

## To Help or not to Help: The Roles of Personality Characteristics, Gender, and Religiosity

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The study by Darley and Latane in circa 1968, following the murder of Kitty Genovese in America in 1964, affirm that people do not often help even when situations demand that they do. The study, however, also necessitates that the factors underlying unwillingness to help should be investigated beyond those of situational factors.

This study therefore set out to find out whether personality variables or religiosity, beyond situational factors, can be indicted as responsible for humans' lack of willingness to help others.

Using a sample of 285 University undergraduates (128 males and 157 females) whose ages range from 16 to 34 years, and with a mean age of 21.68; the study investigated the predictive influences of personality characteristics, religiosity, and sex on helping (altruistic) behavior among adolescents in Nigeria. Data were collected using a questionnaire that comprise standardized measures for personality characteristics, religiosity and helping behavior and collected data was analyzed using the Multiple regression analysis to find out whether personality characteristics, sex, or religiosity will predict willingness to help among adolescents

in Nigeria.

Results revealed that only the agreeableness dimension of personality characteristics predict willingness to help. Also, whereas religiosity and its sub scales jointly predict willingness to help (altruistic behavior), only the pre-occupation dimension individually did among Nigerian adolescents. Sex was not found to be significant however. Findings were therefore discussed in light of available literature and it was recommended that religious institutions and other agents of socialization alike should endeavor to continue to concertededly teach moral obligations and civic responsibilities to people. The re-introduction of history and civics in primary schools curricular, in Nigeria, is highly recommended.

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## I. Introduction

Prosocial behavior is any voluntary action that aims to benefit others. It can be as simple as everyday actions of support, or as complex as delivering emotional care or humanitarian relief (Jung, Kim, Kim, & Han, 2023; Malti & Speidel, 2024). Psychologists have been interested in an understanding of why people choose to help others or why they might choose not to. Despite extensive researches, the exact reasons that consistently cause people to act or otherwise in prosocial ways remain an active area of research, especially when we consider factors like personality characteristics, gender, and religiosity (Thielmann, Spadaro, & Balliet, 2020; Saroglou & Van Pachterbeke, 2024).

Voluntary action for the benefit of someone, an important feature of social behavior, health and well-being, and social life, is a critical element of social behavior and communal living. In the words of scholars as Caprara, Alessandri, Eisenberg, & Steca (2021), and Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner (2017), volunteering benefits human relationships, enhances longevity, and integrates society. Notwithstanding the submissions of the scholars however, evidences exist to support that not everyone is so supportive. For example, the story of the murder of Kitty Genovese in circa 1964 in New York, and the study by John Darley and Bibb Latane (1968) in their bystander apathy experiment suggests that being non supportive of others is a consequence of diffusion of responsibility. While some quickly leap in when they see someone in need, others avoid, shy away, or completely ignore the situation. This divergence gives rise to a significant and often overlooked question: What are some individual factors that predispose one to helping or not?

Whereas existing work has come quite far in identifying situational conditions that determine helping behavior such as the presence of bystanders, perceived danger, or emergency (Fischer, Krueger, Greitemeyer, Vogrincic, Kastenmüller, Frey, Heene, Wicher, & Kainbacher, 2011; Zaki & Mitchell, 2016), internal dispositional conditions have been rather less addressed, especially among African groups.

Among the most important gaps in knowledge are the lack of systematic study of religiosity, biological sex (gender), and personality as factors affecting prosocial behavior in heterogeneous groups (Saroglou & Van Pachterbeke, 2024;

Thielmann, Spadaro, & Balliet, 2020). Understanding these individual-level variables through African cultural frames may shed more insight into helping behavior motivation and guide the development of culturally modified interventions to promote altruism.

This study is, therefore, poised to examine how personality characteristics, sex, and religiosity influence helping behavior among individuals, particularly within Nigeria.

This study is significant in numerous theoretical, practical, cultural, and personal respects. Theoretically, it's a contribution to the growing body of literature on prosocial behavior, integrating three relevant but often separately studied variables: religiosity, sex, and personality traits. Whereas prior studies have mostly been interested in external or situational ones such as the presence of other individuals or felt pressure, this research is interested in internal and identity-related variables: who one is, one's attitude towards religion, and how one becomes conditioned through gender socialization.

