Moral Weighting of Doing Good Versus Avoiding Harm in Young Adulthood

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Literature Review

Morality is intrinsic to the foundation of proper social order: it provides moral guidelines and rules that reflect pro-social behavior. From a pro-social perspective, morality differentiates between "right" and "wrong" behaviours (Haidt and Kesebir, 2010). Concerning "wrong" behaviour, recent research literature has indicated that direct harm caused by action is viewed as worse than indirect harm induced by inaction (Cushman et al., 2012). However, past research has not explored whether individuals prefer providing a direct benefit[1] by "doing good" or an indirect benefit via "avoiding harm". Acquiring this knowledge would aid in sealing this gap in the literature as well as further solidifying decision-making frameworks in behavioural economics, such as Andreoni's (1989) warm-glow giving theory.

Primordialy, "doing good" is defined as the moral responsibility to contribute in positive ways to the lives of others. On the flip side, "avoiding harm" is characterized as the moral responsibility not to expose others to harmful experiences (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023) Morality has two key subsets: proscriptive and prescriptive. Proscriptive morality is prevention-based and concerned about what "bad" actions we should not do, similar to the avoidance of harm (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009). Conversely, prescriptive morality is activation-based and concerned about what "good" actions we should do, reflecting doing "good" (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009). Therefore, prescriptive morality implies fulfilling a positive desire through activation whilst proscriptive morality entails overcoming a negative desire via inhibition (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009). Due to proscriptive morality's focus on negativity, it may have a higher influence on behavior than prescriptive morality across most situations. Negativity bias supports this effect: on average, humans are more vigilant to "bad" outcomes than "positive" ones due to the greater perceived significance of "negative" outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2001). Therefore, across most situations, these moral frameworks posit a typical preference for "avoiding harm" over "doing good".

Another dimension to consider is active and passive forms of doing good and avoiding harm. In the case of a toddler wanting to climb an apple tree, the active form of doing good

[1] Benefit refers to "advantage" in this paper.

would be to encourage the child to climb the tree whilst its passive form would be not to intervene when the toddler climbs the tree (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023). On the other hand, the active form of avoiding harm would be not to let the child climb the apple tree whilst its passive form would be to avoid having the child near apple trees (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023). These distinctions are primordial as they mirror the actor's involvement. Concerning this involvement dichotomy, Janoff-Bulman et al.'s (2009) research suggests that "the greater potency and dominance of negative consequences should be reflected in a stronger motivation to avoid 'errors' [...] and therefore a greater demand to avoid bad, immoral behaviors than to approach good, moral ones." This information suggests that when individuals are presented with an unavoidable unhelpful outcome, they want to be as uninvolved as possible, leading to a passive action. Conversely, social exchange theory posits that people want to be more involved when presented with an inevitable helpful outcome, leading to an active action (Homans, 1958). Hence, these delivery methods are shaped by the helpfulness of the act, potentially influenced by the beneficiary's state.

As a result, an additional facet is the state of the recipient. If the beneficiary is in need, then the agent is likely to help them in a direct manner akin to doing good (Bickman and Kamzan, 1973). In contrast, if the recipient is satiated, then the agent is less likely to aid them directly, increasing the odds of indirect help resembling avoiding harm (Bickman and Kamzan, 1973). Therefore, the state of the beneficiary may shape the act itself. Context-wise, undergraduate students at the University of Toronto are often faced with situations where they have to decide between "doing good" and "avoiding harm" due to the sheer amount of interactions taking place in Toronto's vibrant city and their high levels of age-related extraversion (Donnellan, 2008).

Following the aforementioned theories, my research will have multiple variables: "doing good"/"avoiding risk", active/passive actions, and state of need/satiety. These factors will help encapsulate the underlying foundation of people's reasoning when making these decisions. As per negativity bias, in general, participants may view the avoidance of harm as a greater source of benefit due to the avoidance of negative consequences (Baumeister et al., 2001). However,

according to Bickman and Kamzan's research, if the recipient is in need, then participants are more likely to pick the "do good" action; conversely, if the receiver is not in need, then participants are more likely to pick the "avoid harm" action. According to Homans' (1958) research, when presented with a person in need, the respondents are more likely to actively do good. In accordance with Janoff-Bulman et al.'s (2009) research, if the participants are presented with a person who is not in need, the actor is more likely to passively avoid harm. Therefore, I would like to answer: What is the preferred approach across all conditions: "doing good" or "avoiding harm"? What is the relationship between these acts and the recipient's state? What is the relationship between the act's mode of delivery and the recipient's state?

