

Adolescents' conceptualisations of kindness and its links with well-being: a focus group study

Article (Accepted Version)

Cotney, Jessica L and Banerjee, Robin (2019) Adolescents' conceptualisations of kindness and its links with well-being: a focus group study. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36 (2). pp. 599-617. ISSN 0265-4075

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**Adolescents' Conceptualisations of Kindness and its Links with Well-being: A Focus
Group Study**

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Abstract

There has been a recent surge of interest from researchers, policymakers, and the general public in how kindness can promote well-being. Even though adolescence is a key period for the development of relevant value systems and mental health, little is known about adolescents' understanding of kindness. Six focus groups were conducted with 11- to 15-year-olds, exploring their conceptualisations of kindness. Thematic analysis revealed a multifaceted understanding, identifying ten different categories of kind behaviour that are influenced by situational antecedents as well as specific self- and other-focused goals. Crucially, participants also identified a number of moderators, including contextual and dispositional factors (e.g., features of social relationships, levels of empathy) that support and extend current theoretical frameworks. Responses from participants reinforced the idea that kindness contributes to well-being for the recipient *and* the giver. These findings have implications for the future design and efficacy of kindness-based well-being interventions for adolescents.

Key words: Adolescence, Kindness, Prosocial behaviour, Qualitative, Well-being

Adolescents' Conceptualisations of Kindness and its Links with Well-being: A Focus Group Study

Kindness as a psychological construct has recently attracted great interest from researchers, particularly as a pathway to positive well-being outcomes (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). This complements growing interest from policymakers and the general public (Action for Happiness, n.d.; Aked, Marks, Cordon, & Thompson, 2008). However, little work in this area has been conducted with adolescents, despite research indicating that relevant value systems (e.g., moral reasoning, and self-transcendence) develop (Eisenberg, Sheffield Morris, McDaniel, & Spinrad, 2009) and mental health and well-being decline during this period (McFall, 2012; Taggart, Lee, & McDonald, 2014). Thus, although kindness is recognised as a potentially important focus for school-based programmes that foster social and emotional development (Binfet, 2015; Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2015), we know little about how adolescents conceptualise kindness and the relevant social and psychological processes. The present investigation offers new data on these conceptualisations, and can therefore help to guide future research and applications.

Conceptualisations of Kindness

Kindness can be viewed as one aspect of the larger overarching construct of prosociality. However, kindness definitions differ from broader definitions of 'prosocial behaviour' (any action done voluntarily that protects or benefits another person; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006) because they hinge on an other-focused motivational stance. For instance, Peterson and Seligman (2004) state that kindness is driven by compassion or concern and is expressed by doing favours, good deeds, or care-giving. Eisenberg and colleagues describe kindness as any voluntary act that benefits others and is not motivated by

external rewards or punishments. Although a single operational definition is lacking, all descriptions carry a common theme: Behaviour that involves both the prosocial acts and the underlying, other-focused motivations (Knafo & Israel, 2012).

We can expect that this idea will be at the foundation of adolescents' conceptions, but very few studies on this topic have been documented with youth samples. One study investigated conceptualisations of kindness in children aged five to six years (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). The child conceptions shared the common theme of positive behaviour directed towards others and they picked up on some motivational components, such as friendship-building. Other studies have also shown that children can identify other-focused motivations of kindness (Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2015; Sengsavang, Willemsen, & Krettenauer, 2015). Even so, kindness is thought to be developmental in nature, with knowledge of the underlying motivations becoming more mature as age increases (Lamborn, Fischer & Pipp, 1994). We may, therefore, see more mature conceptions of other-focused drivers in an older sample. Binfet and Gaertner also noted that small gestures considered as kindness by young children, such as 'following directions' and 'wearing a smile', may be given less emphasis (and therefore go un-noticed) by adults that are attempting to promote kindness in the school context. Not only this, but small gestures may not be considered significant enough to be classified as 'kindness' by adults. It is possible that child-adult disparities such as these may continue into adolescence, an important consideration for the development of kindness-based interventions in schools. This highlights a need for illuminating adolescent conceptions such that kindness research with youth populations is appropriate and relevant to the specific age group.

Mechanisms of Kindness

There is little understanding of adolescents' knowledge regarding the social and psychological mechanisms that drive kindness, a seemingly important aspect given the academic emphasis on other-oriented motivation. Within the adult literature, social mechanisms such as levels of relatedness (Pavey, Greitmeyer & Sparks, 2011) and psychological mechanisms such as empathy (Ali & Bozorgi, 2015), self-transcendence (e.g., Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2012) and emotionality (Barasch, Levine, Berman & Small, 2014) are examples of principal topics of interest in kindness research. Indeed, the requirement for an other-oriented motivation implies that attention to others' mental states is integral to an act of kindness. There is evidence that empathy (e.g., Sahdra, Ciarrochi, Parker, Marshall, & Heaven, 2015) and perspective-taking (e.g., Wu & Su, 2013) are important developmental antecedents of enacting kindnesses. Young children can recognise the stability of kindness within individuals (Lockhart, Chang, & Story, 2002) but there is no direct evidence as to whether children or teens understand the socio-cognitive factors that may be driving these individual differences. We therefore seek to discover whether adolescents are able to make connections between mentalizing skills and kind actions.

