

**The Role of Task Specificity in the Relations  
between Personality and Prosocial Behaviors: A Meta-Analysis**

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The study of personality has a long and storied tradition in psychology (Jones, 1998). There has always been much interest in providing integrative, comprehensive accounts of human behavior, and personality was viewed as one potential framework for achieving that objective. However, as with many areas of study, there has been much less consensus regarding how one is to define and operationalize personality, and the role of personality in explaining human behavior.

Among the many areas of debate in the history of personality psychology, one major area of contention regards the conception of personality as either a global, molar construct or as a situation-specific construct (Funder, 1991; Jones, 1998). Scholars (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; McRae & Costa, 1984; Endler & Magnusson, 1976) who primarily espouse global personality approaches (e.g., Big 5), tend to emphasize the inseparable, multiple dimensions of humans. Other scholars (e.g., Bem, 1982; Epstein, 1997; Kenrick & Funder, 1988), who emphasize the situation-specific nature of personality, tend to promote an Allportian account that espouses the relevance of situations. Each set of scholars present strong, convincing evidence on the merits of their approach and, though there is an ebb and flow of popularity for each approach, there is still a plethora of research that is stimulated in each area.

The present chapter stems from the situation-specific tradition in the study of personality. Our aim is to further our understanding of the links between personality and social behaviors, as applied to an area of study in social development—namely, the

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relations between perspective taking and prosocial behaviors. We propose a social cognitive approach to the conceptualization of perspective taking and prosocial behaviors, briefly review prior relevant studies, present evidence to support our model (using meta-analysis), and discuss the implications of our findings.

Social information processing (e.g., Dodge & Crick, 1990; Knight et al., 1994) and social cognitive (Bandura, 1969, 1986) theorists have delineated a number of variables that might influence social cognitive processing and, in turn, social behavior responding. For example, Bandura (1986) and other researchers (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988) have noted that individuals' beliefs and perceptions of their own capacities (i.e., self-efficacy) are impactful on future social behaviors (including prosocial behaviors). Although an individual may have a general sense of self-efficacy, self-efficacy specific to the social behavior opportunity is deemed most predictive. Furthermore, Bandura (1969) proposed that the characteristics of the observer, the properties of the modeling cues (or of the situation), and incentive conditions may modify behavioral responding. Similarly, Bem and his associates (1982) proposed a "template matching" hypothesis that traits would be most consistently related to social behaviors when there is a match in the cues relevant to those specific traits.

The notion that the increased awareness of another's situation often leads to prosocial behaviors has had considerable discussion in both social and developmental psychology. Several theorists (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991; Hoffman, 1991) have argued that understanding another's thoughts and feelings facilitates other-oriented processes and behaviors such as sympathy, comforting, sharing, or volunteering; however, research evidence on these relations has been inconsistent.

Several explanations have been proposed to explain those prior inconsistent findings. One possible explanation stems from the notion that the underlying prerequisites of prosocial behavior indices may not have “matched” the underlying prerequisites of the perspective taking measures in prior studies (Eisenberg, 1986; Underwood & Moore, 1982). Carlo et al. (1991) examined the validity of this argument and found some support for this “matching” explanation. When the cognitive prerequisites of the helping task were similar to the cognitive prerequisites of the perspective taking task, significant positive relations between perspective taking and prosocial behavior were found. In contrast, when the cognitive prerequisite skills in the perspective taking and helping task were not similar, there were no significant relations between perspective taking and prosocial behavior.

The primary purpose of the present investigation was to identify and empirically examine several dimensions of perspective taking and prosocial behavior tasks that might strengthen the magnitude of relations between these constructs. To examine this issue, we conducted a search of the available empirical evidence on the relations between perspective taking and prosocial behavior. Then, for each effect size estimate, independent raters coded the similarity or “match” between the task characteristics of the perspective taking measure and the prosocial behavior measure. The similarity indices were then included as predictors in a weighted, least squares, multiple regression analyses to assess the impact of these predictors on the correlation between perspective taking and prosocial behavior.

As expected, the results of the meta-analyses revealed that the correlation between perspective taking and prosocial behavior was stronger when the level of emotionality,

the characteristics of the target protagonists, and the level of specificity in the tasks were relatively similar in the perspective taking and prosocial behavior measures. In addition, when the characteristics of perspective taking and prosocial behavior measures were simultaneously similar on two similarity dimensions, the amount of explained variance in magnitude of the correlation between perspective taking and prosocial behavior increased substantially, and more than one would expect from a simple additive model. Moreover, there was a nonlinear relation between age and magnitude of effect size suggesting that the strongest effect sizes were in studies of childhood through middle adolescence. The findings suggest that prior inconsistent and weak relations between perspective taking and prosocial behavior may have been partly the result of a “mismatch” of the task characteristics.

The discussion will focus on several important implications for the study of traits. First, the moderating role of task similarity provides evidence that the true relation between trait and social behavior is probably underestimated. In the real world, the perspective taking requirements of a prosocial behavior are embedded in the prosocial behavior situation; thus, there is no disconnect in the circumstances in which perspective taking is enlisted and those in which prosocial behavior is enacted. However, as social scientists, research procedures dictate the assessment of perspective taking separately from the prosocial behavior – thereby, facilitating the use of tasks with dissimilar characteristics that attenuate the true magnitude of relations. Second, the present findings suggest that global trait approaches can be fruitful if investigators carefully consider the task specific characteristics of social behavior and personality measures. Aggregation of measures (i.e., global indices) to increase measurement reliability will be necessarily

restricted by the degree to which the trait measures have task characteristics relevant to the social behavior. And third, the nonlinear relation between age and magnitude of effect size suggests that it is useful to consider the development of traits in predicting relations between traits and social behaviors.

Although the present findings provide additional supportive evidence of the situation-specific approach to the study of personality, there is no necessary incompatibility with global, trait approaches. Both situation-specific and global trait approaches are capable of providing useful information that helps to better account for predictive power, as well as, providing further insights into theoretically important dimensions of personality. The present study served to highlight an approach that enhances the theoretical and methodological utility of each approach.