Methods

Participants

I plan to recruit a random sample of 785 PSY100 students from the University of Toronto. This sample size provides an ideal 80% power for detecting small effect sizes across all statistical tests (See Appendix A). Moreover, I expect small-sized effects at a minimum due to Bickman and Kamzan's (1973) research generally having small effect sizes, $V_{\text{Help vs. Need and No Need}} = 0.16$, $V_{\text{No Help vs. Need and No Need}} = 0.28$ (See Appendix B and C). Additionally, the predicted effect size between "doing good" and "avoiding harm" and the beneficiary's state of need can be equated to the effect sizes presented by Bickman and Kamzan (1973). Furthermore, this sample is culturally diverse and extremely accessible. However, this sample is not representative of the general population as the responses provided by these students may be subject to cohort effects, such as age-related, educational, and socio-economic differences

Materials

Participants will encounter 20 scenarios, 10 involving a target in a "state of need" and the other 10 in a "state of no need." For each scenario, they will have to answer: "Which of the following actions would you feel most comfortable engaging in?" by selecting one of four actions (See Appendix D for example). Each action reflects a combination of "doing good" or "avoiding harm" and "active" or "passive." In addition, all actions are closely related to a

particular situation to prevent participants from perceiving one action as inherently better than another. Most scenarios are connected to urban living, enhancing familiarity. Finally, these actions use common terms to improve participant interpretation.

Procedures

This experimental study will utilize a simultaneous within-subjects design to eliminate in-between subject "noise" and maximize control of extraneous participant variables. Stimuli will be presented in an online questionnaire on *Qualtrics* for ease of access. Therefore, my confounding variables include distractions, motivation, and technology access and competence. Afterward, a χ^2 goodness of fit test will conducted on "doing good" and "avoiding harm" choices to determine whether there is a statistically significant preference (See Appendix E). In addition, a paired samples t-test will be conducted on "doing good" versus "avoiding harm" in relation to the target's state to determine how these actions relate to the target's state (See Appendix F). Another paired samples t-test will be conducted on active versus passive actions in connection with the target's state to determine their relationship (See Appendix G). Their effect sizes will also be computed if applicable. Order effects will be controlled via complete counterbalancing. Extraneous variables will be held constant by giving all participants the same instructions, treating all participants in the same manner, and only using undergraduate students.

Measures

"Doing good" will be defined as the moral responsibility to contribute in positive ways to the lives of others (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023). On the flip side, "avoiding harm" is characterized as the moral responsibility not to expose others to harmful experiences (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023). In the "avoiding harm" option, the actor prevents the harm of others (See Appendix D for example). In the "doing good" choice, the actor aspires to improve a person's livelihood and fulfills that desire (See Appendix D for example). However, Kvalnes and Sandseter's (2023) paper did not determine the validity and reliability of these measures. Consequently, I will conduct a pilot study of 80 University of Toronto students where they have to categorize an agent's actions as "doing good" or "avoiding harm" after providing them with

vague definitions of each construct. Afterward, I will compute two Cronbach's α: "doing good" situations and "avoiding harm" situations, to assess internal consistency. If the values are above 0.80, then my measures are reliable. Concerning validity, students will indicate how much the two acts capture sample statements by using a one to seven Likert scale with seven meaning "strong agreement." These statements include "contributing positively to the lives of others," and "not exposing others to harmful experiences." Afterward, I will compute correlations between these statements and their representative acts. If the correlations are above 0.60, then my measure is valid.

The active form of "doing good" will be described as taking the initiative to do "good" deeds whilst its passive forms will be characterized as the abstention of intervention that leads to "good" outcomes (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023) (See Appendix D for example). Similarly, the active form of "avoiding harm" will be delineated as the prevention of damage via direct intervention whilst its passive form will be defined as abstention from committing harmful acts (Kvalnes and Sandseter, 2023) (See Appendix D for example). However, Kvalnes and Sandseter's (2023) paper did not determine the validity and reliability of these measures. As a result, in the same pilot study, I will instruct students to categorize an agent's actions as "active" or "passive" after providing vague definitions of each construct. Subsequently, I will compute two Cronbach's α: "active" situations and "passive" situations. With regards to criterion validity, these students will indicate: "How much do the two actions capture sample statements?" using a one to seven Likert scale with seven meaning "strong agreement." These statements include "becoming directly involved," and "avoiding responsibility." Afterward, I will compute the correlations between these statements and their representative actions.

