



# Pro-social personality traits, helping behavior, and ego-depletion: Is helping really easier for the dispositionally pro-social?



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## ABSTRACT

The goal of the present study was to examine the motivational underpinnings of helping behavior by looking at self-regulatory demands in relation to pro-social personality traits. Across two experiments, we explored the idea that helping behavior is easier or more intrinsically motivated for those high in pro-social traits, and requires more effortful regulation for those low in pro-social traits. We reasoned that helping behavior may be less sensitive to fatigue, and less fatiguing, for pro-social people in an ego-depletion paradigm. Specifically, in Study 1 ( $n = 79$ ), we hypothesized that people high in pro-social traits would show better Stroop task performance, following an initial helping task. In Study 2 ( $n = 91$ ), we expected to find higher helping rates for those high on pro-social traits following a difficult Stroop task manipulation. Contrary to our predictions, Study 1 suggested that those high in pro-social traits were more cognitively depleted following helping, compared to those low in pro-social traits; in Study 2 high pro-social trait scores were associated with less persistence on a helping task following depletion. Overall, our findings suggest that helping behavior is more difficult or effortful for the dispositionally pro-social. Discussion focuses on possible explanations of and degree of confidence in this suggestion.

## 1. Introduction

The internal and situational factors thought to influence helping behavior have been subject to extensive empirical investigation. Relevant research has largely been guided by the distinct but overlapping perspectives of social and personality psychology. On the one hand, social psychologists have primarily been concerned with contextual factors and the motivational underpinnings associated with helping and the more specific question of whether pro-social acts can be truly altruistic. In contrast, personality psychologists have sought to determine which dispositional tendencies tend to encourage pro-social behavior. Both approaches suggest some role for moral reasoning, emotion, and impulse control, yet there is a dearth of research on self-regulatory resources, specifically, in the relationship between pro-social traits and helping behaviors. The present research takes a step in this direction by examining whether personality is associated with varying degrees of cognitive resource expenditure when engaging in momentary helping behaviors.

### 1.1. The pro-social personality

Personality traits reliably predict helping behavior across a variety

of settings and points in time (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1991; Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Penner, Fritzsche, Craiger, & Freifeld, 1995; Rushton, 1981; Staub, 1978). Individual differences in empathetic concern and social responsibility are often considered to be the core of the ‘pro-social personality’. Empathetic concern is the capacity to recognize and understand the emotional states of others by experiencing the emotions of another person within oneself (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987; Penner et al., 1995; Preston & DeWaal, 2002, Stinson & Ickes, 1992), and is associated with the tendency to engage in real-life helping behaviors (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991). Social responsibility is an internalized predisposition that describes a person’s propensity to display concern for the welfare of others and ascribe responsibility for others to the self (Eisenberg et al., 1989; Penner & Orom, 2009). People who score high on social responsibility are more likely to act on their internalized obligation on behalf of other people by engaging in pro-social behaviors regardless of whether others will reciprocate their acts (Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 1989; Penner et al., 1995). A cluster of other characteristics, comprised of perspective taking, other-oriented moral reasoning, and mutual concerns moral reasoning, are also considered important elements of the pro-social personality in that they are similar to, and support, dispositional empathy and social responsibility (Graziano & Eisenberg,

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1997; Penner et al., 1995). Individuals who score high on these seven aspects of the ‘pro-social personality’ are more prone to engage in helping behaviors (Davis, 1994; Eisenberg et al., 2002; Penner et al., 1995).

### 1.2. Helping behavior

Social psychologists debate whether helping can be ‘truly altruistic’ or whether helping is ultimately directed at self-benefit. Two schools of thought have emerged. Proponents of altruistic motivations proposed the empathy-altruism hypothesis (see Batson et al., 1987; Batson, 1991). According to this view, witnessing another person in distress produces empathic concern (e.g., sympathy, or compassion) that motivates people to help to relieve the other person’s distress. In such an instance, helping is considered altruistic because it is performed out of a consideration of another’s needs and involves other-regarding sentiments and the benefit of the person in need (Piliavm & Chang, 1990). Thus, “if benefiting the other is the ultimate goal and the self-benefits are unintended consequences, then the motive for helping is altruistic” (Batson, 1991, p. 65).

Proponents of psychological egoism (Baumann, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 1981; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997) assert that people behave in ways that benefit themselves when helping. The egoistic approach is strongly associated with the negative-state relief model (Baumann et al., 1981; Cialdini et al., 1987; Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973), which proposes that the empathic concern that arises when witnessing someone in need creates personal distress (negative mood, alarm) that needs to be removed. Thus, it is the egoistic desire to manage personal distress that causes the individual to engage in helping behavior, and not the empathic concern for the person in need (Cialdini et al., 1973; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984).

