Extended Essay:

What factors influence helping behaviours in humans?
ABSTRACT:

This essay investigated the different factors which influence helping behaviour in humans. The interest in research within this field was stimulated by the shocking murder case of Kitty Genovese in 1964 and many psychologists tried to explain the apathy of the bystanders and developed models and theories accordingly. The research question raised based on background information was: **what factors influence helping behaviour in humans?**

The investigation looked upon several different factors and found that there are three main factors; dispositional, social and situational. The key studies which provided support for the argument that these are the three main factors influencing were firstly Latané and Rodin (1969) focusing on social factors and showing that the social context of the situation and especially the number of people influences that helping behaviour using the concept of diffusion of responsibility and secondly dispositional and situational factors (Darley and Batson, 1973) indicating a cause-effect relationship between the situational factor time pressure and helping behaviour. Finally, Piliavin et al. (1968) focused on all three factors and shows that dispositional factors such as gender are influential as well. The counter-claim from the evolutionary perspective based helping behaviour solely on biological factors but lacks empirical evidence and is therefore insufficient. In conclusion, situational, dispositional and social factors are all influential factors but because of limitations to the studies this can only be applied to emergencies.

Word count: 226
An investigation into the factors influencing helping behaviour in humans

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1. INTRODUCTION
A topic of special interest in social psychology is that of helping behaviour. In the
news, there are always stories about heroic actions taken by people endangering their
own life to save another’s. On the other hand, you also hear about sad cases where
bystanders’ apathy leads to the death of helpless victims. It was the shocking murder of
Miss Kitty Genovese\(^1\) in 1964, which sparked off the interest in this topic in psychology.
38 people witnessed her murder; none of them came to her rescue. The questions raised
after this case were all to do with the shock of not one out of 38 respectable, law-abiding
citizens helping in any way.

Miss Genovese was killed in the early hours of the morning on her way home
from work on a New York street surrounded by apartment blocks full of sleeping
people. The disturbed neighbours switching on their lights to see what was happening
interrupted her murderer several times. Yet he came back three times before eventually
killing her. 38 witnesses admitted to having seen what was going on, but not one of
them even called the police until after she was dead. Some of the witness’ statements
were that they “Thought it was a lovers’ quarrel” or did not want to “Get involved”.
Nonetheless it is hard to believe that the situation was unclear as Miss Genovese
screamed; “I’m dying!” And “Oh my God, he stabbed me” several times. The question
asked after hearing this case was: why did not one of the 38 witnesses help? This case
sparked much interest with many researchers and several different explanations have
been proposed. Among others, Milgram tried to explain the tragedy in terms of people
living in cities being less likely to help than people living in rural areas are.\(^2\) He argued
that in cities you live further from your friends so Kitty’s friends and family who would
have rushed to her side to help were physically too far away to help. Another factor was
that in the city the “street” has a symbolic significance for the middle-class mentality in
that it symbolizes everything vulgar and dangerous and opposite to privacy. Therefore,

\(^1\) Gross, Richard, Psychology The Science of Mind and Behaviour, Hodder & Staughton, London:
2001. p. 434
the 38 witnesses would have felt that what was going on in the street was hardly relevant to their lives. These kinds of explanations, however, are only directed at this specific case and are hard to provide evidence for. None of this provides conclusive evidence for analyzing helping behaviour in general.

This case inspired other researchers to investigate the area of helping behaviour and there have been many experiments performed looking at the different factors influencing it. Studies such as of the effect of the type of victim and the number of other bystanders have given an insight into what may influence people in the decision making of whether to help or not. Latané and Darley have been very prominent in the research of bystander apathy; the phenomenon of cases such as the Genovese case where bystanders do not provide the help needed. They proposed the five-step decision model as a suggestion of the decision making process before intervening in a situation. Others such as Piliavin et al. (1968)³ have proposed different models such as the arousal-cost reward model in which the person weighs up the costs and rewards of helping and not helping before deciding whether to intervene or not.

The present essay therefore investigates the factors that may influence people’s helping behaviour and more specifically, the research question is:

**What factors may influence helping behaviour in humans?**

This will be investigated by illustrating the different factors with empirical evidence.

The studies in this area of research all look at different factors and how they affect the helping behaviour. From an evaluation of several key studies, it appears that the main factors influencing helping behaviour are social, dispositional and situational. This position will be defended throughout the essay.

Social factors are the social setting of the situation and could for example be how many other people are present or the social relation to the person in need.

Situational factors are factors such as what situation the bystander is in; are they in a hurry or do they have time to stop and help? Or could also be factors about the situation the victim is in, e.g. are they responsible for their situation themselves or would it be dangerous to help?

Finally, dispositional factors\(^4\) are enduring personal attributes and include demographic characteristics, personal motives and personality traits.