This study has salient implications for Nigeria society from both cultural and contextual perspectives. Nigeria, for example, is a country where religion not only exists as a system of beliefs but also as a powerful cultural element shaping values, behavior, and social expectations (Okafor, Onuoha & Chikezie, 2024). Gender roles are similarly deeply entrenched, such that there are societal expectations on how men and women must conduct themselves in all scenarios, including helping situations (Ogunleye, 2012). These cultural pressures also tend to blend together with internal forces like religiosity and personality in creating behavior (Hardy & Carlo, 2005).

Most of the research on prosocial behavior to this point, however, remains rooted in Western, individualistic societies that fail to reflect the collectivist, religiously dedicated, gendered society that is characteristic of Africa society (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Mikani, Salami, & Ezeokoli, 2022). This study endeavors to fill that gap by generating data that is locally specific, culturally relevant, and representative of Nigeria local realities.

In practice, this study can offer useful lessons to teachers, religious leaders, counselors, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), psychologists, and policymakers. For example, schools may integrate findings into character education and peer mentoring programs, and religious organizations may build outreach and teachings that support authentic, value-based helping behavior rather than visible piety (Saroglou & Van Pachterbeke, 2024; Thomas, Owoyemi, & Salisu, 2020). Counselors and NGOs can apply personality-guided strategies to develop frequent, substantial prosocial conduct, while workplaces and civic initiatives can apply such information to promote cooperation, volunteering, and community involvement (Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2021; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2017). To bring research into practical organizations and needs, this study strives to enhance both theoretical understanding and societal application of helping conduct in Nigeria.

Moreover, the results can help mental health practitioners better understand social and individual determinants that affect people's relationship with others. For instance, if they learn which kind of personality or belief triggers empathy and helping behavior, they can develop intervention plans to nurture these attributes in therapy, psychoeducation, or community interventions (Thielmann, Spadaro, and Balliet 2020; Caprara, Alessandri, and Eisenberg 2012). Clinical and counseling psychologists have increasingly recognized the importance of culturally relevant, strengths-based approaches especially in African societies, where religion and gender roles significantly inform individual identity and behavior (Afolayan and Jegede, 2020; Saroglou, 2016).

## II. Methods

### Research Design

The study follows an exploratory research design of the ex post facto type. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), this design is particularly suitable for examining the influences of different variables on others without really manipulating any of them; especially because the events under investigation had happened earlier.

### Population and Setting

The targeted population in this study is University undergraduate students in Nigeria; particularly those in their second-to-last years of their study duration. These individuals fall within the developmental phase of emerging adulthood, between ages 16–34 years, according to Arnett (2000, 2007). The scholar argued that the formative periods when individuals are actively developing their personal values, religious beliefs, and social identity is in the period of emerging adulthood. At this level, students are likely to be more reflective in their decision-making and to be exposed to a variety of social contexts calling for or eliciting helping actions, rendering them a suitable population for this study.

The study was carried out in Ado Ekiti in Ekiti State; Nigeria. The place is characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversities. These diversities provide a realistic context to examine how helping behavior is influenced by variables such as personality traits, sex differences, and religiosity. The use of university undergraduates is particularly suitable because Universities host individuals from varied backgrounds who interact daily across academic, social, and religious settings (OpenStax, 2020).

### **Participants, Sample and Sampling Technique**

The participants for the study were sampled across various faculties and levels (200–500 level) to guarantee diverse backgrounds and experiences relevant to the constructs under investigation: personality traits, sex, and religiosity.

In all, a sample of 285 undergraduates made up of 128 males (44.9%) and 157 females (55.1%) whose ages range from 16 to 34 years with a mean age of 21.68 years were incidentally selected to participate in the study by responding to items in a questionnaire designed for the study.

