

IMPORTANCE OF LOCUS OF HELP INITIATION AND TYPE OF OUTCOME AS DETERMINANTS OF REACTIONS TO ANOTHER'S HELP ATTEMPT

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In the present study we examined the effect on a recipient of another's effort to provide help. Two variables, locus of responsibility for initiating a help attempt (requested, offered, and imposed) and type of outcome resulting from the help attempt (successful and not costly, and unsuccessful and costly for the help-giver), were manipulated in a 3 x 2 factorial design. Participants were asked to place themselves in the role of a hypothetical student who was confronted with a particular situation and to answer a series of questions regarding their reactions to that situation. Results indicated that the requested help condition yielded the strongest obligation to help other as well as the greatest liking for other. With regard to type of outcome, successful help produced greater obligation to help other and greater liking for other. Successful help also resulted in a greater willingness to assist other when the locus of help initiation was either offered or imposed. However, when the locus of help initiation was internal (i.e., requested), success of the outcome had no effect on willingness to assist other.

Keywords: locus of responsibility, type of outcome, determinants of reactions, help attempts.

Numerous investigations have demonstrated that attempts to render help generate a variety of both positive and negative reactions in a potential recipient. For example, attempts to help have been shown to result in the recipient feeling attraction (Greenberg & Frisch, 1972) and gratitude (Tesser et al., 1968) toward the other person. Also frequently reported are feelings of obligation to help the donor and attempts to reciprocate (e.g., Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966; Pruitt, 1968). Not surprisingly, other researchers have found that recipients do not necessarily manifest greater attraction and willingness to assist the help-giver (Brehm & Cole, 1966; Schopler & Thompson, 1968) and may, under certain conditions, develop negative feelings towards their benefactors and toward themselves (Broll et al., 1974).

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Recent efforts to delineate the conditions underlying reactions to help attempts have shown that positive reactions are primarily a function of two variables: (a) the locus of help initiation, that is, the responsibility for initiating a help attempt (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966; Greenberg & Frisch, 1972); and (b) the outcome of a help attempt, that is, the magnitude of the recipient's rewards and the donor's costs (Greenberg et al., 1971; Pruitt, 1968).

Research on the locus of help initiation has been focused on the comparison between help that is initiated by the donor with help that is initiated by factors external to the donor, such as the donor's role requirements (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966) and luck (Greenberg & Frisch, 1972). These investigations have shown that the recipient feels more attraction towards the donor and demonstrates greater willingness to reciprocate the benefit when the locus of help initiation is internal to the donor than when it is a function of external factors. Unfortunately, attempts to investigate the locus of help initiation variable have not, in general, examined the role of the recipient as an initiator of the help attempt. Yet, it should be clear that the locus of help initiation often resides either primarily or partially within the recipient; such as when he *requests* or *chooses* to accept another's offer of help.

In one study which has investigated the recipient as an initiator of help, Broil et al. (1974) reported that participants who received requested help liked the helper less than participants who received offered help. To explain their findings, Broll et al. reasoned that the recipient, having chosen to request help (as opposed to it being offered or imposed), was more likely to view the action as an admission of a lack of ability, resulting in feelings of lowered self-esteem. However, other research and theorizing does not support the Broll et al. position. For example, Schopler (1970) has reasoned that a help attempt will elicit more favorable reactions when the recipient perceives that the proximal cause of the donor's act is the recipient's needs or wishes (i.e., "recipient instigated") than when the cause is seen as deriving from the donor's needs or wishes (i.e., "donor instigated"). Making the "recipient instigated" type of attribution, according to Schopler, is very likely in the case of a donor who responds positively to a recipient's request for help; while a donor who imposes help is likely to be seen as acting inappropriately and motivated by his own needs or wishes.

Empirical support for Schopler's position was provided in a study by Brehm and Cole (1966). They found that the imposition of a favor, at a time when it was important for the recipient to be free of obligation, produced less willingness to reciprocate than when no favor was imposed. Whereas Brehm and Cole viewed their findings as supporting reactance theory, Schopler (1970) offered an attribution explanation by arguing that the favor was "beyond the bounds of expected behavior and was therefore attributed to donor instigation" (p. 237).