Social-contextual factors are also known to influence kind behaviour in youth. Research has shown that adolescents express a felt obligation to help those in need and are sensitive to different levels of need in others (Smetana et al., 2009). Even young children are able to make complex decisions about whether to provide help to friends in need (Sierksma, Thijs, Verkuyten, & Komter, 2014) and can also be very selective with their prosocial behaviours based on relational contexts. For example, children are more likely to share with 'liked' rather than 'disliked' peers (Moore, 2009). Given this evidence, adolescents are likely to be able to reflect on how particular social contexts, such as the level of need or features of relationships, may influence kindness.

Kindness and Well-being

As discussed above, the idea that kindness will benefit the recipient is integral to definitions provided by adults and children alike. However, researchers have begun to ask whether kindness can also be beneficial for the *giver*. Research with adult populations has shown that positive aspects of well-being correlate with kind behaviours (e.g., Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014) and numerous intervention studies have shown that engaging with acts of kindness can lead to improvements in well-being outcomes (Alden & Trew, 2013; O'Connell, O'Shea, & Gallagher, 2015). We know much less about these effects in adolescents, but a pilot study with children aged nine to 11 years demonstrated improved life satisfaction and peer relationships following a four-week kindness intervention in school (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Adolescent understanding of this link has barely been investigated, but teens have been found to identify generosity and prosocial behaviours as examples of achieving a fulfilling sense of purpose in life (Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010), with an accompanying appreciation that helping others is satisfying (Killen & Turiel, 1998). These findings show not only an awareness that kind behaviour is beneficial for the giver's life, but also an ability to reflect on social and psychological functioning. We anticipate that adolescents will therefore identify giver-focused benefits of kindness.

Researchers have begun to investigate the mechanisms that link kind behaviour with well-being outcomes, identifying the conditions under which kindness is most likely to be beneficial for a giver (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). For instance, kind acts tend to have greater effects on well-being when they are driven by pleasure-based (or autonomous) motivation (Gebauer, Riketta, Broemer, & Maio, 2008; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010) or when they provide opportunity for social connection (Aknin, Dunn, Sandstrom, & Norton, 2013).

These factors are shown to mediate the link between being kind and feeling good (Martela & Ryan, 2015). We therefore also consider adolescents' awareness of social and psychological factors that may affect kindness outcomes.

Kindness is also thought to have broader societal effects, such as social contagion (Tsvetkova & Macy, 2014). Cooperative behaviour spreads through social networks (Jordan, Rand, Arbesman, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013) and those who receive help from strangers are more likely to help others in the future (Fowler & Christakis, 2010). These effects may be driven by feelings of gratitude (Bartlett & De Steno, 2006) and elevation, an emotion triggered by witnessing another perform acts of moral beauty (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Research has shown that gratitude and elevation both lead to increased altruistic behaviour in adults (Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). Little is known about elevation in adolescence but gratitude does predict prosocial behaviour in children aged 11 years (e.g., Tian, Chu, & Huebner, 2015). Also, young children are able to reason about reciprocity when making prosocial decisions (Martin & Olson, 2015). We therefore expect that adolescents may be conscious of the contagion effects of kindness and other influential mechanisms, such as gratitude and reciprocity.

The Current Study

The preliminary aim of this study is to document adolescents' perceptions of kindness, a gap in the current literature. We know from other research that relevant value systems (e.g., moral reasoning and self-transcendence) emerge and become established during adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Moreover, this is a developmental period where the prevalence of mental health problems increases considerably (Murphy & Fonagy, 2012; Taggart et al., 2014; Thapar, Collishaw, Pine, & Thapar, 2012) and substantial individual differences can be found in positive aspects of well-being (e.g., happiness; McFall, 2012).

Furthermore, higher levels of positive well-being in adolescence predict a wide range of health and social outcomes in adulthood (Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDave, & Adam, 2012). Not surprisingly, then, policymakers and charitable organisations have begun to turn their attention to the potential value of strategies to promote kindness and prosocial skills in school settings (Bywater & Sharples, 2012; Helliwell et al., 2015). Given the relative scarcity of research on adolescent conceptions of kindness, this study will help to ensure that future research and interventions in this area are relevant to youth populations. A secondary aim is to explore adolescents' perceptions of kindness-related well-being outcomes, as well as the social (e.g., features of social relationships) and psychological (e.g., empathy) factors that influence the development and enactment of kindness and its links with well-being. To this end, we conducted six focus groups with 11- to 12- and 14-to-15-year-olds. Given the significance of this developmental period for kindness and well-being, we selected these age groups to adequately represent views across the age range. The relationship between kindness and well-being has previously been investigated via experimental methods. Research that explores these relationships from a qualitative and experiential perspective is currently absent from the literature and this study, therefore, provides a novel approach to researching this topic.