### **Instrument**

A questionnaire was used for data collection for the study. The questionnaire is made up of four sections viz:

#### **Section A: Demographic Information**

This section gathers basic background information such as:

- Sex
- Age

#### **Section B: Personality Traits**

Personality traits were measured using the Big Five Inventory–Short Form (BFI-10), developed by Rammstedt and John (2007). This 10-item scale captures the five major personality dimensions of:

i. Openness to Experience (creativity, imagination, and curiosity). The dimension was captured by item numbers 5R, 10 and (R denotes reverse scoring).

ii. Conscientiousness (organization, responsibility, and dependability). Item numbers 3R, 8

iii. Extraversion (sociability, energy, and assertiveness). Captured by item numbers 1R, 6R

iv. Agreeableness (trust, kindness, and cooperation). Captured by items 2, 7R

v. Neuroticism (emotional instability and anxiety). Captured by items 4R, 9.

Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

The BFI-10 has shown acceptable reliability and validity across multiple cultural settings (Rammstedt & John, 2007; Soto & John, 2017), and it is ideal for field studies due to its brevity. The test-retest correlations reported for the scales are: Extraversion: .83, Agreeableness: .68, Conscientiousness: .77, Neuroticism: .74, and Openness to Experience: .72.

The test reliability for the big five is .75. Convergent validity with the NEO-PI-R domains averaged .67 for the BFI-10.

#### **Section C: Religiosity**

Religiosity was measured using the dimensions of religiosity scale; a 20 items self-report measure of religious preoccupation, guidance, conviction, and emotion involvement, developed by Stephen Joseph and Deborah Diduca (2007). The measure has four domains of Emotional Involvement with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93, Conviction (0.94), Preoccupation (0.94), and Guidance (0.87). The scale is highly internally reliable with a Cronbach alpha of 0.95. Participants responded to the measure on a 5-points response format of Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) with only item 9 on the scale reverse scored.

#### **Section D: Helping Behavior**

Helping behavior was measured using the Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM) which was standardized by the authors. Items on the measure were responded to on a 5-points response format of Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Copies of the 10 items measure were given to experts in Psychology and Test and Measurements to ascertain the construct and content validities. Also, a test-retest reliability was carried out to ascertain the reliability of the measure and correlation of test scores yielded  $r = 0.69$ . The scale includes items such as:

“I feel a strong sense of responsibility to help those in need.”

“I enjoy volunteering my time for community service projects.”

“I frequently encourage my family and friends to help others.”

#### **Ethical Consideration**

Following ethical research standards for research among human subjects, the research adhered to ethical standards as advocated by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) and Nigeria's National Code of Health Research Ethics (Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria, 2007), such as respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

#### **Informed Consent**

Prior to participation, participants were provided with a clear and concise consent form that informs them of the purpose of the study, procedures involved in the study, potential risks and benefits, voluntary nature of participation, and right to withdraw at any time with no cost. Consent to participate was obtained from all participants in the study.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** To maintain confidentiality of participants, information were gathered anonymously. No personally identifiable information (such as names, identification numbers, or addresses) requested.

#### **Procedure**

Participants were incidentally selected for the study with a conscious effort that they spread across levels. Data were collected using a standard questionnaire containing items that measure personality traits (based on the Big Five Inventory), religiosity (using an established religiosity scale), and helping behavior (using self-report items for prosocial behaviors). The questionnaire is physically distributed in paper form, contingent on the participants' availability and preference.

For the integrity of the data collection process, instructions were provided; especially requesting participants to respond honestly with the assurance that their responses shall be anonymous and used strictly for scholarly purposes as advised by Babbie (2021).

Once gathered, the responses were computer-coded and analyzed with the aid of statistical software (SPSS, version 25). Descriptive statistics were employed to present participants' characteristics and mean score. The roles of religiosity, sex, and personality traits in predicting and interacting with each other to generate a model of helping behavior was tested using the multiple regression analysis and the t test for independent samples.

#### **Data Analysis / Statistical Methods**

The data collected by a standardized questionnaire in the research were analyzed by using appropriate quantitative statistical techniques.

Multiple Regression Analysis was employed to establish the single and combined predictive effects of personality traits (based on the Big Five Model), sex, and religiosity on helping behavior. The process allows for the establishment of the unique contribution of each independent variable after the others have been controlled for, hence a clearer indication of the best predictors.

## **Results**

**Table 1.** Distribution of socio-demographic data

<b>N = 285</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	128	44.9
Female	157	55.1

The distribution of gender among the respondents reveals that out of 285 participants, 128 (44.9%) were males, while 157 (55.1%) were females. This indicates that females constituted a slightly larger proportion of the sample compared to males.

