds calmly, I would continue talking to him
5	Yes, I would have compassion; I have similar personal issues
4	Yes, I would offer referrals for help
3	Yes, this is serious
3	Yes, although this is socially awkward and embarrassing
2	Yes, I would ask a distracting question and see how he responds. If he responds calmly, I would continue talking to him
2	Yes, I would have compassion; it is a moral duty
2	Yes, I would have compassion; I have had similar experiences helping distressed peers
2	Yes, I would feel guilty if I did nothing
1	Yes, I would be cautious and check on him after class
1	Yes, I would alert a teacher or another person

Table 3 indicated the number of responses and rationale listed for respondents (N = 30, 28%), who indicated that "maybe" they would intervene. The majority of respondents indicated that they would consider asking the student if he was ok, but also acknowledged the intensity of the situation would stimulate debilitating anxiety, and thus, respondents indicated a preference to wait for another person or teacher (bystander effect).

Table 3. Maybe, Uncommitted to help

At Distress Level 1: The male student having head bent down and lost in thought	
Number of responses	**Rationale**
0	
At Distress Level 2: The male student had reddened eyes:	
4	Maybe I would ask, "Are you ok?"
3	Maybe, but I would be anxious and cautious
2	Maybe, but I could make the situation worse; I don't know what to do
1	Maybe I would ask, "Are you ok?" If he responds calmly, I would continue talking to him
1	Maybe because of my Christian moral
1	Maybe, but I would want to respect his privacy
1	Maybe, but this situation is embarrassing
At Distress Level 3: At the point of the male student is digging at his arm:	
7	Maybe I would ask, "Are you ok?"
7	Maybe, but I would be anxious and cautious

Table 3. Maybe, Uncommitted to help

6	Maybe, but I would wait for a teacher or another student
4	Maybe, but it is best to intervene after class to reduce social awkwardness and embarrassment
4	Maybe, I am female, and I would feel uncomfortable helping a male.
3	Maybe, but I could make the situation worse; I don't know what to do
3	Maybe, but this is socially awkward and embarrassing
3	Maybe, but he could be digging at his arm to distract himself
2	Maybe, I am concerned about his possible aggressive or unwanted response towards me
2	Maybe, I would offer referrals for help
2	Maybe I would ask, "Are you ok?" If he responds calmly, I would continue talking to him
2	Maybe I would after class; I would feel obligated/guilty if I didn't offer advice
2	Maybe, it would be best to intervene after class to reduce social awkwardness and embarrassment. If he responds calmly, I would continue talking to him
2	Maybe, I would pray; I have Christian morals
1	Maybe, but I would be disturbing him
1	Maybe I would ask a distracting question
1	Maybe I would check on him the next day
1	Maybe I would check on him in a couple of days

Results

As indicated by Table 1 (37%, Not Help), the rationale for not intervening represented egoistic helping (responding with a preference or concern for the self). What was interesting to note was that in Distress Level 3 of the male student digging into his arm, the participants responded with anxiety, not knowing how to handle the situation, social awkwardness and embarrassment, preference to wait for someone else, gender issue, and the perception that the subject could react to the participants with physical aggression. This would suggest that although the hypothetical situation has a student physically harming himself, the majority of respondents would not intervene. In addition, the negative discomfort of social awkwardness and embarrassment may stem from the participant being a peer to the student and would likely see this student again in class.

As indicated in Table 2 (35%, Will Help), participants at all Distress Levels, stated they would directly engage the student when appearing distressed, redden eyes, and digging at his arm although they experienced negative and uncomfortable emotions as well. Although an intense scenario, these participants were willing to continue checking on and engaging with the student as long as the student did not respond aggressively back to them. Some of these answers were also reflective of egoistic helping as opposed to altruistic helping.

As indicated in Table 3 (28%, Maybe), participants were uncommitted even when the instructions were indicative of a "yes" or "no" format. Perhaps this scenario revealed an inner struggle to help or analyze the best response amid unknown variables. The same or similar responses were posted as other participants with the exception of Distress Level 1 which had no responses. This uncommitted group also utilized egoistical helping strategies.

In regard to postings that the majority of peers would intervene with the student by asking if the student was ok, and yet, some participants would continue talking with him on the condition that he reciprocated in a calm manner. In fact, this condition of the student's responding calmly was frequently posted throughout at various distress levels. This concern of safety of respondents who both would and would not intervene presented a lack of altruistic thinking. It was interesting to note that participants who would intervene had posted the same or similar rationale as those participants who would not intervene. Thus, the possible motivator to intervene may be interpreted in the expressions of compassion. Some egoistic helping was evident in comments of feeling "guilty if I did nothing." Simply asking if the student had ok seemed to be the most common intervention posted by the participants who would intervene as well as by participants who were uncommitted. Several participants, especially in the Maybe/Uncommitted group, responded they would check on this student after class to avoid potential embarrassment to both parties. An inhibitor would propose a lack of salience as well as knowledge of appropriate behaviors in a classroom setting when the teacher may be perceived as the responsible authority.

