

ABOUT KINDNESS AS A CHARACTER TRAIT. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY*

Răzvan-Alexandru CĂLIN¹

10.52846/AUCPP.2023.2.06

Motto: "One of life's great thanks is to know yourself a good man"
Ioan Slavici

Abstract

Kindness is a subject of study that is equally concerned with psychology, religion, philosophy, or pedagogy.

Seen through the prism of the significantly different explanations and meanings associated with these sciences, the debate over its innate or acquired character and the research conducted on the benefits of practicing kindness, represent as many points of departure for our scientific approach, which seeks to identify the defining components of kindness, such as are they currently felt by young people in Romania.

To achieve this objective, following an exploratory study, there were identified a series of attributes/behaviors of a good person, and organized in the form of a list of qualities, as they were detected after interviewing several 545 young people, students at several faculties of the University of Craiova.

The conclusions regarding the possibility of acquiring these qualities through training, our vision regarding the referred subject as well as the openings to future interesting areas of exploration regarding kindness as a character trait, conclude this non-exhaustive material, which, however, aimed to reflect a current reality regarding the researched subject.

Key words: *Kindness; Character trait; Moral value; Humanism.*

1. About kindness

The conceptualization of kindness is not an approach likely to lead to universally valid generalizations. It is precisely for this reason that it is so fascinating and has piqued the interest of so many disciplines.

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¹Senior Lecturer, PhD, Teaching Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania, e-mail address: calinrazvanalexandru@yahoo.com

Probably the first approaches come from the direction of religion. In the Bible, kindness is one of the central subjects, approached predominantly not from a religious perspective, but from that of a human key value. We thus find it mentioned that "a good man will rejoice, and an evil man will suffer" (Proverbs 11:17), but also the fact that "the fruit of the Spirit contains love, peace, patience, kindness, goodwill, and trust" (Galatians 5:22). In turn, the Qur'an teaches us that "Allah enjoins justice, and the doing of good to others" (Qur'an 16:19), but also that "the reward for kindness is nothing but kindness" (Qur'an 55:61) (Miller, 2019).

Kindness is a universal value, accepted and promoted as such by most cultures and religions that put man at the center of their concerns. It can take on significantly different meanings from one person to another. It can mean altruism, generosity, compassion, empathy, unconditional love, or all of them. However, a conceptual delimitation is important to serve our next endeavor.

Dexonline defines kindness as "the disposition to be good, the inclination to do good; gentleness, mercy, indulgence; kindness, benevolence" (Dexonline, n.d.).

Other authors define it as a type of behavior marked by acts of generosity, consideration, or concern for others without expecting praise or rewards (Wikipedia, n.d.).

For Tudor Alexandru Dumitrescu, kindness is a character trait, an attitude that is manifested by the inclination to do good (Dumitrescu, 2014).

We can also understand kindness as "a human quality that reflects the tendency to do good and empathize with others" (Tikaboo, 2020, p. 2).

Finally, The Psychology Dictionary online defines kindness as "a benevolent and helpful action intentionally directed towards another person, it is motivated by the desire to help another and not to gain explicit reward or to avoid explicit punishment" (Sam, 2023, p. 1).

A remarkable synthesis with kindness as its central subject is offered to us by Kori D. Miller, who in their material manages to provide a very good overview of current approaches to this topic (Miller, 2019).

Many other authors explain the concept of kindness and emphasize the importance and benefits of its practice, felt as such on all levels of life, whether we are talking about physical and mental health, social integration, climate, and professional performance or management and leadership (Aknina, Dunn, Whillans, Grant, & Norton, 2013; Brown, Hoye, & Nicholson, 2012; Jenkinson *et al.*, 2013; Huy *et al.*, 2020; Kerr, O'Donovan, & Pepping, 2014; Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016; Nelson-Coffey, Fritz, Lyubomirsky, & Cole, 2017; Oteke, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Piellemer, Fuller-Rowell, Reid, & Wells, 2010; Post, 2014; Ballamudi, 2022).

Without a doubt, all these ways of looking at and understanding kindness are correct, but, in our opinion, incomplete.