One factor not considered in the investigations of the locus of help initiation concerns the outcome of the help attempt. Previous researchers have shown that the recipient's willingness to help other is a direct function of the magnitude of rewards of the recipient (Greenberg et al., 1971) and costs incurred by the other (Pruitt, 1968; Tesser et al., 1968). The outcome of a help attempt may involve any one of a number of combinations of recipient rewards and donor costs. For example, the help attempt may be successful and not costly for the donor or the help attempt may be unsuccessful and costly for the donor. In the latter case the intended recipient is left only with the knowledge that the other person incurred costs in his behalf. In one study that compared reactions to a successful attempt to help with one that was unsuccessful and costly for the other (Greenberg et al., 1971), it was found that more help was given to the person who rendered successful help than to the one who only incurred costs in trying to help.

The above literature review indicates that certain aspects of the locus of initiation and type of outcome variables have been insufficiently studied. Specifically, only one researcher has compared recipient versus donor initiation of help – perhaps because of the difficulty of inducing participants to “request” help. Similarly, there has been only one investigation concerned with the relative importance of recipient rewards and donor costs. The present study was designed to investigate the potential importance of these two variables for understanding reactions to a help attempt.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

Participants were 74 male and 75 female students enrolled in an introductory social psychology course at the University of Pittsburgh. The investigation was conducted during a regular class meeting and participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 x 2 factorial design. The independent variables were (a) locus of help initiation (requested, offered, imposed) and (b) type of outcome of help attempt (successful and not costly for the helper, unsuccessful and costly for the helper).³

PROCEDURE

The participants were asked to read a story about a hypothetical student and to respond to a series of questions. In an effort to increase their involvement in the stories, participants were asked to place themselves in the role of the hypothetical student and to indicate what they would do and feel in that situation. The story began in an identical way for all participants who were told, “Imagine that you are confronted with the following situation: You are currently writing a paper for a history course which is due on Monday”.

³Based on insignificant findings in pilot research, sex of participants was ignored as a factor in the analysis.

Manipulation of Locus of Help Initiation

The locus of initiation of the help attempt was manipulated by having participants in each of the three conditions read one of the following versions of the story:

(a) Requested help: “While doing research for the paper you discover that a key book written on the topic has been checked out of the library by a fellow student. You phone the student and ask to borrow the book. He agrees and brings it over to your house Friday evening.”

(b) Offered help: “Another student in the class informs you about a key book which has been written on the topic and that he has checked it out of the library. He offers to lend you the book and brings it over to your house Friday evening.”

(c) Imposed help: “Another student in the class informs you about a key book which has been written on the topic and that he has checked it out of the library. He offers to lend you the book. You tell him that you don’t need the book, but he brings it over to your house Friday evening anyway.”

Manipulation of Type of Outcome

The type of outcome of the help attempt was also manipulated by having participants read different versions of the story. In the successful and not costly condition, participants were told that the book contained “a lot of useful material” and that because of the book they had saved five hours of work. The extra time was used to study for an examination given on Monday on which they thought they had done well.

In the unsuccessful and costly condition, participants were told that the book contained “no material which was useful”, although they were still able to complete their paper. They were further told that the student who had given them the book had lost some important notes and had to spend an extra five hours working on his paper. As a result, he was unable to study for his examination and thought he had done poorly. It later turned out that the lost notes were tucked away in the pages of the book.

The remainder of the story was identical for all participants. It read as follows: “The following Saturday, while studying in the library, you meet the other student. In your conversation with him you find he is working on an assignment for an English Literature class. He tells you that his professor asked him to go to the library and check a number of references on a particular topic. Since he doesn’t have much time left in which to complete the assignment, he asks you if you would spend some time helping collect the list of references from the card catalogue and other reference sources.”

Postexperimental Questionnaire

Participants then answered a series of seven questions. Four questions represented measures of the dependent variables (of which there were three) and concerned participant's reactions to the other student's attempt to help. The three remaining items were included as a check on the experimental manipulations. The first variable pertained to the feeling of obligation to help the other student and was measured on a scale which ranged from "not obligated" (1) to "highly obligated" (10). The second variable dealt with participants' liking for the other student with the response alternatives ranging from "negative" (1) to "positive" (10). The third dependent variable concerned the amount of time the participant was willing to invest in helping the other student. Response alternatives ranged from "less than one hour" (1) to more than eight hours" (10). Immediately following was a fourth item which was an open-ended question asking participants to explain the basis for their willingness to assist the other student.