Researchers have adopted different positions as to what factors are important and influence helping behaviour and at one point, many believed that dispositional factors were not as important as situational factors. However, recent studies show that dispositional factors are just as important too, if not even more.

The counter-claim for the main argument is the evolutionary explanation of altruism which is a specific form of helping behaviour performed for the benefit of others with no expectation of personal gain.\(^5\)

2.1. SOCIAL FACTORS

One major line of research offers explanations to what situational and social factors are influential. This line focuses on the decisions a person takes before intervening and what affects this decision.

The first prominent researchers within this area of were Latané and Darley who proposed the five-step decision model of intervention\(^6\) as a suggestion as to the process of making the hypothesised decision whether to intervene or not. They were inspired by

the Kitty Genovese murder case and were specifically interested in bystander apathy, that is to say the concept of the unresponsive bystander, which denotes people’s typically uncaring attitude towards others in need of their help.\textsuperscript{7} The model illustrates the decision-making process a bystander goes through before intervening in a situation. It represents a logical sequence of steps, where a negative response at any one step means that the bystander will not intervene. The five steps are as follows: first, the bystander must notice that something is wrong. Secondly, they must be able to define it as a situation requiring help. They must then decide whether to take personal responsibility and furthermore what kind of help to give. Finally, the last step is to implement the decision to intervene.

To test the model they performed a number of different experiments, one of the most well known being the study by Latané and Rodin in 1969.\textsuperscript{8} In this laboratory experiment, the participants were set to wait in a room alone, with a friend, with a passive confederate, or with a stranger. They then heard a woman in an adjoining room fall and cry out in pain. The results showed there was no difference between the helping behaviour when alone or with a friend, but its likelihood dropped when with a stranger and was lowest when with a passive confederate.

The interpretation of the results provided surprising conclusions: even though the probability a person helping should be higher in a larger group, it is actually the opposite. They believed that bystanders should be less helpful in groups than alone. This was explained using the concept of diffusion of responsibility in which the outcome is diffused, or spread, among many people.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, the more people there are, the

less responsibility an individual in the crowd will feel to take action. The aspect of modelling was also relevant, because when with a passive confederate the least help was given. It seems that the social influence of the other person and their actions are relatively important.

There will always be questionability as to whether the results from an experiment can be generalised to real life thought because of the lack of validity. Therefore, one could question whether the behaviour would be the same if the participants did not know they were taking part in an experiment. However, the strengths of the experiment are that they can establish cause-effect relationships as in this case the social context of the event and the helping behaviour exerted. Depending on who and how many people you are with, the helping behaviour will vary. The results also seem to be able to explain what happened in the Kitty Genovese case, where the witnesses could see there were other witnesses and may have felt they had less responsibility because someone else could just as well intervene.

Thus, this study supports the argument that situational and social factors influence helping behaviour.

2.2. SITUATIONAL AND DISPOSITIONAL FACTORS

Another important study related to helping behaviour, and more specifically how situational and dispositional factors influence it, is the study by Darley and Batson (1973) called “From Jerusalem to Jericho”: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behaviour\(^\text{10}\). The focus of this study was very much on situational factors that inhibit helping, yet it also began to address the question of why people help and what motivates them to

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intervene on behalf of others. It investigated the effects of both personality and situational variables.

The experiment was based on the definition of helping behaviour as “Voluntary acts performed with the intent of providing benefits to another person” (Dovidio, 1995)\(^\text{11}\) and was inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan and investigates the effects of both personality and situational variables. The parable describes how both a priest and a Levite passed a robbery victim on the road to Jericho without helping, whereas a Samaritan helped. The supposed reasons for this were in terms of the content of their thoughts, the extent to which they travelled under time pressure, and the type of their religiousness. They conducted the experiment such that the participants were all students at a theological seminary. They had been induced either to think about this parable of the Good Samaritan or to think about professional problems. They were then sent to another building where they would either first be a few minutes before being ready for them or already expected and running late. While on their way to the other building they passed a man slumped in an alleyway and depending on the different variables the likelihood of helping differed.

The results showed that the more people were put under time pressure, the less likely they were to help. Yet it was shown that what the participants were assumed to be thinking about or the type of religiosity did not affect helping. This seems to show that situational factors are more important than dispositional factors. However, the type of help offered was affected by the dispositional factors indicating that dispositional factors still play a role. The situational factor in this study was the degree of time pressure and the dispositional factor was the type of religiosity. Again, this study has the limitation of being a laboratory experiment lacking ecological validity however, it does establish the cause-effect relationship of time pressure and helping behaviour. Another limitation is

that the sample for this study is only theology students and therefore the ability to
generalize from the results is questionable.

