

Expectation for Mood Enhancement as a Result of Helping: The Effects of Gender and Compassionate Love

Susan Sprecher · Beverley Fehr · Corinne Zimmerman

Published online: 23 March 2007
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2007

Abstract Several theoretical perspectives in the social psychology literature on helping suggest that people forecast the benefit that they will receive as a result of helping others, and help only if they determine that it is rewarding to do so. One type of self-benefit that can be received from helping is an enhancement of positive mood. The major hypotheses of the present study were: (1) women, to a greater degree than men, would expect to experience enhanced positive mood as a consequence of both helping and receiving help in a relational context; and (2) those who are high in compassionate love for others would expect to experience enhanced positive mood from giving and receiving help relative to those who are lower on compassionate love. Support was found for both hypotheses. In addition, women were more likely than men to rate certain helping behaviors in a relational context (e.g., providing verbal support) as good examples of “compassionate love acts.” The meaning of the results with respect

to altruism and for gender differences in helping behavior is discussed.

Keywords Mood enhancement · Compassionate love · Helping behavior · Gender differences · Altruism

Mental health professionals have long noted the positive benefits of giving to others. For example, according to the “helper therapy principle,” identified in the social work literature (Reissman, 1965), doing something for others is fulfilling and can increase the self-esteem of the person who provides the help. Several theoretical perspectives in the social psychology literature on helping also suggest that people gain from helping others (see Dovidio & Penner, 2001, for a review). Social exchange theory and the cost-benefit perspective (e.g., Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981) suggest that people are most likely to help when they perceive rewards, including self-rewards, for doing so. In addition, according to the negative-state relief hypothesis (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973), when people feel sad or experience another negative emotion, they will sometimes help others in order repair their mood. Similarly, esteem enhancement models (Batson, 1998) suggest that people help others in order to increase their self-esteem. The implicit assumption of all of these perspectives is that people often are cognizant of how an internal state (e.g., happiness) will be affected by engaging in pro-social behavior. It is surprising, however, that these cognitions have not been the focus of much research. In the present study, we examined how gender and other-orientation (i.e., a propensity to experience compassionate love for others) are associated with the forecast of how one’s emotions will be influenced by helping others.

S. Sprecher (✉)
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
and Department of Psychology, Illinois State University,
Normal, IL 61790-4660, USA
e-mail: sprecher@ilstu.edu

B. Fehr
Department of Psychology, University of Winnipeg,
515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R3B 2E9
e-mail: b.fehr@uwinnipeg.ca

C. Zimmerman
Department of Psychology, Illinois State University,
Normal, IL 61790-4620, USA
e-mail: czimmer@ilstu.edu

Gender and Helping

Previous researchers have examined whether men or women are more likely to help. In general, research has shown that men are more likely than women to engage in heroic helping behaviors, such as interventions in emergency situations, whereas women are more likely to engage in helping and supportive behaviors within a relational context, such as listening to a friend's problems (Batson, 1998; Dovidio & Penner, 2001; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Crowley, 1986). One explanation provided for this gender difference is that it is normative for men and women to help in different situations (Batson, 1998). For example, Eagly and Crowley's (1986; Eagly, 1987) social role theory of helping suggests that the masculine gender role encourages helping that is "heroic and chivalrous" (e.g., emergencies), whereas the feminine gender role encourages helping that is "nurturant and caring" (e.g., social support). We offer a distinct but related reason. Due to different socialization experiences and social role experiences, men and women may come to expect different self-rewards, including positive mood-enhancement, as a result of helping behaviors. For example, the reason women may choose to be more supportive in a relational context is that they, to a greater degree than men, may expect to have an enhanced positive mood as a result.

Situational and dispositional variables

In countless creative experiments, social psychologists have identified the powerful role of situational factors (e.g., role models, time pressure, number of available others to provide help, appearance of victim, location) that affect the probability of helping behavior (e.g., Piliavin et al., 1981; for a review see Dovidio & Penner, 2001). However, there has been just as much effort to identify the dispositional variables that predict helping behavior, particularly long-term helping (e.g., S. P. Oliner & P. M. Oliner, 1988). The characteristics that have been examined include empathy, advanced moral reasoning, perspective taking (Batson, 1998) and, more recently, the propensity to experience compassionate love for others (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; 2006). These characteristics have been found to be associated with greater helping, and their influence on helping may occur for many reasons. For example, to the degree that these dispositional variables are associated with acknowledging another's pain, they are likely to contribute to helping behavior to relieve the other's distress. These dispositional variables may also be associated with the greater awareness of social norms for helping (e.g., Dovidio & Penner, 2001). We suggest that such dispositions may also be associated with forecasts of how one will feel as a consequence of helping. It is possible that those who are

oriented toward others (e.g., propensity to experience compassionate love) know that they will feel good as a consequence of helping others.