In sum, we were interested in exploring adolescents' representations of kindness across four main categories: the behavioural forms that kindness takes; the antecedents of kindness; the outcomes of kindness; and the social and psychological factors that influence any of these processes. The discussion guide was designed to address these four aspects. Given the lack of prior research with this age group, we didn't have any specific hypotheses regarding these. However, it is expected that adolescents will describe a wide range of prosocial behaviours when defining kindness, in line with recent qualitative research with

younger children (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015), and that they will be able to identify both social and psychological benefits of kindness. We also expect participants will be aware of at least some contextual and dispositional factors that influence these processes.

Method

Participants

Participants were 32 pupils from UK secondary schools in year 7 (11-12 years; 8 male, 10 female) and year 10 (14-15 years; 4 male, 10 female). Pupils were drawn from three mixed-gender, comprehensive secondary schools in England. All schools were large compared to the national average. The majority of pupils were White British but two schools had a higher than average intake for speakers of English as a second language. The percentages of pupils with special educational needs or entitlement to free school meals were average or lower than average in all schools (Ofsted Dashboard, 2014).

In one school, all eligible pupils were invited to take part during an assembly. In another, eligible pupils from the school council were invited, and in the remaining school, the invited pupils were selected by teachers in eligible year groups, based on their current school workload and resulting availability. A three-stage consent procedure was employed. Head teachers first approved the study in each school and parental consent was then sought for invited participants. Participants provided their own written consent on the date of the focus group. Schools and participants were not compensated for their time.

Focus Group Semi-Structured Discussion Guide

Questions were focused on definitions and examples of kindness; reasons for kindness; variations in kindness; and emotions associated with kindness. The groups were semi-structured, such that participants were encouraged to lead the discussion but the

facilitator helped them to stay on topic by asking core questions and adding prompts where necessary (see Table 1). Broad questions were asked to allow the conversation to remain pupil-led as much as possible, and prompts re-phrased the questions to foster a more detailed response. The discussion guide included detailed instructions that informed the facilitator on how and when to use the questions. The first and last question were mandatory – the facilitator was instructed to only ask the remaining core questions if the participants did not cover them in the spontaneous discussions. Pupils were encouraged to give specific, clear and concrete examples to ensure data integrity. Towards the end of the discussion, pupils were encouraged to say anything else that they felt was relevant.

Table 1

Examples of Questions and Prompts from the Semi-Structured Discussion Guide

<u>Core Questions</u>	<u>Prompts</u>
What does the word kindness mean to you?	How would you describe kindness to someone that didn't know what it was?
Try to remember times when someone was kind. What are you thinking of? Can you give some examples?	It could be when someone else was kind, or when you were kind. Are there any types of kindness you haven't described? Can you explain every detail of what you're thinking of?
Why are people kind?	When people are kind, what are their intentions? What impact does kindness have?
Is kindness the same in every place or situation?	Are some people more kind than others? Can you give me some examples? Do certain experiences encourage kindness?
What emotions or feelings do you associate with kindness?	How do people feel when there is kindness? How does it feel when someone is kind?

Procedure

Participants were divided into six mixed-gender focus groups, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Each group consisted of three to eight pupils and met once during school hours. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Focus groups offer a valuable opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge from several individuals. Interaction between participants is thought to be particularly likely to produce depth of understanding, when compared with one-to-one interviews for example (Daley, 2013). This method can be useful with young participants as it can reduce unease that may occur from a one-to-one interview and instead creates a safe and familiar environment with peers (Punch, 2002). After gaining consent, the group facilitator led an icebreaker activity involving a name-learning game and a warm-up task. Pupils were split into two groups and asked to write down as many words as they could that they would use to describe kindness. This activity is recommended with young samples as it helps to a) foster open group discussion between pupils, and b) give pupils the space to explore the concept of kindness amongst peers before being asked direct questions by the facilitator (Gibson, 2007). The facilitator then guided the focus group through the interview schedule described above.

Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was used to identify commonly occurring themes within the dataset. Given the dearth of prior empirical research on adolescent's conceptualisations of kindness, the analysis was based entirely on the semantic content of the dataset, rather than latent meanings, such that the coding process was inductive and data-driven, rather than theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Familiarity with the data was achieved through transcription and repeated reading. During this stage, like responses that represented common topics were grouped as initial codes. These codes were attached to

broad over-arching themes in order to form a general conceptual description of the participants' experiences. Transcript extracts were read by both authors, who discussed similarities and differences between their initial impressions. Once the coding framework was agreed upon between the two researchers, the first author coded all transcripts using NVivo software. The data was extracted and read individually for each theme. At this stage, themes were merged or sub-divided as necessary (e.g., in cases of substantial overlap across themes) to ensure the framework's integrity to the dataset as a whole. Themes were then clearly defined, including a written description, criteria, examples and counter-examples for each. The coded dataset was examined to uncover meaningful links within and across themes. The data for each theme was read thoroughly and a detailed summary was written. This process informed the identification of patterns within the group responses, and the way in which themes were interconnected. Throughout the analysis, checks for researcher bias were made between the two researchers, who met frequently to discuss the integrity of the framework to the raw dataset.