Embarrassment and social awkward were reasons posted whether the participants intervened or not. Even though negative consequences were not written in the scenario, participants may have assumed that distressful events accompany negative cognitions which was indeed a tendency of anxiety. Perhaps our socialization process has incorporated distressful events to equate an aftermath of unwanted and negative events as if prolonging the strain.

Gender issues were noted by a few females who remarked about helping a male in this situation. The interpretation of helping a male in this scenario was outside of the appropriate female-helping-male arena. The female respondents were concerned about potential unwanted clinginess from the student as well as a misinterpretation of the female who was helping as conveying a potential relationship interest. Literature by Poepsel and Schroeder (2024), stated that although it may be a standard perception that women were nurturing helpers, and men were the helper heroes in emergency distress, some studies have not found distinct differences in the genders towards helping. However, some research suggests that women may be more likely to help in the context of family and friendship relationships as well as tasks related to stereotypical gender roles for women. Due to the gender issues of this study, future research could discern gender helping and potential misinterpretations of intentions.

The majority of "No" responses seem to be indicative of egoistic helping as well as bystander effect. Regardless of the level of distress, these participants usually based their decision to not intervene based on the emotions of being anxious, embarrassed, social awkwardness, and the cognitive rationale of respecting the student's privacy to work through personal issues (these participants also justified that they do not want help from others when

they were in distress). Several participants responded to wait for a teacher or another person to encounter the situation. These responses seemed to be reflective of egoistic helping and the bystander effect (Cherry, 2022, November 17).

Research on the bystander effect resulted in a better understanding of why people help in some situations but not in others, and have uncovered the following variables that may contribute to not helping: 1) fear of judgment or embarrassment especially if the help is unwarranted or judged incorrect, and thereby, bystanders simply take no action, 2) diffusion of responsibility when several people were in close proximity (as in this scenario with responses indicative of discomfort as more students were coming into the classroom), the less responsibility the participant felt, thus, promoting no action (Cherry, 2022, November 17), and 3) waiting for another(s) to make a decision on resolving a dilemma known as pluralistic ignorance (Poepsel & Schroeder, 2024). All these of these phenomena were seen in this study.

Conclusion

During classroom discussions on prosocial behavior among undergraduate college students, focus groups have indicated that prosocial and altruistic behaviors did not develop during college but were perceived to develop later in adulthood, especially during parenthood when the effort of "giving was perceived as more meaningful and necessary." Rather, college was a time for self-exploration and evolvement as an individual (egotistic prominence). Future research would help discern these perceptions and if they were an aftermath of the Generation Me socialization. Purdam and Tranmer (2012) suggested that the value of help was detached from daily activities and was confined to nonemergency helping situations such as volunteering. Therefore, constructs of heroism or moral courage may be the terminology for distressful events.

Of note was that there were a few comments suggesting a concern about the student in the scenario possibly becoming physically aggressive in response to the participant's intervention. One may interpret that the student's digging into his arm could be a flag suggesting an emergency situation in which help was definitely needed. There were other comments or conditions posed by the respondents which stated they would communicate with the student if he had responded "calmly" in return to the participant. Is it feasible to consider a person who is digging into his arm as able to respond "calmly" when asked if he was ok? Future research to discern the kind of intervention would deescalate an intense event and lay a framework for personal obligations to help those in distress. Weinstein and Ryan (2010) found the construct that autonomous motivation for helping yields benefitted for both helper and recipient through greater need satisfaction.

In conclusion, the majority of respondents stated that they would not intervene which was closely followed by respondents who would intervene posting similar concerns of the prior respondents but also added commentary about compassion and moral concerns. A third group of respondents who were uncommitted to help or not help also posting similar concerns. All three groups of respondents posted comments of egotistical helping; therefore, the focus groups could be correct in their perceptions that altruistic helping does not develop in college but later in adulthood. Of course, safety is an imperative social norm, and research could discern at what point

intervention should take place, if at all. This knowledge of corrective intervention may facilitate responses to evolve from egoistic helping to autonomous motivation evident in prosocial behavior during early adulthood or later teen years. The value of helping practice has important implications for the understanding of civic society and civil contributions. Again, future research and civic social movements can ethically normalize the practice of helping into society.

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