Overview:

Three studies assessed the relationship between the act of helping, moods, self-evaluations, and relationship types. The first two studies sought to replicate previous findings demonstrating that the act of helping another improves one's own mood and self-evaluations. The third study sought to show how the type of relationship desired, either communal (in which members act in response to each other's needs) or exchange (in which members act in order to maintain equity of inputs and rewards), impacts a person's moods and self-evaluations in reaction to helping.

In the first study, subjects studied were led to believe that they were participating in an experiment on task performance and mood. After being told that their moods and self-evaluations would be especially time-sensitive, they then filled out a scale measuring their own moods and self-evaluations. The experimenter temporarily left the room. Two thirds of the subjects were then asked to help a confederate pick up and sort a stack of spilled experimental tiles. Half of these subjects actually helped, but the half learned that experimental rules prevented from helping. The final third of subjects were never asked to help. The experimenter then returned and informed the subjects that their initial questionnaires on mood and self-evaluations were old and must be redone. The subjects then filled out their forms a second time. The changes in mood between the first and second evaluations were then measured. As hypothesized, the results showed that the act of helping improved mood and self-evaluations more than simply being asked to help, and even more than never being asked to help at all.

The second study sought to clearly demonstrate that the act of helping and not the performed task itself was truly responsible for the results of the first study. This study replicated the procedure of the first, but while one half of subjects was similarly led to believe that their act of picking up the tiles was helping the confederate, the other half participated in the tile-sorting task as if it were part of the experiment. Similar to the first study, those in the helping condition had greater improved moods and
self-evaluations than either the students who didn’t help or who believed the act was part of the experiment.

In the third study, subjects were primed to desire either a communal or exchange relationship with an attractive woman, the type of relationship controlled by whether she appeared to be single or not. The woman similarly needed assistance picking up tiles. Half of the subjects in each relationship condition helped, while the other half was prevented from helping by experimental rules. Again, mood and self-evaluations were measured both immediately before the woman entered the room and after she left. The results showed that those who helped in the communal relationship condition had higher ratings of mood and self-evaluations than those who either did or did not help in the exchange relationship condition.

These three studies confirm previous findings that the act of helping improves mood and self-evaluations, especially when a person seeks a communal relationship with the other person.

Reactions:

1. In the third study the researchers involved an attractive female as the confederate needing the assistance of the unmarried undergraduate male test subjects because previous research showed that this method of relationship-priming strengthened the subjects’ desire for a communal relationship with the confederate. While this may be true, I believe that the involvement of physical attraction decreases the weight of their findings since, in reality, we help people often whether they are attractive or not. Because the concept of the communal relationship is so tied with the satisfaction of another’s needs, its character has an aspect of altruism. However, the use of the attractive female compromises this aspect of the communal relationship in that the subjects may be driven to help not simply out of another person’s needs, but because the subjects may have a self-serving desire of a relationship with that person. The influence of romantic physical attractiveness could have been significantly diminished if the confederate in need of assistance was perhaps a male of the same age as the test subjects.

2. The conclusion that we are happier and feel better about ourselves after helping others can be interpreted in two ways. Either our mood and self-evaluation improve after helping because the pleasure elicited from helping is inherent aspect of all humankind, or because such is the fulfillment of socially-created values. Conducting this study across cultures would demonstrate whether this behavior was universal, thus leading one more to believe that the pleasure derived from helping would be a natural, inherent aspect of human sociability.
Connections:

1. If the pleasure elicited from helping another was found to be culturally universal (which I estimate is quite likely), we could, using the evolutionary perspective of psychology, estimate that this specific kind of pleasure is a functional behavior for group survival, since it encourages the desire for communal relationships that would have allowed our ancestors to work together and provide for one another’s needs.

2. The connection between the attractiveness of the confederate needing help and the strength of the desire of a communal relationship might be a reflection of the halo effect. In desiring a relationship with an attractive person, one might not simply want a relationship from this person but might subconsciously believe that, because of this person’s attractiveness, he or she deserves to have their needs taken care of.

Questions:

1. Based on this study, do you think it’s best to desire a communal relationship with everyone, whether it’s surface or deep? When might an exchange relationship be more appropriate than a communal relationship?

2. Which do you think is the cause: either we get happiness from helping because we’re born with this responsive habit or because it is a part of taught social values?