Results

In total, analysis of the data resulted in the identification of 27 themes. These themes were grouped conceptually into five overarching categories (see Figure 1). The Kind Acts category includes themes representing the various types of kind behaviour described by the adolescents. Two categories of antecedents for these behaviours were also identified: Situational Triggers and Psychological Goals. One further category was identified for the different types of Impacts that kindnesses were thought to have. Finally, participants identified a range of Moderating Factors, representing the factors that could influence any or all of the previous categories. Participants discussed themes in distinct but related ways, such that the categories were interconnected and any instance of kindness could incorporate a

different combination of the themes shown within the diagram. The key findings from each of the overarching categories are explained below. Illustrative quotes or examples are reported where needed.

Conceptualisations of Kind Behaviour

Kindness was consistently defined as prosocial acts that are driven by placing other people's needs and emotions before one's own, even if there is no benefit to oneself, "*like not just thinking about yourself all the time,*" [Female, Year 7] "*to go out of their way to do, not what they want, but to help you succeed*" [Male, Year 7]. In line with our expectations, when discussing specific examples of kindness, participants described a broad range of behaviours. The types of behaviour are divided into 10 distinct themes, each containing a diverse range of specific examples (shown in Table 2). These findings show that adolescents perceive kindness to be a concept that has both behavioural and motivational components. The behaviours tended to be inseparable from the underlying motivation; if an act occurs in the absence of other-focused intentions, it would not be considered as a kind act by the participants of this study (discussed in more detail below).

Table 2

10 themes for kind acts, and examples

<u>Kind Act Theme</u>	<u>Description</u>
Emotional Support	Being thoughtful, trustworthy, and understanding when another person is upset or going through a difficult life event (e.g., listening, comforting, cheering someone up).
Proactive Support	Providing support for others when they are not experiencing emotional upset (e.g., showing an interest in positive life events, or congratulating others for their success).
Social Inclusion	Letting or inviting people to join in with games or activities.

Positive Sociality	Behaving positively towards others in everyday situations (e.g., saying good morning, smiling, being friendly, being polite, expressing gratitude, and letting others go first on the bus).
Complimenting	Using kind phrases or words to describe others and expressing it to them.
Helping	Instrumental helping, (e.g., picking up a dropped item); helping with basic needs, (e.g., providing accommodation or food); and helping with achievement needs (e.g., helping someone to complete a task or learn a new skill).
Expressing Forgiveness	Explicitly forgiving other's transgressions and/or mistakes. This refers to the specific act of expressing forgiveness to the transgressor (e.g., to alleviate negative feelings following a transgression).
Honesty	Telling the truth whenever it is appropriate to do so, or withholding an honest opinion to prevent upsetting others.
Generosity	Sharing, monetary giving, material giving, loans, and making things for others.
Formal Kindness	A premeditated act of kindness, (often collective, involving more than one individual), such as fundraising for charity or volunteering.