If we extend the attempt to understand the concept to the several types of kindness identified in several previous studies, we see that exhaustive coverage is practically unattainable. Nelson-Coffey, Bohlmeijer and Schotanus-Dijkstra identify two main types of kindness: *self-centered kindness and other-centered kindness* and

demonstrate that incorporating both types into our lifestyle benefits both mental and physical health (Nelson-Coffey, Bohlmaijet, & Schotanus-Dijkstra, 2021).

Curry, Rowland, Van Lissa and their collaborators divide kindness into *kin kindness*, or being kind to your family; *mutualism*, or being kind to members of your community; *reciprocal altruism*, or being kind to those you will meet again; and *competitive altruism*: being kind to others when it enhances your status (Curry, Rowland, Van Lisa *et al.*, 2018).

The presented classifications are important, but they do not satisfy us from the perspective of the objectives we pursue in this research.

The importance of kindness in today's social context is obvious, a fact confirmed by the impressive number of prestigious universities, institutions, and organizations that have turned their attention to this topic. We list in this regard only: The Center for the Study of Kindness of the University of Berkeley, the Bedari Kindness Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), The Sussex Center for Research on Kindness of the University of Sussex (with its Kindness Test, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/centres/kindness/>) or The Kindness Institute (TKI) within the Research for the Prime Minister's Mental Health Project (New Zealand, <https://thekindnessinstitute.com/>).

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

In the light of all these premises and arguments, the present exploratory study aims to identify what, in the opinion of young people in Romania, are the main qualities of a good person, so that they can then be extrapolated in the form of the defining attributes of kindness, as a trait of character.

We also aim to offer to all those interested in the early development of kindness in children, an inventory of these attributes circumscribed by the concept, with the necessary nuances and explanations, accompanied by our perspective on the types of kindness, useful both in the training activity but, equally, in the context of a possible self-education and understanding of kindness as an experience and a way of life.

2.2. Participants

A group of 545 students (281 boys and 264 girls) from the University of Craiova, in their first year of study, aged between 18 and 22, participated in the research.

Also, 24 students, Master's students from different faculties within the same university, were involved in the scientific process of validating the indicators-attributes, constituted in the form of the group of experts, who contributed to the definition and ranking of the attributes associated with the concept of kindness.

2.3. Instruments and procedure

Conducted in the form of exploratory research, the investigative approach undertaken was based on what Flanagan named, in 1954, the Critical Incident Technique (The Critical Incident Technique). This technique was corroborated with

the Behavioral Anchored Rating Scale of Smith and Kendall (1963), the aim being, as I stated, obtaining an inventory of the attributes circumscribed to kindness as a character trait, organized and ranked from the perspective of the importance perceived by the study participants, the students.

Thus, at the beginning of the research, the 545 students were invited to participate in watching a movie full of emotion, which reflects behaviors full of generosity, sensitivity, and humanism. Its choice was made by compiling an individual list containing 15 films known to have this subject, with the most favorable quotes on specialized websites.²

They were asked to rank these films in order of individual preference, according to the "most impressive film" criterion. They were then asked to remove the last 10 films from the list, and the resulting individual lists (containing the names of 5 films each) were combined and the name of the film with the highest frequency of mention and position in the hierarchy of options was retained. This whole process was aimed at making a selection as objective and representative as possible for the study participants. The film with the most votes received was *Seven Pounds*³.

The reason behind watching such a film in advance is represented by the fact that we strongly believe that to approach a subject like kindness in an involved and personal way, it is necessary to first enter "*in State*", to be connected with *State*, and what can be better to achieve this than watching a well-chosen movie.

Next, the exploratory approach undertaken presented four steps:

Step I: In the first phase, the students who participated in the study were asked to answer the question "*what, in your opinion, is being a good person?*".

Later, all these lists containing the descriptions/enumerations of the qualities that define the kindness of a man were collected, and centralized, those with similar meanings were brought together and only the first 20, whose frequency of appearance was the most, were retained in a single list. The attributes thus chosen were collated, the redundant, non-serious, or banal ones were eliminated, and the resulting list was again subjected to an evaluative analysis in which it was requested to elaborate explanatory definitions for each dimension (the duration of this activity varied between thirty and sixty minutes).

Step II: The list of qualities/attributes, together with their explanations/definitions, was distributed to several 10 expert professors, with the task of thinking of one or two examples to describe the presence of the reference criterion. After collecting the examples, they were synthesized on a unique list, the repetitive and banal ones being eliminated.