The participant's state will be operationalized in accordance with Maslow's (1943) pyramid of needs. Although Maslow's (1963) hierarchy of needs has a low validity (Taormina and Gao, 2013), most scientists agree that Maslow's physiological needs are quintessential to human development (Kenrick et. al, 2010). Therefore, I will only use Maslow's (1943) basic physiological needs in my scenarios. For reliability, the same participants will rate an agent's

level of need using a one to seven Likert scale with seven meaning “strong need.” Following this procedure, I will compute two Cronbach’s α: “Need” situations and “No need” situations.

Discussion

The purpose of this experiment is to determine whether “doing good” or “avoiding harm” acts are preferred overall, find the relationship between the recipient’s state and the acts themselves, and establish the relationship between the recipient’s state and the act’s mode of delivery. This laboratory study will determine causal relationships between the aforementioned variables. In a similar vein, it yields high internal validity due to strong experimental manipulation, and random sampling. In addition, this study addresses the reliability and validity issues of each measure by computing correlational analyses and Cronbach’s αs in a pilot study. These calculations ensure that my experimental manipulations are adequate. Furthermore, this study uses simple statistical analyses to determine the statistical significance of the relationships between variables, reducing the chances of calculation error. This study also manages to analyze “doing good” versus “avoiding harm” by using realistic scenarios, maintaining a close connection to real-life situations. My items will be more relatable to the daily lives of my participants, enabling them to provide me with responses that align with real-life situations. The predicted effect size is well-justified using previous comparable research, providing me with an accurate sample size. Finally, this study helps close a significant gap in moral psychology literature.

However, this study lacks external validity due to the usage of word representations of scenarios. Therefore, this study’s results cannot be generalized across all real-life situations. Additionally, due to my within-subjects design, carryover effects, such as fatigue effect, practice effect, and context effect, may obfuscate my findings. Participants may also find it easier to guess my hypothesis. The usage of dummy coding for “doing good,” “avoiding harm,” “active,” and “passive” may confound my collected data as these constructs often have multiple levels depending on situational factors. For example, a participant may believe that one “doing good” action outweighs another one in terms of the positive benefit received by the beneficiary.

Moreover, I assume that intention leads to the desired outcome, which is problematic as the acts of “avoiding harm” and “doing good” are more convoluted in the real world. For example, a positive intention may inadvertently lead to a negative outcome: after Mary started spreading a malicious rumor about John, she tried to reconcile with him, but John had enough of Mary’s antics and blocked her on social media. This study solely examines the immediate outcomes of one's actions, neglecting the long-term implications, thereby constraining the comprehensiveness of its findings. Furthermore, the manner I probe responses from my participants reflects their “ideal” response, not their “practical” response due to the absence of a lifelike scenario, further reducing external validity.

Future directions include the control of carryover effects by making the study shorter and the usage of scenarios in which intention does not manifest itself into its outcome counterpart. In addition, researchers can make the scenarios more vivid by providing pictorial representations of each option, increasing external validity. Moreover, researchers should explore the perceived short-term and long-term effects of “doing good” and “avoiding harm” actions. For example, scientists could ask participants how often they would do these acts over time. Additionally, researchers should investigate additional subsets of “doing good” and “avoiding harm” actions, such as protective versus preventative measures as subsets for “avoiding harm” acts. Finally, scientists should try to connect these behavioural tendencies to culture and personality to further contextualize participants’ decisions.

Ultimately, this research will seal a significant gap in moral psychology research literature. After this acquisition, behavioural economists will make more rigorous theories that revolve around receiving and giving benefits. Finally, would you not want to know how most people provide others with benefits depending on situational factors?

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Appendix A

Required *n* based on categorical effect size, with 80% power, for α = .01, .05, and .10
Table gives required *n* based on categorical small, medium, or large effect size.