The present study

The present study is not another examination of who is more likely to help. Rather, we explored a proximal predictor of helping—beliefs or expectations about how one's mood will be enhanced as a result of helping. Very little research has examined how mood (or expectations about mood) may be affected by helping others. The research that has been done has produced mixed findings, but generally points to an enhancement of positive mood as a result of helping, especially in the context of a communal or close relationship (Williamson & Clark, 1989). In a study similar to the design used in the present study, Harris (1977) asked participants to indicate how engaging in various acts would influence their mood. These acts focused on helping directed toward strangers (e.g., donating money, helping to pick up dropped papers, giving a ride to a hitchhiker). Harris found that people expected that most of the helping behaviors would improve their mood. However, the topic of how people expect that they will feel (prior to actually engaging in helping behaviors) or imagine that they would feel (in response to hypothetical scenarios) in a relational context has not been explored.

In the present study, we considered how gender and an other-focused orientation might be associated with the forecast of a specific self-benefit from helping, that is, the enhancement of positive mood. We considered not only *giving* help to others but also *receiving* help from others. Although receiving help from others should be associated mostly with positive emotions (e.g., feeling grateful, relieved, comforted), negative emotions such as guilt, frustration, or shame may also occur (e.g., Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001).

With regard to gender, we expected that women would be more likely than men to anticipate mood enhancement from providing help to others. Dovidio and Penner (2001) have suggested that, "Women, because of how they have been socialized, may find the rewards associated with nurturant forms of helping... to a greater degree than do men" (p. 180). Women may also anticipate more positive emotion than men when in the role of recipient. For example, women are more likely than men to ask for help (Wills & DePaulo, 1991), which suggests that they may not find it aversive to be on the receiving end of help.

We also hypothesized that an other-orientation, the propensity to experience compassionate love for others (e.g., for close others, or for all of humanity), would be associated with the anticipation of positive emotion in response to both giving and receiving help. Sprecher and Fehr (2005) defined compassionate love as:

an attitude toward other(s), either close others or strangers or all of humanity; containing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need (p. 630).

Sprecher and Fehr (2005) found that compassionate love experienced for close others was associated with the provision of social support and that compassionate love experienced for humanity was associated with engaging in volunteer behavior. Compassionate love also was found to be associated with various types of helping behavior, as measured by Penner, Fritzsche, Craiger, and Freifeld's (1995) Pro-social Inventory.

To provide a preliminary investigation of how gender and the propensity to experience compassionate love are associated with beliefs about how one's mood will be enhanced as a result of helping, we conducted a scenario study that focused on helping in a relational context (i.e., close friendship). Participants were asked to imagine that several helping acts had occurred in a friendship and to rate the extent to which they expected their emotions to change as a result of each of these acts.

Method

Sample and procedure

The sample consisted of 47 men and 133 women from a U.S. midwestern public university. The mean age was 20.6 (s.d. = 3.06). A majority of the participants identified themselves as White (82%), with the remaining participants identifying themselves as Black (12%), Asian (1%), Native American (2%), or Other (1%). Most participants classified their background as middle- or upper-middle social class (83%), with a minority in the upper (2%) and lower or working (14%) classes.

The participants completed an anonymous and voluntary questionnaire during class time. Participants were told that they would answer a number of questions about their attitudes and personality, as well as report their perceptions of various behaviors as compassionate or not, and how their emotions might change as a result of those behaviors. The questionnaire took approximately 10–12 minutes to complete.