Step III: At this stage of the research the group of 24 Master's students, as experts, were given a list of dimensions and their definitions and another list of examples from the previous action, ordered in a purely random manner. The given task was to assign each example to the category or dimension for which it was

² www.cinemagia.ro, www.IMDB.com

³ <https://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/seven-pounds-sapte-suflete-22687/>
https://www.imdb.com/find/?q=seven%20pounds&ref_=nv_sr_sm

written. Called the retroversion operation, it aims to see if the examples match qualitatively.

Step IV: Finally, among the items present in this final list, the experts were asked to choose the first 10 qualities/attributes they consider the most important for a person to be considered a "good person". The options were gathered, the ones with the best rank and frequency being retained, the final results being those presented in Table 1.

At the same time, we specify that only those qualities associated with a good person were retained that presented a percentage score higher than 20% of the opinions expressed.

3. Results and discussion

Table 1. Inventory and ranking of behaviors associated with the phrase "to be a good man"

<i>Description of conduct (To be a good person means...)</i>	<i>Percentage of opinions (%)</i>	<i>Rank</i>
... to care	75	1
... to be empathetic	65	2
... to be supportive	57	3
... to be kind	52	4
... to be understanding	43	5
... to be generous	36	6
... to be affectionate	33	7
... to be patient	27	8
... to be positive	23	9
... to be kind	20	10

Certainly, we cannot expect our study to be exhaustive. Obviously, it contains a dose of subjectivism, unavoidable in research based on the opinions of some subjects. However, the results nuance and clarify the conclusions of other studies regarding the way in which kindness is understood and experienced, reflecting, through the representativeness of the sample, the current perspective of young people in Romania regarding the subject.

1. From a philosophical perspective, kindness itself is a central value for what is meant by humanism. Like any human value, it is associated with a character component. In this context, we appreciate as relevant the character architecture made by the VIA Institute on Character based in Cincinnati, Ohio, which identifies 24 essential character traits including kindness, which it places, along with love and social intelligence, among those subsumed under the category of humanism, the most important in terms of relating to others (VIA, 2023). *Kindness, therefore, implies valuing man and nature and everything that surrounds you as realities with which you develop together, to become.*

2. We are born with the premise of becoming good people. Significant experiences and patterns in life sometimes lead us away from this path. The fact that we understand kindness as a character trait (which we know is built throughout life as a result of the individual's interactions with the environment and education), leads us to support the findings of studies that attest to this fact. *The formation of kindness in children, from the perspective of the future adult characterized as a "good person", thus becomes a future project with multiple individual and social benefits.* It can constitute a priority of any education system that assumes the responsibility it has in building a future society whose values include humanism and human kindness.

3. The kindness we show in everyday life adds a dose of respect and sensitivity to interpersonal relationships (Iliescu, 2018).

The results obtained during our study (Table 1), their interpretation, correlation, and corroboration with the discussions that accompanied our investigative approach, allow many conclusions or findings to be drawn. Equally, however, they create opportunities for new questions and openings.

The main qualities, without which kindness would not be complete and real, are compassion and empathy. Both reflect an involvement, a desire to know and to do. We can better understand this if we properly understand the meaning of these concepts.

In general, empathy means "putting yourself in the other person's shoes", thinking in the paradigm of "what you would feel and what you would do if you were in the other person's place". But it is more than that, it is to seek to feel what the other feels, in the internal and external conditions that they experience, to feel and understand them, without judging them. It's about them, not you!

Kindness presupposes *compassion*, being concerned with how someone feels in the various situations they experience and how it would be optimal to respond behaviorally in that context. But to know, to truly understand what the other person feels, you often need to have felt it, to have had similar experiences.

For any person, to become a good or a better person, to be able to experience and then authentically live kindness, it is necessary that in the history of their life, there should be a series of significant personal experiences, sometimes traumatic, which they have outgrown, they accepted them as part of his own life, as a past that can no longer be changed, and concluded with a potential generator of growth - "they made peace with them". Often, *these revelatory experiences are crowned with a salient (trigger) experience capable of triggering, and then fueling and maintaining, lifelong, the mood for kindness.*

This is the way.

When it is not found or not chosen there have been changes and erroneous constructions of reasonings, significant or traumatic events (sometimes perceived as such only at the individual level) have led to erroneous beliefs, sometimes transmitted trans-generationally, premises for the construction of characters lacking kindness (Săvulescu, 2017).