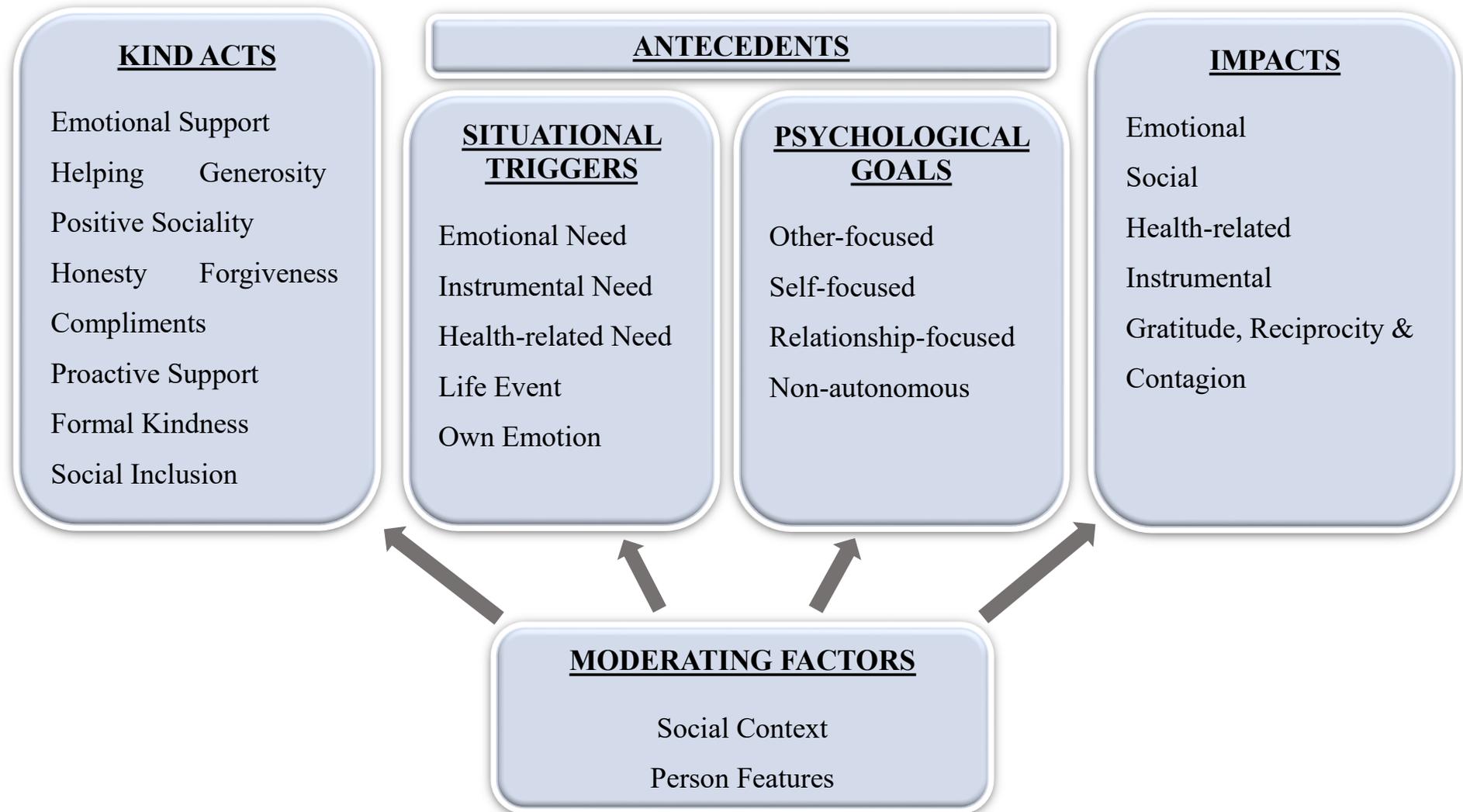


Figure 1: Conceptual grouping of 27 themes into five over-arching categories

Situational and Psychological Antecedents

The participants identified various antecedents of kindness. Firstly, kindness is always preceded by an underlying motivation, or psychological goal. As shown in Figure 1, these psychological processes formed four distinct themes (other-focused, self-focused, relationship-focused, and non-autonomous).

Other-focused goals are those that are driven by a desire to improve another person's physical or emotional state and were, by far, most frequently spoken about by all the participants. They were often, but not always, linked with the situational trigger (where one exists). For example, emotional distress may trigger a goal to relieve that distress which, in turn, may stimulate emotional support (the kind act). This is a relatively simplistic example though; other-focused reasoning can also occur in the absence of need, and can drive any one of the kindness types shown in Table 2. For instance, a compliment (the kind act) may be given to make someone feel good (the goal) but it is not a prerequisite that the recipient feels bad, or is in need, before the kind act occurs.

Self-focused goals include examples such as hoping to improve one's social standing, feeling good about oneself, or relieving feelings of guilt. Here, a participant describes how these goals often occur alongside other-focused goals, rather than in isolation: "...*thinking about like how you can make somebody else happy as well as making yourself happy,*" [Female, Year 10].

In the case of relationship-focused goals, it is not the individuals that benefit per se, but the quality of the interactions between them. Here, the goal may be to initiate, maintain, or repair a friendship, for example. One participant compared relationship-focused kindness with an egg timer that is "*draining away and you keep topping it up, making sure that it doesn't run out [...] so you're keeping your friendship or whatever type of relationship*

going” [Female, Year 7]. Any act could be driven by this goal but behaviours that are triggered by a relationship issue (e.g., forgiveness) may be particularly likely to have this kind of goal.

The fourth theme relates to acts of kindness that are non-autonomous. This reflects acts that are not intrinsically driven, such as when adhering to school rules. There was a consensus that this is a “*slightly different*” [Male, Year 10] construct to kindness because “*you might feel obliged to do things for others [...] it’s more like a chore.*” The participants noted that this type of act is less likely to feel good. Similarly, participants felt that kindnesses entirely driven by self-interest (in the absence of other-focused goals) are not ‘real’ kindness: “*sometimes people are doing it in a fake way*” [Female, Year 10]. This further demonstrates participants’ understanding of kindness as a multifaceted concept; the behaviour cannot be truly kind, nor is it likely to benefit one’s well-being, without the prosocial psychological processes that drive it.