	α = .01			α = .05			α = .10		
Test	Sm.	Med.	Lg.	Sm.	Med.	Lg.	Sm.	Med.	Lg.
1. Mean dif	586	95	38	393	64	26	310	50	20
2. Sig *r**	1,163	125	41	783	85	28	617	68	22
3. *r* dif	2,339	263	96	1,573	177	66	1,240	140	52
4. *P* = .5	1,165	127	44	783	85	30	616	67	23
5. *P* dif	584	93	36	392	63	25	309	49	19
6. χ^2**									
df = 1	1,168	130	38	785	87	26	618	69	25
df = 2	1,388	154	56	964	107	39	771	86	31
df = 3	1,546	172	62	1,090	121	44	880	98	35
df = 4	1,675	186	67	1,194	133	48	968	108	39
df = 5	1,787	199	71	1,293	143	51	1,045	116	42
df = 6	1,887	210	75	1,362	151	54	1,113	124	45
7. ANOVA									
k = 2	586	95	38	393	64	26	310	50	20
k = 3	464	76	30	322	52	21	258	41	17
k = 4	388	63	25	274	45	18	221	36	15
k = 5	336	55	22	240	39	16	193	32	13
k = 6	299	49	20	215	35	14	174	28	12
k = 7	271	44	18	195	32	13	159	26	11
8. Multi *R**									
2 IVs	698	97	45	481	67	30			
3 IVs	780	108	50	547	76	34			
4 IVs	841	118	55	599	84	38			
5 IVs	901	126	59	645	91	42			
6 IVs	953	134	63	686	97	45			
7 IVs	998	141	66	726	102	48			
8 IVs	1,039	147	69	757	107	50			

Note: For unequal *n*s, mean *n* should be equal to or greater than required *n* in the table. For example, if the required *n* = 21, with two conditions, the two conditions must have an average *n* equal to or greater than 21 (e.g., n_1 = 22, n_2 = 20) to maintain 80% power.

*not based on total number of observations (e.g., in *r*, not based on sum of observations from X and Y variables)
**based on mean number of expected values per cell (i.e. $n = N/k$)

n typically refers to observations in a given condition/group/cell. In repeated measures design (e.g., *t*, ANOVA), a single subject will be observed more than once across conditions.

Sm. = Small, Med. = Medium, Lg. = Large

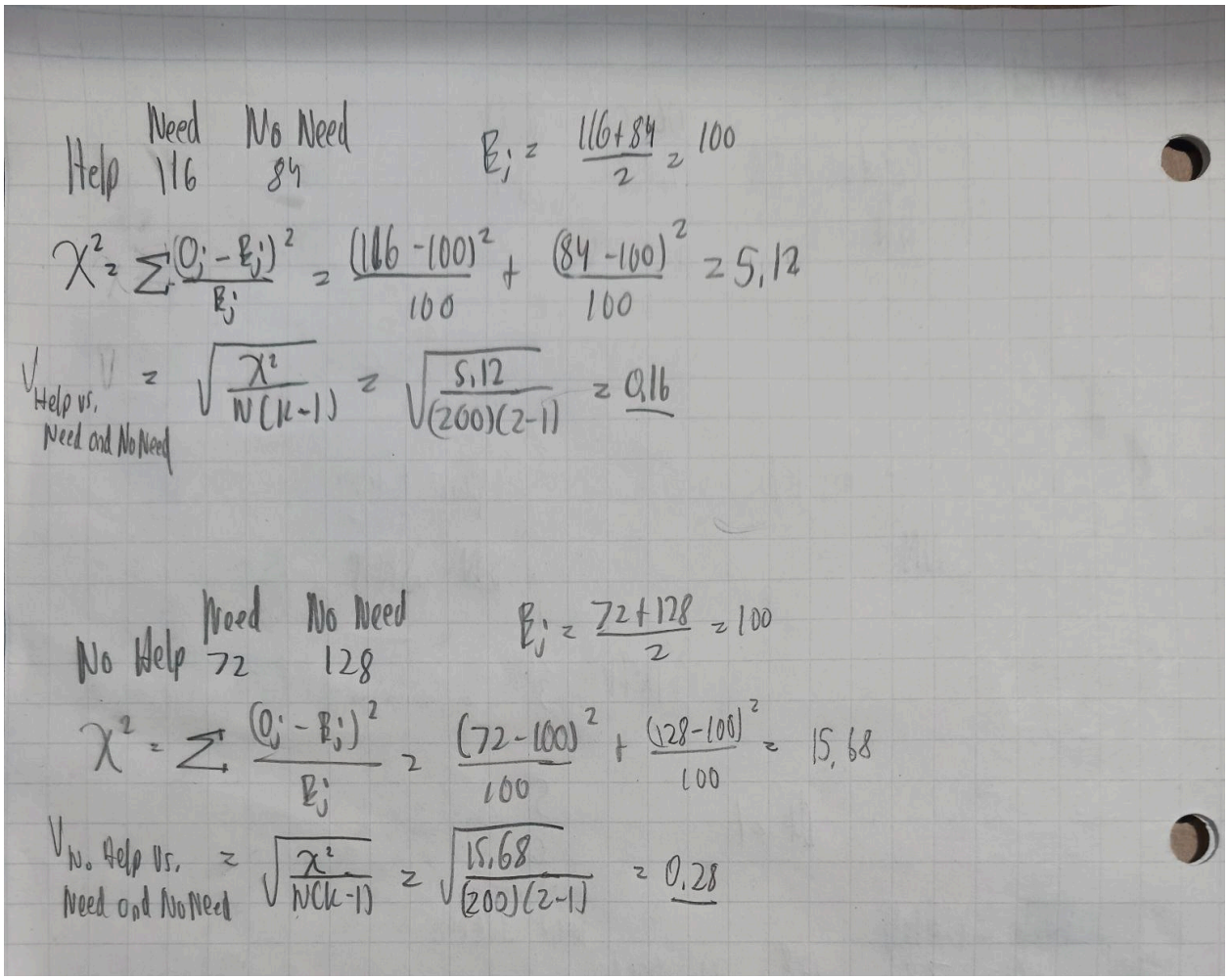
Appendix A. Power chart with required sample sizes provided in PSY202.