**Table 2: Correlation matrix of relationships between age, personality characteristics, religiosity dimensions and helping behavior.**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age (1)	-									
Extraversion (2)	.02	-								
Agreeableness (3)	.02	-.07	-							
Conscientiousness (4)	.02	-.12*	.09	-						
Openness (5)	-.003	-.07	-.07	.01	-					
Neuroticism(6)	.05	-.01	-.05	.23**	.15*	-				
Preoccupation (7)	.01	-.09	.17**	.09	.02	-.13*	-			
Conviction(8)	-.05	-.04	.12*	.03	.04	-.21*	.48**	-		
Emotional involvement	-.05	-.07	.17**	.08	.02	-.18	.53**	.68**	-	
Guidance	-.02	-.11	.17**	.16**	.04	-.21*	.57**	.53**	.57**	-
Helping behavior	-.01	.01	.15*	.07	-.01	-.10	.31**	.22**	.26**	.26**

Note:  $p < .01$ \*\*,  $p < .05$ \*

Correlation matrix table showed that only the agreeableness dimension of personality trait is positively related to helping behavior  $r = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ; indicating that a higher agreeable personality characteristic is related to higher exhibition of altruistic behavior. Furthermore, preoccupation  $r = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ , conviction  $r = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ , emotional involvement  $r = .26$ ,  $p < .01$  and guidance  $r = .26$ ,  $p < .01$ ; all being dimensions of religiosity were positively related to helping behavior. This indicates that the higher the level of religiosity, the higher the inclination to help as reported by undergraduate students.

**Table 3: Summary of regression showing independent and joint influences of personality dimensions on helping behavior**

Predictors	$\beta$	t	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
Extraversion	.03	.49	>.05				
Agreeableness	-.15	2.49	<.05	.18	.03	1.91	>.05
Conscientiousness	.04	.59	>.05				
Openness	.02	.29	>.05				
Neuroticism	-.08	-1.36	>.05				

The results on Table 3 show that personality dimensions did not jointly predict helping behavior among undergraduate students ( $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(5, 279) = 1.91$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, only agreeableness  $\beta = -.15$ ,  $t = 2.49$ ,  $p < .05$  independently predict helping behavior among undergraduate students, while extraversion  $\beta = .03$ ,  $t = .49$ ,  $p > .05$ , conscientiousness  $\beta = .04$ ,  $t = .59$ ,  $p > .05$ , openness to experience  $\beta = .02$ ,  $t = .29$ ,  $p > .05$ , and Neuroticism  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $t = -1.36$ ,  $p > .05$  did not.

**Table 4: Summary of regression showing independent and joint influences of religiosity dimensions on helping behavior**

Predictors	$\beta$	t	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
Preoccupation	.21	2.96	<.01				
Conviction	.01	.17	>.05	.34	.114	9.04	<.01
Emotional Involvement	.09	1.07	>.05				
Guidance	.08	1.07	>.05				

Regression summary on table 4 above shows that religiosity dimensions jointly predict helping behavior among undergraduate students ( $R^2 = .114$ ,  $F(4, 280) = 9.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This means that the dimensions of religiosity jointly account for 11.4% variation in helping behavior. Independently, only the preoccupation dimension of religiosity significantly predicts helping behavior  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 2.96$ ,  $p < .01$ . This means that an increase in preoccupation with religiosity predicts an increase in helping behavior. Specifically, one-unit increase in religiosity predicts a corresponding .40 increase in helping behavior. However, conviction  $\beta = .01$ ,  $t = .17$ ,  $p > .05$ , emotional involvement  $\beta = .09$ ,  $t = 1.07$ ,  $p > .05$ , and guidance  $\beta = .08$ ,  $t = 1.07$ ,  $p > .05$  did not independently predict helping behavior.

**Table 5: Independent t-test table showing gender difference in helping behavior**

Gender	
Male (n = 128)	Female (n = 157)

	M	SD	M	SD	t <sub>(283)</sub>	p
Helping Behaviour	40.15	6.51	41.05	6.38	-1.17	>.05

The table above shows that there is no significant difference in helping behavior between male and female undergraduate students  $t(283) = -1.17, p > .05$ .