Situational triggers of kindness included five distinct themes (see Figure 1), three of which are focused on the needs of other people, specifically emotional, instrumental, and health-related needs. Examples of an act triggered by a health-related need may include raising money for someone with cancer, or helping someone to stop smoking: “*I helped my dad, because my dad used to smoke [...] I guided him to do the right thing and he actually did stop which is really good*” [Male, Year 7]. The notion that kindness occurs in the presence of need is a commonly occurring discourse within the existing literature (Smetana et al., 2009). However, the remaining three themes refer to situations where a recipient’s need is *not* a prominent factor. Participants described situations in which a recipient’s positive (or neutral) life events may trigger kind acts. For example, a recent engagement or news of an achievement can stimulate the act of proactive support in others: “*I won an award and one of*

my friend text me the night that I won saying, 'Well done' [...] even though he won a prize, he was putting me before him" [Male, Year 7]. The young people also described instances when one's own emotion can spark kindness. For example, feeling in a positive mood can promote any of the kindness types listed in Table 2, although it may be more influential in the context of everyday behaviours such as positive sociality, and complimenting. Other emotional triggers can include guilt or gratitude. Note that situational triggers do not always occur in isolation. Here, a participant describes needs-based and emotional triggers occurring simultaneously:

I feel a bit like guilty in myself as well if I see other people like not as like happy as me [...] Like when you see homeless people [...] the other day I was gonna go and buy a snack after school [...] you see the people outside and you feel really guilty about just going and wasting money. So you sort of want to help them. [Female, Year 10]

Notably, the participants stressed that kindness can sometimes happen without a specific situational trigger, labelled as 'No Trigger' in Figure 1, "*like smiling at people, they don't necessarily need to be crying,*" [Male, Year 10]. Actions that apply here may include, but not be exclusive to, positive sociality or generosity.

Impacts of Kind Behaviour

The participants identified five distinct outcomes of kindness (see Figure 1) and, as predicted, there was a consensus that some of these impacts can affect not only the recipient, but also the giver, and those in the surrounding social context.

The types of outcomes reported by participants differed according to whether the benefit was specific to the recipient, the giver, or shared between giver, receiver and others.

Often, participants spoke about short- and long-term instrumental and physical health-related benefits, and these outcomes were deemed specific to the recipient of kindness. Typically, they were concretely tied to the recipient's needs (e.g., offering a seat to someone less physically able). Participants felt that as a general rule, the recipient of kindness is always a beneficiary.

In the context of emotional outcomes, however, there was a consensus that the giver can *also* experience positive effects, such as increased levels of confidence, joy, or pride.

"Sometimes without realising it, you only realise afterwards, that that's probably made you more happy than them, even though you're being kind ... it's just made you really happy. It's made you feel good" [Male, Year 7]. *"...they're feeling positive views about themselves and it just makes you feel more confident and that people do appreciate it"* [Female, Year 10].

Relatedly, an awareness of having made a positive impact can lead to feelings of fulfilment and feeling like a good person: *"If you help someone it makes you feel good coz it makes you feel like you're a good person"* [Female, Year 7]; *"it makes you feel better as a person, it makes you feel kinder, and more complete"* [Male, Year 7]. The impact that kindness has on relationships was also spoken about as a shared benefit between giver and receiver: *"...we became really good friends ... kindness like pulls people together"* [Female, Year 7]; *"you feel a bond if you're kind to them"* [Female, Year 7].

Finally, the adolescents spoke about the wider impacts of kindness (beyond the dyadic interaction). Feelings of gratitude were discussed as both an impact and a trigger of kind actions, closely related to and often influencing, instances of reciprocity and behavioural contagion. *"If you do something then they're like, 'Oh, that's nice, they didn't need to do that, I should do that.' And they pass it on. It's like, I dunno, contagious isn't it? It's like a cycle"* [Male, Year 10]. Expressions of gratitude were also spoken of as acts of kindness if

they had a kind motivation. Participants stressed the importance of gratitude for well-being effects; where the recipient does not show gratitude, being kind is less likely to feel good: *“it could make you quite sad if you’re being kind and [they’re] not giving the kindness back”* [Female, Year 10]. In contrast, when gratitude is expressed to the giver, it can promote positive emotional outcomes for them: *“...They actually show a lot of appreciation [...] you feel a bit better about it”* [Female, Yr10].

Moderating Factors

In line with our aims, the participants identified a range of social and psychological factors that can influence the way in which kindness is enacted, intended, or received, in addition to those referred to in the categories described above. These fell into two inter-related themes, concerning the social situation on the one hand (social context), and the giver’s individual competencies, states, or traits on the other (person features).

Beginning with the social context, aspects of the dyadic relationship (between the giver and receiver of kindness), particularly the level of relatedness, and the relationship history, were considered highly influential. For example, a negative history, such as bullying, could make kindness feel *“kind of strange, so you don’t necessarily give the kindness back,”* [Female, Year 10] and being kind to strangers may feel more extraordinary than to close relatives because *“no one’s expecting you to do it”* [Female, Year 10], sometimes leading to an increased emotional impact for the giver: *“I think you feel better about it [...] because when you’re kind to strangers you don’t have to do it”* [Female, Year 10]. However, some participants did point out the age-related difficulties in being kind to unknown others, as it is often inappropriate to approach strangers.