4. There is sometimes a need to nurture our self-esteem, to revalue ourselves in our own eyes, most of the time when we are going through a busy, stressful, or

difficult period. And to overcome the moment, we are inclined to resort to benevolent behavior. And we want it to be noticed and appreciated by others. Sometimes we forget what it's like to be happy, and then doing an act of kindness helps us get closer to the well-being of happiness. All these possible situations led us to search for an answer to the following question: "*Can we talk about levels/stages of the development of kindness?*"

The undirected exploratory interviews conducted with the students participating in the present study allowed us to identify and describe 4 levels of depth at which kindness is manifested (Table 2):

Table 2. Depth levels of kindness

	<i>Emotional involvement (in the state of doing good)</i>	<i>Emotional non-involvement (in the state of doing good)</i>
Conscious (voluntary)	<i>I am good as a result of a rational decision and I engage sincerely, with all my being (with all my soul), in the act of kindness that I do</i>	<i>I am good as a result of a rational decision, but I do not get involved emotionally, acting from reasons related to reciprocity, obligation, interest, formalism, social rules</i>
Unconscious (involuntary)	<i>I act with kindness without thinking about it, most of the time automatically, because that's how I am and feel, and I sincerely involve myself, with my whole being (with my whole soul), in the act of kindness that I do</i>	<i>The act denoting kindness is purely accidental, random, conjunctural and not internalized or perceived by the person performing it</i>

5. Can happy people be bad people? They can, but with incomparably more effort than those who are not happy. A happy person is more prone to acts of kindness than an unhappy person (Miller, 2019; Oteke, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Post, 2014).

Being happy is therefore a good prerequisite for being better. And most of the time, being happy is a matter of choice, of personal perspective on the reality you live. *The more we learn to be happier, the more likely we are to become better.*

6. We all have life topics that constitute what David Rock, through the SCARF⁴ model, called "*emotional buttons*", potentially triggering reactions that escape the rational, control being taken over by instincts and emotions (Rock, 2009). They are very personal, and knowing them is a big step in properly managing the

⁴ The acronym SCARF comes from 5 emotional buttons that, when pressed (voluntarily or involuntarily), subconsciously influence our behavior in various social situations:

Status – our relative importance to others

Certainty – our ability to predict the future

Autonomy – the feeling of control over the things that happen to us

Relatedness (Familiarity) – the feeling that we are in a familiar environment

Fairness – how fair we think the exchanges between people are

associated behaviors. The triggering of these emotional buttons sometimes causes even a good person to act out of character, especially if their level of emotional intelligence has not reached a level of development that allows them excellent self-awareness and self-control. of emotions.

7. *Fatigue, overwork, and depressive/anxious states* are other factors that contribute to diminishing what we could call "generative energies of availability towards kindness".

8. An act of kindness generates the return of the act, reciprocity, but this fact is not a valid indicator of increasing the presence of kindness (it is not necessarily a sincere return of the act, but it may very well be a form of courtesy, an obligation customary, a form of reciprocity). A better prediction is the situation in which the person who is the recipient of an act of kindness later turns to another person or social context with kindness.

We cannot but bring up here a special category of kind, nice, polite people, who could easily be mistaken for good people, but who are deeply insincere, wearing only a mask of kindness.

It is the false, insincere politeness frequently displayed by those of today's Western culture. It is a form of toxic kindness, formalized, displayed but not lived. *At the root of these manifestations is an education for politeness and formal kindness, and not an education that teaches you to live honestly and fully experience the kindness.*

9. Oscar Wilde said that "to be good is to be in harmony with yourself".

We totally agree with the opinion expressed by Karlin and Ozawa-DeSilva, according to which "To have a fully formed capacity for kindness, one must first learn to be kind to oneself and practice self-compassion. When we are not emotionally aware or are unkind towards ourselves, it is very difficult to be kind to another. Learning to have greater self-compassion can put us in the right physiological, emotional, and mental state to be kind to others" (Karlin & Ozawa-DeSilva, 2023).

In our view, to be good you must:

- to wish
- to understand
- to get involved with your whole being in a living
- to practice
- to self-observe, self-evaluate and correct yourself, if and where appropriate.

We can only wish that, in a world where we are surrounded by more and more evil, we choose to remain good.

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