Comparing this study to the previous one it still seems that situational factors are
the most important as it is the factor which is consistent with its influence in both
studies. However, the studies show that it is not the only factor, which influences it
because as seen in Latané and Rodin’s study social factors are important as well.
Thus, this study confirms that situational and to a lesser degree dispositional factors are
influential upon helping behaviour.

2.3. SITUATIONAL, SOCIAL AND DISPOSITIONAL FACTORS

A study investigating dispositional, social and situational factors was the key
study by Piliavin et al (1969) called Good Samaritanism; an Underground Phenomenon?12
After there having been many laboratory experiments done investigating the “Good
Samaritan’s” act and in relation to this also the bystanders’ behaviour, Piliavin et al.
decided to perform a field experiment to see how these behaviours were in real life
situations. The primary focus of the study was on the effect of the type of victim (drunk
or ill) and the race of victim (black or white) on speed of responding, frequency of
responding and the race of the helper. Based on background knowledge they assumed
that people would be more inclined to help someone of their own race than of a different
race, and that people would be more inclined to help the ill victim rather than the
drunken victim. This was based on the belief that people would have less sympathy for
someone who is regarded as partly responsible for their situation, as the drunken victim
would be, than for someone who is not responsible for their situation, as the ill victim
would be.

They conducted their experiment on the New York subway making it more
realistic than it would have been in a laboratory. They performed the field experiment

such that there were two observers, one victim and one model in every repeat. They varied whether the victim was black or white and “drunk” or “ill”. All the models and victims were males. On every repeat, the victim collapsed and remained on the floor looking towards the ceiling until he was helped. On some trials the model helped early, and in some late. On the trials without a model, the victim remained on the floor until he was helped or a certain length of time had passed and then the model went to help him. The results showed that people were more likely to help the “ill” victim rather than the “drunken” victim supporting the prediction and a surprisingly high frequency of the victim being helped overall compared to previous laboratory experiments. Even the “drunk” victim was helped 19 out of 39 times. In most of the “ill” trials, the victim received help before the model came to help whereas in the “drunken” trials it was after the model came to help that others helped too. The results also show that there was more immediate helping of the “ill” victim than the “drunken” victim but do not show any race difference.

It seems from the results that overall, an ill victim is more likely to be helped than a drunk one – this illustrates the importance of situational factors. The results also show that men are more likely to help than women are when it is a male victim. There is some tendency for same-race helping to be more frequent especially in the drunk condition. These are the dispositional factors. Interestingly, though, no diffusion of responsibility was found, and the longer the emergency continues without help the less impact the model has, the more likely people are to leave the area, and the more likely it is that observers will discuss the situation – these are the social factors. One possible explanation for the results reflecting social factors is that in the previous experiments the victims could only ever be heard, not seen. In this study, the victim was not only heard but also seen and therefore perhaps when the victim can only be heard there is some ambiguity as to the seriousness of the situation which there is not when the victim can be seen. This shows that it is necessary to do more research into the factors affecting diffusion of responsibility, especially how the ambiguity of the situation could affect it.
Piliavin et al. presented the arousal-cost-reward model as an explanation of the results. This model is a development of Latané and Darley’s five-step decision model in that it goes into more details of the steps towards the decision of whether or not to intervene. According to this model, the bystander takes an economic view of the situation and first of all weighs up the costs and rewards of helping or not helping. Their decision of whether to intervene or not is then based on this. For example, if the costs of helping are high and the rewards are low, the likelihood of intervention is low. On the other hand, if the costs of helping are low and the rewards for helping are high, the likelihood for helping is also high. In the case of Piliavin et al.’s experiment, the cost of helping the drunken victim is higher (greater disgust) and the costs for not helping are also lower because there is less self-blame since the victim is perceived as partly responsible for his situation and therefore receives less help. Secondly, the cost for women to help is greater because they need more effort than men do and the costs for not helping are lower because it is not her role. Hence, women help less.

Piliavin et al. (1969) shows how situational factors such as the type of victim affect the helping behaviour. It seems that when the plight of the victim can be attributed as their own responsibility the bystanders will feel less responsibility to help because it was the victims own fault getting into their situation. This study also shows that gender is a factor in helping behaviour, and that there was no race distinction. Gender and race are both dispositional factors, so the fact that one is influential but the other is not suggests that perhaps it is too broad to generalize all the dispositional factors into one category. Thus, this study concludes that situational and dispositional factors influence helping influence, but the influence of social factors is questionable.

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These three case studies show how the influence of the three factors, situational, dispositional and social can form a basis for discussion. They particularly show us the importance of situational factors whereas the status of dispositional and social factors remains somewhat ambiguous because of the cases’ nature. This partially weakens the argument. The argument’s validity can be further evaluated by the presentation of the counter-claim.