Participants also identified challenges in evaluating kindness, such that the giver may think they’re being kind but the recipient might not. The adolescents linked this with a giver’s

ability to assess a person's need and anticipate their reaction, and is therefore associated with their knowledge of (or relatedness to) the particular recipient (social context). However, they also felt that individual differences in person features – such as the ability to use mentalizing skills or empathy – are relevant:

[...] see what it would be like to be them and see the pain and the anger they're going through, so then you could really understand what they need and what they like and how to help them properly. Because sometimes when you're helping somebody [...] you sort of miss the objective of what they really need [...] So maybe if you just stop and see what they really need, like their priority, that can be quite helpful. [Male, Year 7]

Participants noted that these difficulties in evaluating kindness can sometimes lead to negative emotional consequences for the recipient, or a reluctance to engage with kindness from the giver.

A giver's life experiences were also considered an important person feature, particularly in needs-based situations where the giver is better able to empathise, or be more motivated to help, because they have experienced similar needs to those of the recipient. Likewise, positive life experiences can motivate one to pay-it-forward, passing the kindness onto others. This is linked with the impact of reciprocity and contagion: *"it can make them be kinder to other people as well because they'll be like, 'I need to do something else,'"* [Female, Year 10]. Other experience-specific knowledge can also facilitate kindness in particular circumstances, such as knowing the way around school when someone is lost.

Some of the discussions implied that certain aspects of emotional well-being may be required in order for one to fully engage with kindness. A few participants mentioned that confidence is sometimes needed in order to go through with a kind act, *"coz you're brave to*

go up to someone and actually be kind to them," [Female, Year 10]. Other participants stated that it can be quite difficult to be kind if a giver is feeling in a low mood, because *"if you're like feeling sorry for yourself then you're not looking out towards other people, you're just staying in your shell and stuff,"* [Male, Year 10] or is struggling with social anxiety, making them *"not want to necessarily talk to a new person,"* [Female, Year 10].

Discussion

Participants identified ten distinct types of kind behaviour and provided a multifaceted definition of the construct, including both behavioural and motivational components. Participants made detailed assessments, illuminating situational triggers and psychological goals that contribute to enactments of kindness. The adolescents were also able to make direct links between kindness and numerous social and psychological outcomes, for both the giver and the recipient, as well as the wider community. Furthermore, they initiated insightful discussions about the complexities of kindness in everyday life, recognising that social and psychological aspects of life can influence whether kindness occurs, but also the extent to which it has a positive effect.

Motivational and Behavioural Dimensions of Kindness

Participants provided substantial depth about the motivational component of kindness. Consistent with other qualitative research (Bergin et al., 2003; Binfet & Gaertner, 2015), they identified a wide range of behavioural examples, such as social inclusion, complimenting, forgiveness, honesty, proactive support, and positive sociality, that went beyond those primarily referred to in prosocial research with youth. In contrast, developmental research is still predominantly focused on a smaller range of prosocial behaviours, typically sharing, helping, and comforting (Dunfield, 2014). Unsurprisingly, some of these behaviours (e.g., forgiveness) had not been previously reported by younger children (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015),

suggesting that adolescents have a more sophisticated understanding of kindness. Further qualitative research would clarify whether the types of behaviour identified here are meaningful across different age groups. There were also subtle differences between the behaviours reported here, and those described as 'prosocial behaviour' by adolescents of another study (Bergin et al., 2003). This positions kindness as distinct from positive social behaviour more generally and reiterates the importance of studying kindness as a distinct construct with a particular motivational stance. Typically, developmental research is focused more broadly on prosocial behaviour. If researchers intend to assess and promote kindness in young people, then research must direct its focus to include the range of behaviours that are salient to the specific age group.

Importantly, participant utterances suggest that the link between behaviour and motivation cannot be severed; kindness is kindness because of the interplay between the act and the goal that drives it. In other words, it is possible to *act* kindly but not *be* kind, emphasised by participants' rejection of prosocial acts that are driven by self-interest or are not autonomous. Participants' repeated reference to other's emotional states suggests that other-oriented reasoning is a prominent aspect of kindness. This went beyond merely comforting others, a behaviour that is commonly researched in developmental science (Dunfield, 2014), because the promotion of positive emotion in others is not limited to needs-based situations. Participants also emphasised the initiation and maintenance of social relationships in line with younger children who considered social goals as a key part of kindness (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Researchers must therefore consider the importance of an autonomous orientation, interpersonal relationships, and other-focused goals in kindness research and interventions with adolescents.

Facilitators and Barriers of Kindness

The adolescents also demonstrated an awareness of factors that can be barriers and facilitators of kindness. This data provides evidence that adolescents recognise mentalizing skills as important prerequisites for successful enactments of kindness and that a person's need can influence kindness, often as a result of triggering an empathic response. Although participants recognised empathy as a facilitator of kindness, they stressed that unfamiliar social contexts, such as when specific personal experience or social knowledge is lacking, can make empathising very challenging. This complex interplay between mentalizing skills and social experience warrants further systematic investigation as it seems that mentalizing skills must be paired with specific social knowledge in order to facilitate confident enactments of kindness in youth. This study therefore provides novel, qualitative evidence of adolescents' awareness of the complex interactions between mentalizing skills, kindness, and social contexts and is in line with experimental research that empathy and perspective-taking are important developmental antecedents of prosociality (Sahdra et al., 2015). The quality of relationship between giver and recipient was also identified as influential. Participants noted that it is more difficult to be kind towards those who have been unkind in the past, or with whom they do not get on well, supporting evidence that prosociality becomes more selective in adolescence (e.g., Moore, 2009). In relationships with a negative history, feelings of gratitude and reciprocity are therefore likely to be in short supply, creating a potential barrier to future kindnesses. However, where gratitude is present, it was viewed to promote positive outcomes of kindness. Gratitude should therefore be an important consideration within kindness research.