### III. Discussion

The study investigated the influence of personality characteristics, religiosity dimensions, and socio-demographic factors on helping behavior among undergraduate students. The findings provide important insights into the psychological and social predictors of prosocial behavior, and they contribute to the broader literature that emphasizes the interplay between individual dispositions, religious orientations, and demographic factors in shaping altruism.

The socio-demographic analysis revealed a fairly balanced gender distribution, with females slightly outnumbering males. This balance strengthens the representativeness of the sample and allows for a more reliable interpretation of gender-related findings. However, subsequent analyses showed that gender did not significantly differentiate helping behavior, suggesting that both male and female students in this context exhibit comparable levels of prosocial engagement. This outcome challenges some gender-stereotypical expectations that women may be more nurturing or prosocial than men; for example, Beutel and Marini (1995), argued that women's helping behaviors are more often sustained and relational, particularly in caregiving contexts. Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) also reported that women generally report higher empathic concern than men, a factor that explains their greater likelihood of engaging in nurturing forms of prosocial action. Notwithstanding those findings however, the present study, instead, aligns with studies such as Thielmann, Spadaro, & Balliet, 2020; Carlo, Knight, McGinley, & Hayes, 2010) which posit that individual differences like personality and socio-cultural influences often outweigh average sex-based differences in predicting helping behavior.

With regard to personality traits, correlational and regression analyses consistently demonstrated that agreeableness was the strongest predictor of helping behavior. This finding resonates with established empirical evidences that identify agreeableness as a core dimension of altruism and empathy; for instance, Habashi, Graziano, Sheese, and Tobin (2007) found that agreeable individuals are more likely to engage in spontaneous helping behaviors, a tendency mediated by empathic concern. Similarly, Thielmann, Spadaro, and Balliet (2020) demonstrated across diverse cultural settings that agreeableness is a universal predictor of prosociality; further corroborating the present finding.

Religiosity also emerged as a significant correlate of helping behavior. This dimension reflects the internalization of religious values, emotional investment in faith, and the directive influence of religious principles respectively.

Importantly, regression analyses revealed that among the religiosity variables, preoccupation with religion was the strongest, and only independent predictor of helping behavior. This suggests that individuals who are deeply absorbed in religious thought and practice are more likely to engage in altruistic acts. The collective influence of religiosity dimensions was also statistically significant, accounting for over 11% of the variance in helping behavior, thereby highlighting the centrality of religious engagement in motivating prosocial tendencies within this sample. This result corroborates extensive evidence (e. g. Hardy and Carlo, 2005; Kausar, Alis, and Ismail, 2023) showing that religiosity, particularly intrinsic religiosity, is positively linked to altruism and moral responsibility. Similarly, Saroglou (2013) emphasized that religious values cultivate empathy and moral obligation, which directly foster prosocial acts such as volunteering, charitable giving, and everyday helping. In the Nigeria cultural context where religion permeates social life, these effects may be amplified, reinforcing the link between religiosity and prosocial behavior.

The results also revealed a significant positive correlation between agreeableness and religiosity. This indicates that adolescents who scored higher on agreeableness also tended to report higher levels of religiosity. This convergence is not surprising, given that both constructs emphasize compassion, empathy, and moral responsibility. The positive correlation observed between agreeableness and religiosity dimensions in this study is consistent with prior findings. This convergence reinforces the idea that individuals who are high in agreeableness are especially receptive to religious norms that emphasize altruism and moral responsibility, thereby amplifying their propensity to help.

Findings from the present study are also consistent with the **Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)**, which positions subjective norms and moral obligations as central determinants of behavioral intention. Religiosity reinforces these normative pressures by framing helping as both a social and spiritual duty, thereby strengthening individuals' intentions and likelihood to help.

#### Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Findings from the present study revealed that beyond situational factors, personality differences and the strength of our religious feelings/beliefs are strong predictors of helping (altruistic) behavior. It is therefore concluded that social institutional settings should reinforce their teachings on moral obligations of citizens. This conclusion is harped on by the position of the theory of planned behavior.

Based on the above therefore, it is advised that the cancelled subject of History and Civics should be re-introduced into primary school curricular in Nigeria since the subject entails the teaching of moral obligations and empathy to children and pupils from primary school level.

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