Measures

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: background questions, descriptions of various helping acts, and the Compassionate Love Scale. Eight helping acts were developed based on lists of love acts (Buss, 1988) and

helping behaviors (e.g., McGuire, 1994), and were pre-tested with a small group of similar students. The helping acts included those that may be commonly experienced in the friendships of young adults, and for which one could be either the giver or the recipient: making a special meal, buying a present, expressing empathy and caring, verbal support for a tough decision, providing care when sick, a surprise gift, a call when feeling down, and sticking up for another (see Table 1). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the helping questionnaire: In the first version, they were instructed to imagine themselves as the giver of the helping acts; in the second version they were to imagine themselves as the recipient of the helping acts. Participants were instructed to think about these acts occurring with a close friend (gender not specified). Ninety-two participants completed the receiving version (27 men, 65 women) and 88 completed the giving version (20 men, 68 women).

Participants were first asked to rate the extent to which each helping act was a good example of compassionate love, using a scale where 1 = *not a good example of compassionate love* and 7 = *excellent example of compassionate love*. This question served as a manipulation check to ensure that these behaviors were perceived to be compassionate (helping) behaviors. Second, the participants were asked, "If this act were to occur, to what degree would you experience an increase in positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy, satisfaction)?" A 7-point response scale followed that ranged from 1 = *not at all* through 4 = *somewhat*, to 7 = *a great deal*.

Participants then completed a version of the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), which included 19 items that assess compassionate love with the target specified as others. Sample items include: "When I see others feeling sad, I feel a need to reach out to them" and "I feel a selfless caring for others." Cronbach's alpha for the present sample was .90.

Results

Manipulation checks: are the acts compassionate?

All of the helping behaviors were perceived to be good examples of compassionate love. The grand mean of the items was 5.25 (s.d. = 1.13), which was higher than the midpoint of the response scale and indicates that the behaviors that we included were, indeed, representative of helping or compassionate acts (see Table 1). The particular acts that the participants rated as the best examples of compassionate love were expressions of empathy and caring, care when sick, sticking up for a friend when attacked, and making/receiving a call when feeling down.

A 2 (gender) $\times$ 2 (version: giving vs. receiving) ANOVA was conducted on the ratings of the degree to which the

Table 1 Reactions to various compassionate love acts.

	Total sample		Men		Women		<i>F</i> for gender effect
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
You cook a special meal for your close friend; or	4.48	1.34	4.45	1.25	4.50	1.37	.02
A close friend cooks a special meal for you.	5.52	1.09	5.19	1.12	5.63	1.06	5.87*
You buy a special present for your close friend; or	4.94	1.20	4.89	1.01	4.96	1.26	.01
A close friend buys you a special present.	5.58	1.05	5.23	.98	5.71	1.05	7.23**
You express empathy and caring for your close friend; or	5.77	1.19	5.53	1.08	5.85	1.22	2.42
A close friend expresses empathy and caring for you.	5.87	1.06	5.49	1.18	6.00	.99	8.70**
You give your close friend verbal support for a tough decision; or	5.10	1.38	4.51	1.14	5.31	1.40	11.22**
A close friend gives you verbal support for a tough decision.	5.41	1.21	4.79	1.32	5.63	1.09	18.22***
You take care of your close friend when he or she is sick; or	5.76	1.26	5.43	1.41	5.88	1.18	4.06 *
A close friend takes care of you when you are sick.	5.96	1.00	5.66	1.15	6.07	.92	6.66*
You surprise your close friend with a gift; or	4.83	1.17	4.77	1.09	4.85	1.20	.23
A close friend surprises you with a gift.	5.50	1.15	5.28	1.17	5.58	1.13	2.44
You call your close friend when she or he is feeling down; or	5.48	1.30	5.02	1.41	5.64	1.23	7.37**
A close friend calls you when you are feeling down.	5.80	1.10	5.30	1.23	5.98	.99	14.49***
You stick up for your close friend when someone tries to put him or her down; or	5.66	1.37	5.28	1.43	5.79	1.32	4.88 *
A close friend sticks up for you when someone tries to put you down.	5.98	1.04	5.55	1.27	6.13	.90	12.68***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The only difference between the giving and receiving versions was for the scenario involving sticking up for a friend. Participants expected a greater increase in emotion for the receiving version.

behaviors were perceived to be good examples of compassionate love acts. Women perceived four acts to be better examples of compassionate love than did men: verbal support in a tough decision, care when sick, a call when feeling down, and sticking up for a friend when attacked. No gender differences were found for the other items. The main effect for version (giving vs. receiving) was nonsignificant for all of the helping acts. Further, there were no significant gender $\times$ version interactions.