Appendix B

smallest k - 1	Small	Medium	Large
1	0.10	0.30	0.50
2	0.07	0.21	0.35
3	0.06	0.17	0.29
4	0.05	0.15	0.25
5	0.04	0.13	0.22

Appendix B. Chart provided in PSY202 that describes effect sizes of chi-square tests depending on k.

Appendix C



Appendix C. Calculations that lead to the effect sizes of Kamzan's (1973) research.

Appendix D

Sample items of the experiment

Which of the following actions would you feel most comfortable engaging in?

1: You would like to help somebody in need and you end giving a hungry homeless man a bowl of noodles.

2: You see a passerby give a hungry homeless man a bowl of noodles and you do not prevent the transaction.

3: You witness a hungry homeless man forgetting about his bowl of noodles and you remind him to bring it with him.

4: You would like to walk past a hungry homeless man, but you feel like he needs some food so you give him a bowl of noodles.

Figure E1. Sample item where the target is in a state of need with responses

Which of the following actions would you feel most comfortable engaging in?

1: You would like to help somebody in need and you end giving a hungry homeless man a bowl of noodles. (Doing Good + Active)

2: You see a passerby give a hungry homeless man a bowl of noodles and you do not prevent the transaction. (Doing Good + Passive)

3: You witness a hungry homeless man forgetting about his bowl of noodles and you remind him to bring it with him. (Avoiding Harm + Active)

4: You would like to walk past a hungry homeless man, but you feel like he needs some food so you give him a bowl of noodles. (Avoiding Harm + Passive)

Figure E2. Sample item where the target is in a state of need with annotated responses

Which of the following actions would you feel most comfortable engaging in?

1: You would like to help somebody in need and you end giving a well-fed homeless man a bowl of noodles.

2: You see a passerby give a well-fed homeless man a bowl of noodles and you do not prevent the transaction.

3: You witness a well-fed homeless man forgetting about his bowl of noodles and you remind him to bring it with him.

4: You would like to walk past a well-fed homeless man, but you feel like he needs some food so you give him a bowl of noodles.

Figure E3. Sample item where the target is not in a state of need with responses

Which of the following actions would you feel most comfortable engaging in?

1: You would like to help somebody in need and you end giving a well-fed homeless man a bowl of noodles. (Doing Good + Active)