### 1.3. Motivation, helping behavior, and self-regulation

Many have theorized that it is difficult or unpleasant to behave in ways that are inconsistent with one’s personality (Little, 2008; Moskowitz & Cote, 1995; Vohs et al. 2005). Such non-habitual behaviors may require suppression of attractive behavioral alternatives, overcoming physiological predispositions, difficult decisions, regulating dissonance if contradicting the self-concept, reputational concerns if there are observers, etc. A variety of processes plausibly make it harder to behave counter-dispositionally. From the perspective of self-determination theory, intrinsically motivated behaviors arise via the expression of innate psychological needs in a social context, are carried out of free will, are enjoyable, and performed in the absence of reinforcements or rewards. In contrast, extrinsic behaviors arise from a desire to obtain an external reward (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006). Behaviors that arise via intrinsic or extrinsic motivations place different self-regulatory demands on people. Situations where individuals can exercise their free will, act on their inner predispositions without feeling pressured by external outcomes (e.g., intrinsically motivated behaviors) result in *autonomous* regulation, which is enjoyable and easy (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Moller et al., 2006). On the other hand, when people feel coerced, controlled, or have to overcome internal resistance in order to perform a behavior (e.g., extrinsically motivated behaviors) the resulting regulation is *controlled* regulation (Muraven, Rosman, & Gagne, 2007).

Research findings suggest that autonomously regulated behaviors are less demanding, in terms of self-regulation, compared to behaviors that result from controlled regulation (Moller et al., 2006; Muraven, Rosman, & Gagne, 2007). Specifically, across three experiments Muraven, Rosman and Gagne (2007) found that people who feel forced to exert self-control, compared to individuals who felt more autonomous, performed more poorly on subsequent self-control tasks (e.g., the Stroop task).

The reduced performance of participants in the experiments

conducted by Muraven et al., (2007) is thought to occur due to the phenomenon of ego-depletion. Ego depletion is “a temporary reduction in the self’s capacity or willingness to engage in volitional action (including controlling the environment, controlling oneself, making choices, and initiating action), caused by prior exercise of volition” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998, p. 1253). To be clear, depletion is thought to occur only when regulation is effortful (i.e., the result of controlled regulation), for example, when tempting alternatives are suppressed (Kuhl, 2000). The same objective behavior might even be vitalizing, rather than depleting, if it stems from autonomous regulation (Martela, DeHaan, & Ryan, 2016).

Although supported by many studies, the validity of the ego-depletion paradigm has recently become the subject of an ongoing, and unresolved, debate in the face of failed replications and concerns about publication bias (e.g., Carter & McCullough, 2014; Hagger, Wood, Stiff & Chatzisarantis, 2010; Hagger et al., 2016). However, insofar as this model of self-regulation is accurate, the results presented by Muraven et al., (2007) suggest that exerting controlled self-regulation temporarily reduces the capacity to engage in acts of volition to a greater extent than exerting autonomous self-regulation. Our research builds on this reasoning.

Helping behavior is characterized by a predisposition towards empathic concern (Batson et al. 1987), deep-seated personal values (Piliavm & Chang, 1990), and an internal locus of control (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1991; Rushton, 1981; Staub, 1978). Furthermore, people with high levels of dispositional altruism and empathy report anticipating feelings of enjoyment from self-reported helping behavior (Sprecher, Fehr, & Zimmerman, 2007; Williamson & Clark, 1989). These behaviors are therefore likely to arise from intrinsic motivation in the altruistic individual, and many studies suggest that intrinsically motivated behaviors require less inhibitory control and involve fewer self-regulatory efforts (Moller et al., 2006; Muraven, Rosman, & Gagne, 2007). Conversely, egoistic helping is thought to arise from more effortful, controlled self-regulation (Manucia et al., 1984) to obtain external rewards (Cialdini et al., 1973) or to avoid guilt and social criticism (Batson, 1991; Freeman, 1997). It follows that egoistic helping would pose higher cognitive demands on the individual and require more self-regulatory efforts. Thus, we assume that individuals high on pro-social traits are likely more intrinsically motivated to engage in helping behavior while individuals low on pro-social traits are likely more extrinsically motivated to engage in helping behavior. Based on this rationale, and the relationship between controlled and autonomous self-regulation and ego-depletion, we hypothesized that helping behavior will require less self-control for those high on pro-social traits than those low on pro-social traits.

On the other hand, alternative predictions could also be derived from the literature. For example, Lanaj and colleagues (Lanaj, Johnson, & Wang, 2016) reasoned that the self-imposed internal pressure to benefit others experienced by those high on pro-social traits would strain their limited resources of self-control to a greater extent than it would for those low on pro-social traits. It is not always easy to behave in ways that support one’s values. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that engaging in behavior that is counter to one’s dispositional tendencies does not always strain self-regulatory resources. In one example, dispositional introverts who acted counter-dispositionally (i.e., like extraverts) in a laboratory based experiment did not exhibit diminished performance on a subsequent Stroop task; however, dispositional extraverts who acted counter-dispositionally did demonstrate decreased performance (Zelenski, Santoro, & Whelan, 2012; see also Gallagher, Fleeson, & Hoyle, 2011). Despite the plausible rationale for alternative hypotheses, we initially predicted that helping behavior would require less effortful self-control for the dispositionally pro-social.

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