### 2.4. AN EVOLUTIONARY EXPLANATION

Another relevant aspect of helping behaviour is altruism, which is defined as help performed for the benefit of others with no expectation of personal gain. In the arousal-cost-reward model, it seems that any situation in which someone decides to help another is purely self-interest. If helping were not in their interest (e.g. the costs of helping are high or the rewards for helping are low) they would not help. This in some ways fits with Darwin’s theory of evolution even though at first it may not seem so. According to Darwin’s theory of natural selection the focus is on competition. Therefore, at first, any act of altruism would seem to disprove the theory because a person is seemingly sacrificing himself or herself for another. An example could be bees sacrificing themselves by stinging an intruder to save their hive. These acts of altruism do not seem to fit into the competition of natural selection. However, in the early 1960s, William Hamilton came up with a suggestion for a solution to this problem. He suggested that individuals do not only pass on their genes through their offspring but also by helping other relatives. This is because on average 50% of our genes are passed on with each child produced. When we help two children to survive, we are passing on 100% of our genes. Nevertheless, as we also share 25% of our genes with each grandchild and with each nephew and niece, helping them will also pass on more of our genes. We even share 12.5% of our genes with cousins, so by helping eight cousins we

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are passing on 100% of our genes. This is how Hamilton explained how altruism fits into Darwin’s theory of natural selection and can be applied to humans specifically. When an individual helps a relative or someone in the same group, they are making sure their genes are passed on. However, he also argued that we can expect to see altruistic behaviour towards all relatives but the likelihood of it decreases as the closeness of the relative and the proportion of genes shared decreases. This type of altruism directed towards relatives is called kin altruism.

Another kind of altruism is reciprocal altruism. This concept was developed by Robert Trivers\textsuperscript{16}, an associate of Hamilton’s, as an explanation of acts of altruism towards other non-relatives. In reciprocal altruism, two non-relatives may help each other seemingly altruistically but actually then gain from it because what one does for the other, the other will be expected to do for the first as well. Therefore, they both gain from developing a tit-for-tat cooperative strategy. This only applies to a situation where the cost of helping is low compared to the benefit from helping.

These concepts can be applied to helping behaviour in humans because it shows how biological factors influence it. This would be a powerful counter-claim because it suggests that helping behaviours in which people help other people seemingly selflessly is all because of basic survival instincts, i.e. biological factors. This counters the claim that situational, social and dispositional factors are the most influential ones as it explains altruism solely through biological factors.

The evolutionary theory could perhaps be used to illustrate cases such as Kitty Genovese. It may have been that the witnesses’ survival instincts told them not to get involved because it was a dangerous situation in which they could have gotten hurt. None of them were related to Kitty either so there was no connection of their genes.

\textsuperscript{16} Workman, Lance. \textit{Evolutionary Psychology}, Psychology Review, April 2004
This, combined with diffusion of responsibility, may have been the cause of their apathy.

One problem with the evolutionary explanation is, however, that there is no empirical evidence to support it. This means that it is not as reliable as the other explanations such as the five-step decision model or the arousal-cost-reward model. Another weakness of this explanation is that it only explains altruism and cannot explain all the other forms of helping behaviour.

This leads to the conclusion that this counter argument for the situational, dispositional and social factors being the influential factors determining helping behaviour is not strong enough to completely refute them. It may give some insight into the fact that biological factors could also play a role. Nevertheless, the lack of empirical evidence weakens its application.

3. CONCLUSION

From this investigation of the different factors and key studies it seems to be that all three factors are influential. The Latané and Rodin study is centered on the social factor and therefore is the key evidence for its influence. The Darley and Batson study provides evidence for situational factors’ importance because there was established a cause-effect relationship between time pressure and helping behaviour. The third study by Piliavin et al. encompasses all three factors but is noteworthy because it is the only one of the three to provide evidence for dispositional factors’ influence.

The weakness of the three studies is that they only examine emergencies and therefore, the conclusions drawn are only completely valid in this context. Another limitation is that all three use the experimental method. The first two studies are laboratory studies and therefore lack ecological validity. The third study, however, is a field experiment
giving it the strength of ecological validity. A further restriction to the investigation is that all the studies were conducted within the context of Western culture, and it is thereby questionable as to whether they could be applied to other cultures.

The answer to the research question found in this investigation is then that the evolutionary explanation is not strong enough to refute the explanation that the situational, dispositional and social factors are the important factors influencing helping behaviour because it lacks the support of empirical evidence which they have.

To apply this to real life one can return to the Kitty Genovese case and explain it by using two of the three factors. The situational factor influencing the bystanders’ behaviour was that it was a dangerous situation to get involved in and the social factor was that there were so many witnesses and the responsibility to intervene was diffused among them just as it is put in the Latané and Rodin study.

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