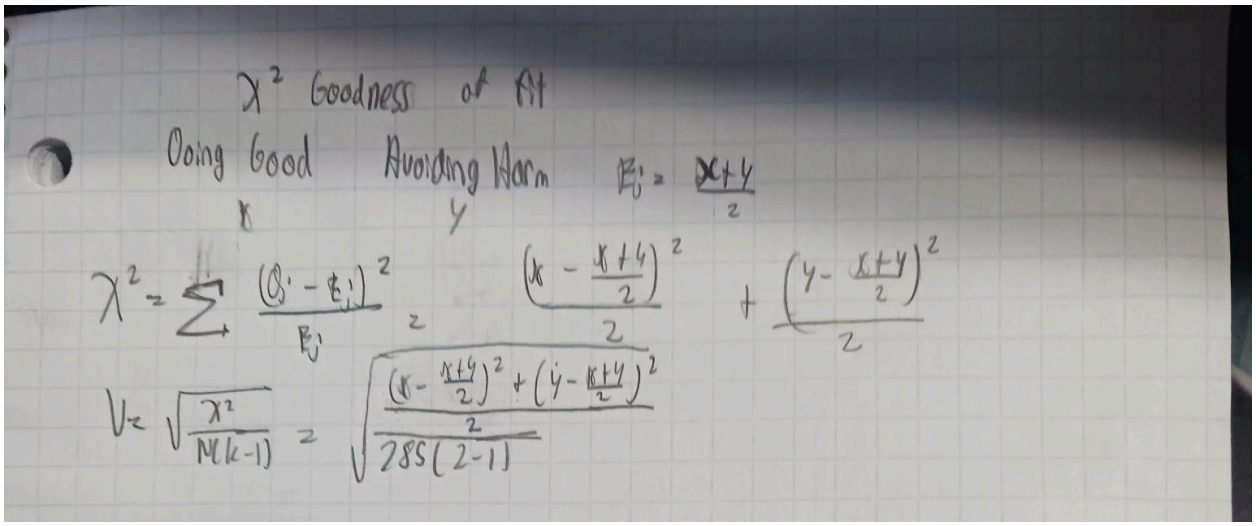
3: You witness a well-fed homeless man forgetting about his bowl of noodles and you remind him to bring it with him. (Avoiding Harm + Active)

2: You see a passerby give a well-fed homeless man a bowl of noodles and you do not prevent the transaction. (Doing Good + Passive)

4: You would like to walk past a well-fed homeless man, but you feel like he needs some food so you give him a bowl of noodles. (Avoiding Harm + Passive)

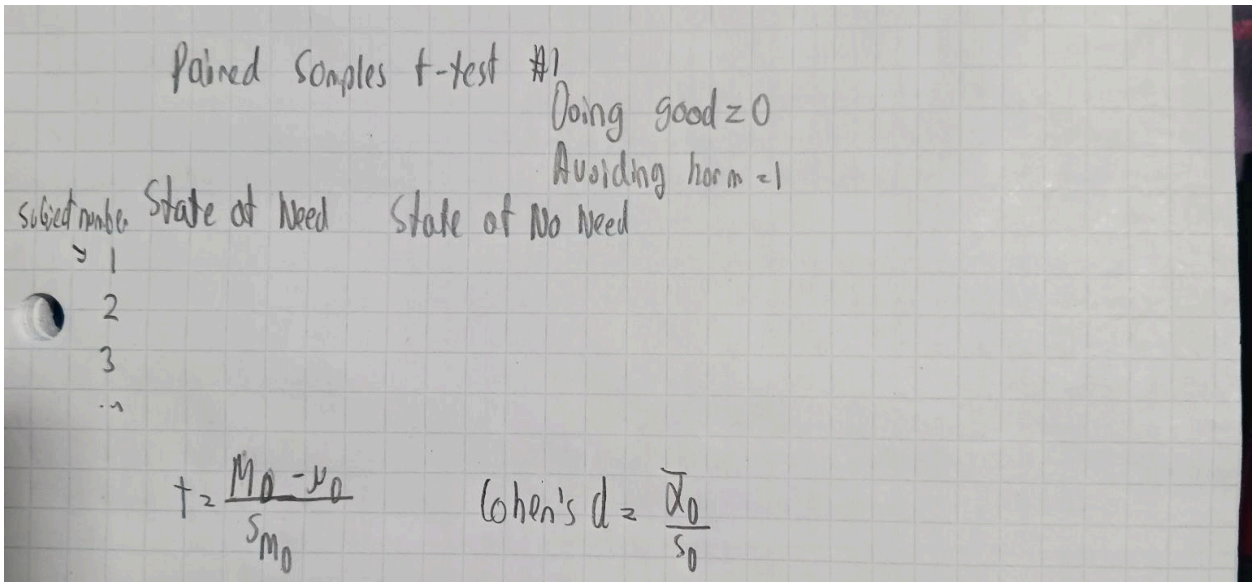
Figure E4. Sample item where the target is not in a state of need with annotated responses