Participants also identified state emotions that can influence kind behaviour. Broadly, positive mood states were thought to facilitate kind acts, whereas negative mood states were thought to hinder them. Participants felt that attending to other people's emotions is challenging when one is experiencing negative affect because self-focus tends to be

exaggerated. Indeed, research has identified that self-transcendent values (caring for people and entities outside of oneself) are associated with kind behaviours (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011) and positively correlated with numerous aspects of well-being, including hope, purpose in life, and affect balance (Coward, 1996). A degree of emotion regulation or baseline well-being may therefore be required for a young person to successfully engage with kindness. These are important considerations for researchers investigating kindness-based well-being interventions.

Kindness as a Pathway to Well-being

On the other hand, participants identified numerous well-being benefits of being kind, in line with adult evidence that being kind has a positive effect on a giver's well-being (e.g., O'Connell et al., 2015). Much like the existing literature, the participants reported numerous positive outcomes of kindness, including happiness (Kasser, 2005); improved self-confidence or a sense of competence (Martela & Ryan, 2015); and better social relationships (Layous et al., 2012). Participant utterances also support the theory of a positive feedback loop between feeling happy and being kind (Aknin et al., 2012) and provide novel evidence that adolescents have an understanding of contagion effects, gratitude and reciprocity (Jordan et al., 2013; Tsvetkova & Macy, 2014). Together, these findings warrant a much closer examination of kindness-based well-being interventions for younger populations, particularly in school settings where opportunities for contagion and reciprocity may be in abundance.

Current research has yet to investigate the factors that moderate the effectiveness of kindness interventions for adolescents. Prior research with adults has found that kindness to close social ties has stronger effects than to weak social ties (Aknin et al., 2011) but the participants of this study note that kindness to strangers can have a bigger impact on happiness than being kind to family members. Autonomy is also shown to enhance the beneficial impact of kindness in adults (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), a finding that is consistent

with participant responses in this study. Other influential factors, such as baseline well-being and self-transcendent values also warrant investigation, as discussed above. Systematic research investigating the moderators of intervention success would be a valuable addition to current literature with this age group.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the unique understanding this study has provided, it is important to recognise that these findings cannot be generalised to all people of this age. A larger study, involving a range of different youth groups would allow us to see whether conceptions of kindness differ across this age group (for example, by gender, ethnicity, or economic status; see Eisenberg et al., 2006; Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier, & Mayer, 2007). Moreover, the discussion questions asked participants to discuss kindness but did not specify that the kindnesses should be those that are enacted by people of their own age. Therefore, their descriptions represent their knowledge and understanding of kindness, but not necessarily their own proclivity to behave in this way. Future research would benefit from further qualitative investigation into specific kindnesses that young people actually engage with as understanding does not necessarily reflect capacity to act. Some examples may be particularly more common in older adolescents (or indeed adults) than younger teens, such as formal kindness, or kindness directed towards strangers (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this research meant that it was vulnerable to researcher bias in the data analysis and interpretation. Steps were taken to minimise this risk, including frequent checks across both authors to ensure the coding framework reflected the raw data. Even so, researcher bias in the design and analysis of the research could mean that some conceptions of kindness may not have been identified in this study and the findings should not be considered exhaustive.

Although this research provides unique evidence that young people are aware of and have experienced the well-being benefits of kindness, these results do not in themselves show

that fostering kindness will improve well-being for adolescents. One study has tested this relationship in youth (Layous et al., 2012). School students, aged nine to 11 years, were prompted to engage with three kind acts per week for four weeks. Promising results showed that participants significantly improved in positive affect and peer acceptance (Layous et al., 2012) but research is still in its infancy. Future research should test systematically the effects of kindness on well-being outcomes, incorporating the findings from the current study in order to design interventions that include age-appropriate activities and to test relevant mechanisms. Adolescents may benefit from interventions that include guidance on how to employ empathy skills, for example. Similarly, interventions would likely be strengthened by including examples of kind behaviour that are specifically relevant to the age of the youths concerned. Kindness-based interventions that incorporate gratitude practice may also provide positive results. Indeed, prior research has shown that interventions are more successful if participants practice gratitude before kindness (Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Future studies may also consider the effects of kindness within different social contexts, such as with close or distant recipients, a factor that moderates well-being in adults (e.g., Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, & Norton, 2011). In sum, the present work extends our understanding of kindness in adolescents and shows that they make direct links between kindness and well-being. The findings have important implications for the design of future research in this area such that the research, and its applications, are relevant and meaningful to youth populations.

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