Mood enhancement as a result of the compassionate love acts

All of the helping behaviors were expected to increase one's mood, but we hypothesized that women's ratings of mood changes would be greater, relative to men's ratings. The grand mean across the items was 5.70 (s.d.=.79), which is above the mid-point on the response scale. The acts that were rated as most likely to increase positive emotions were: sticking up for a friend when attacked, care when sick, expressions of empathy and caring, and making/receiving a call when feeling down (see Table 1).

A 2 (gender) $\times$ 2 (version) ANOVA was conducted on ratings of mood change for each of the helping acts. A significant main effect for gender was found for seven of the eight items. Women were more likely than men to expect an increase in positive emotions for the following behaviors: cooking a special meal, buying a special present, expressing empathy and caring, support for a tough decision, care when sick, a call when feeling down, and sticking up for a friend when attacked. Men's and women's ratings of the item pertaining to giving/receiving a surprise gift did not differ significantly.

The main effect for version (i.e., giving vs. receiving) was significant only for the item that referred to sticking up for a friend when attacked, $F(1, 174)=5.33$, $p<.01$. Participants reported that they were more likely to experience an increase in positive emotions when they received this helping act ($M=6.26$, s.d.=.85) than when they gave it ($M=5.74$, s.d.=1.32). Finally, none of the gender $\times$ version interactions reached significance.

Associations between compassionate love and beliefs about positive mood enhancement

The correlations between compassionate love scores and ratings of expected mood enhancement for each version (i.e., giving or receiving) are presented in Table 2. As predicted, the propensity to experience compassionate love for others was positively correlated with the expectation of enhanced mood when giving and receiving helping acts, although the correlations failed to reach significance for three of the helping acts in the giving condition (cooking a meal, buying a present, giving a surprise gift). Incidentally,

Table 2 Correlations between compassionate love score and expectation for enhancement of positive mood in giving vs. receiving conditions.

	Giving helping acts	Receiving helping acts
Cook a special meal	.13	.28**
Purchase a present	.18	.35**
Expression of empathy and caring	.37***	.44***
Verbal support in tough decision	.40***	.39***
Care when sick	.28*	.24*
Surprise gift	.19	.24*
Call when down	.36**	.43***
Stick up for	.39***	.38***

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$.

these were the helping acts that were rated as the poorest examples of compassionate love.

Discussion

The results of the present study provide support for the idea that people are aware that helping others, as well as receiving help from others, can lead to an enhanced positive mood. For almost all of the helping acts, no difference was found in the degree to which one's positive mood was expected to be enhanced as a function of giving versus receiving, with the exception of sticking up for a friend when attacked. Thus, for the most part, people believe it is just as rewarding to give as to receive in a relational context. These expectations are consistent with research that shows that people experience mood enhancement when offered the opportunity to help someone, especially in a relational context (e.g., Williamson & Clark, 1989) and also feel good as a result of receiving support from others (e.g., Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000).

In support of our predictions, women expected more positive mood as a result of giving *and* receiving helping acts. Due to early socialization experiences, men and women may have learned to expect different degrees of self-reward, including mood enhancement, for providing help to others and for seeking help from others. These gender differences in beliefs and expectations about self-rewards may explain why women are more likely than men to offer help and seek help in a relational context (Batson, 1998). In order to fully explore the implications of this hypothesis, future investigations should focus on examining expectations about mood enhancement in other contexts, including those in which men have been found to be more likely to help than women (e.g., in emergencies), and for

other relational contexts such as the context of a romantic or familial relationship.

In the present research, we also examined whether a dispositional other-focused variable—the propensity to experience compassionate love—would be associated with the expectation of mood enhancement as a result of both giving and receiving compassionate helping acts. Those who scored higher on the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) were more likely to anticipate enhanced positive mood when extending help to others (with a few exceptions, noted earlier) and when receiving help from others.

These results have implications for understanding altruism. Some researchers and theorists have argued that altruism is not possible because of the self-rewards (such as feeling good) that occur as a result of engaging in helping acts toward others (for a review, see Batson, 1998). Our results provide evidence that a compassionate or empathic person may gain more in mood enhancement from helping than a person who is less compassionate. A compassionate person may also have a greater awareness of such benefits. However, those who scored high on compassionate love for others were also likely to believe that enhanced mood would result from *receiving* help from others. Thus, mood enhancement may not be the primary motivator for engaging in altruistic behaviors, but some individuals (e.g., women and those high in compassionate love) may be more aware that positive emotions are a byproduct or side effect of both giving and receiving compassionate love acts.