Appendix E



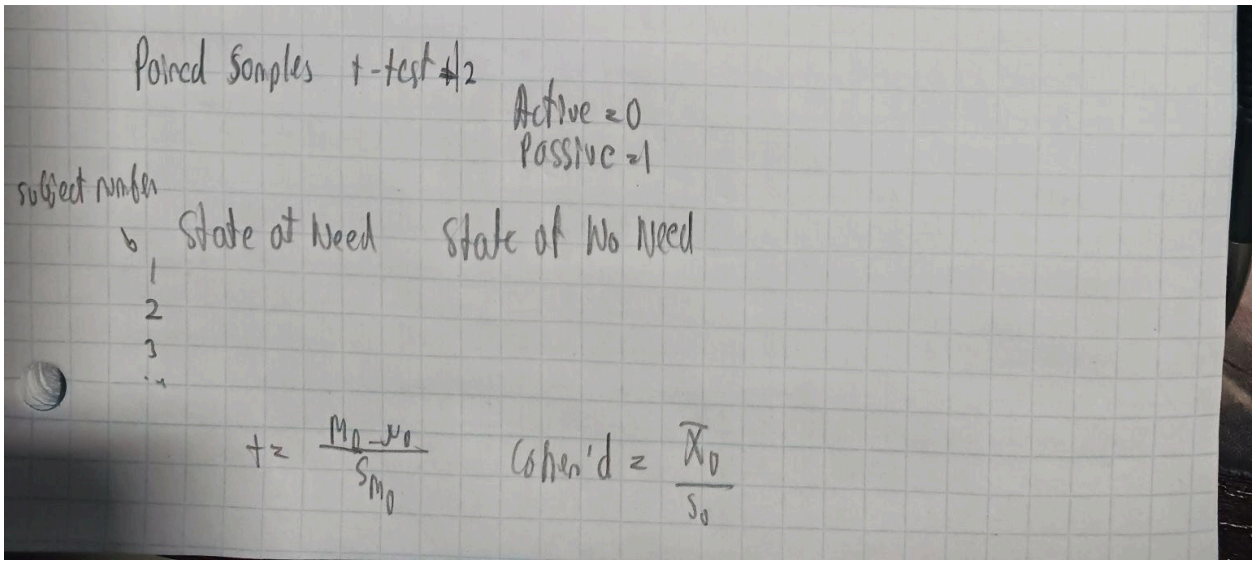
Appendix F. Layout describing how the chi-square goodness of fit test will be computed.

Appendix F



Appendix G. Layout describing how the paired samples t-test will be computed.

Appendix G



Appendix H. Layout describing how the paired samples t-test will be computed.

Reflection

In terms of feedback, I incorporated the suggestion of backing up my statements using citations. For example, instead of writing: “Proscriptive morality is [...]. Conversely, prescriptive morality is [...] (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009),” I wrote “Proscriptive morality is [...] (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009). Conversely, prescriptive morality is [...] (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009).” In addition, I divided my paragraphs in terms of the ideas explored. For example, I created a new paragraph with “Another dimension to consider is passive versus active actions.” Moreover, I stated the reasons for why I chose to design my study this way. For example, I directly answered the following questions: “Why is your study online?” and “How would the questions be formulated?” Furthermore, I stated the purpose of my study at the beginning of the discussion section in addition to including the strengths, limitations, and future directions of my study. Finally, I mentioned the confounding variables associated with online studies and increased the specificity of my measurements by referring to the manner in which past research has operationalized these measurements. Overall, I believe that I have properly incorporated my peer-reviewees's feedback by addressing the aforementioned points in an assiduous manner.

With regard to the assignment, I absolutely loved digging up old data from past research and performing my own statistical analyses on it. Furthermore, this process allowed me to apply my PSY202 knowledge to this essay, which was a blast. Honestly, this is the most engaging psychology-related assignment I have ever done due to the sheer amount of connections I made between my current and past psychology courses. Thank you so much for this opportunity!

Regarding learning, I learned that operationalizing my measures based on previous research is primordial to psychological research. In addition, I learned that using Cronbach’s α and correlations is one of the best ways to validate my measures. Finally, I discovered that it is possible to break down complex concepts, such as “doing good” and “avoiding harm” into their behavioural equivalents, which facilitates their interpretation and statistical analysis.