The focus of the present investigation was on the anticipated benefits, specifically mood enhancement, that people expect to experience as a result of giving or receiving help. In future research, it will be important to explore the other side of the coin, namely the anticipation of negative emotion—in terms of the costs associated with helping and in terms of the costs associated with failures to help. For example, Otten, Penner, and Waugh (1988) found women expected to feel worse than men for not visiting a friend who requested psychological support. Similarly, those who are high in compassionate love might be expected to anticipate more negative emotions for not helping. Continuing in the same vein, Dovidio and Penner (2001) have suggested that men may perceive the costs of not helping in heroic contexts to be higher, and the cost of intervening to be lower, than that perceived by women. Thus, the picture is likely to be quite complex. Findings will probably vary, depending on whether the focus is on the anticipation of positive versus negative emotion, the provision/receipt of help versus failing to help, the gender of the helper/recipient, and whether or not one is dispositionally oriented toward helpfulness. However, we believe that investment in fleshing out this larger picture is likely to

provide important insights into who is more likely to help, and under what conditions, as well as why help may be extended, received, or withheld.

In sum, the present study contributes to the literature on helping and altruism by examining giving and receiving help in a close relational context. Based on our findings we suggest that both giving and receiving help may be motivated by the anticipation of positive affect. Further, these mood enhancement effects vary, depending on dispositional factors such as gender and the propensity to experience compassionate love.

Acknowledgements The authors acknowledge support from the Fetzer Institute for this research.

References

- Batson, C. D. (1998). Altruism and prosocial behavior. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (pp. 282–316). Boston: McGraw-Hill (4th ed.).
- Buss, D. (1988). Love acts: The evolutionary biology of love. In R. L. Sternberg & M. L. Barnes (Eds.), *The psychology of love* (pp. 100–118). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Cialdini, R. B., Darby, B. L., & Vincent, J. E. (1973). Transgression and altruism: A case for hedonism. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 9, 502–516.
- Cohen, S., Underwood, L. G., & Gottlieb, B. H. (Eds.) (2000). *Social support measurement and intervention: A guide for health and social scientists*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dovidio, J. F., & Penner, L. A. (2001). Helping and altruism. In G. J. O. Fletcher & M. S. Clark (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Interpersonal processes* (pp. 331–356). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eagly, A. H., & Crowley, M. (1986). Gender and helping behavior: A meta-analytic review of the social psychological literature. *Psychological Bulletin*, 100, 283–308.
- Harris, M. B. (1977). Effects of altruism on mood. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 102, 197–208.
- Liang, J., Krause, N. M., & Bennett, J. M. (2001). Social exchange and well-being: Is giving better than receiving? *Psychology and Aging*, 16, 511–523.
- McGuire, A. M. (1994). Helping behaviors in the natural environment: Dimensions and correlations of helping. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 45–56.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. New York: Free Press.
- Otten, C., Penner, L. A., & Waugh, G. (1988). That's what friends are for: The determinants of psychological helping. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 7, 34–41.
- Penner, L. A., Fritzsche, B. A., Craiger, J. P., & Freifeld, T. S. (1995). Measuring the prosocial personality. In J. N. Butcher & C. D. Spielberger (Eds.), *Advances in personality assessment* (vol. 12; pp. 147–163). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Piliavin, J. A., Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., & Clark, R. D., III. (1981). *Emergency intervention*. New York: Academic.

- Reissman, F. (1965). The “helper” therapy principle. *Social Work, 10*, 27–32.
- Sprecher, S., & Fehr, B. (2005). Compassionate love for close others and humanity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 22*, 629–652.
- Sprecher, S., & Fehr, B. (2006). Enhancement of mood and self-esteem as a result of giving and receiving compassionate love. *Current Research in Social Psychology, 11*, 227–242.
- Williamson, G. M., & Clark, M. (1989). Providing help and desired relationship type as determinants of changes in moods and self-evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*, 722–734.
- Wills, T. A., & DePaulo, B. M. (1991). Interpersonal analysis of the help-seeking process. In C. R. Snyder & D. R. Forsyth (Eds.), *Handbook of social and clinical psychology: The health perspective* (pp. 350–375). New York: Pergamon.

Copyright of *Sex Roles* is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.