RESULTS**EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MANIPULATIONS**

The success of the manipulation of the locus of help initiation variable was assessed by responses to the following question: "To what extent do you feel some responsibility for the fact that the other student attempted to help you?" Participants were given a 10-point bipolar response scale which ranged from *feel no responsibility* to *feel greatly responsible*. An analysis of variance performed on responses to this item yielded a significant locus of help initiation effect ($F = 3.73$, $df = 2/143$, $p < .05$). There was no significant type of outcome effect nor was there a significant interaction effect. Planned comparisons among the three levels of locus of help initiation indicated that, as predicted, perceived responsibility in the Request condition was greater than in the Offered condition ($F = 3.99$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .05$) and the Imposed condition ($F = 6.87$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .01$). No significant differences were found between the offered and imposed conditions although the means were ordered in the predicted direction ($M = 5.51$ and 5.26 , respectively).

The success of the manipulation of type of outcome was assessed by two questions. The first, "How helpful to you was the other student?" had response alternatives that ranged from *not helpful* (1) to *very helpful* (10). An analysis of variance performed on these data showed that, as predicted, participants who were successfully helped perceived the other student as more helpful than those who were unsuccessfully helped ($F = 162.0$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .001$). In addition, there was an unexpected locus of help initiation effect ($F = 15.0$, $df = 2/143$, $p < .001$), as well as a significant interaction between type of outcome and locus of help initiation ($F = 9.37$, $df = 2/143$, $p < .001$). The significant interaction effect does not qualify the interpretation of the significant type of outcome effect, since planned comparisons showed that at each level of locus of help initiation, successful help yielded a higher mean score than unsuccessful help (p

TABLE 1

Questionnaire Item	Type of Outcome					
	Successful			Unsuccessful		
	Locus of Initiation			Locus of Initiation		
	Requested	Offered	Imposed	Requested	Offered	Imposed
<i>n = 25</i>	<i>n = 24</i>	<i>n = 25</i>	<i>n = 24</i>	<i>n = 25</i>	<i>n = 26</i>	
Obligation to Help Other	6.36	5.88	5.80	6.38	4.80	4.65
Liking for Other	8.16	7.46	7.64	7.04	5.40	6.35
Willingness to Assist Other	3.28	4.00	4.44	2.88	2.32	2.39

< .01 for each comparison). The second question was designed to measure perceived costs and read as follows: "Considering everything, how much trouble did the other student experience as a result of trying to help you?" Response alternatives ranged from *very little* (1) to *very much* (10). As predicted, the analysis of variance revealed that participants receiving the unsuccessful and costly help manipulation perceived the other student as experiencing more trouble than those receiving the successful and not costly help manipulation ($F = 126.56$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .001$). Neither the other main effect nor the interaction effect was significant.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

Obligation to help Other

An analysis of variance performed on the obligation scores (see Table 1 for means) indicated that successful help produced a stronger obligation to help other than unsuccessful help ($F = 3.51$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .07$). In addition, there was a significant locus of help initiation effect ($F = 3.16$, $df = 2/143$, $p < .05$). The interaction was not significant. *A posteriori* comparisons⁴ among the three levels of locus of help initiation showed that only requested help produced a stronger feeling of obligation than offered help ($p < .05$). A significant linear trend was also obtained ($F = 4.27$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .05$), indicating that feelings of obligation tended to increase as the locus of help initiation became more internal to the recipient.

Expressed Liking for Other

An analysis of variance performed on the liking scores (see Table 1 for means) showed that participants who received successful help felt more positive towards Other than participants for whom the help attempt was unsuccessful ($F = 29.81$, $df = 1/143$, $p < .001$). In addition, there was a significant locus of help initiation effect ($F = 5.97$, $df = 2/143$, $p < .01$). The interaction was not significant. *A posteriori* comparisons among the three levels of locus of help initiation revealed that participants in the requested help condition evaluated other more positively than participants in the offered help condition ($p < .01$). Neither of the other *a posteriori* comparisons was significant (i.e., requested vs. imposed, and offered vs. imposed).

Amount of Time Willing to Assist Other

Table 1 shows the mean responses to the question asking participants how much time they would be willing to spend collecting references for the other student. An analysis of variance performed on these data revealed a significant type of outcome effect ($F = 19.99$,

$df = 1/143, p < .001$) and a marginally significant interaction effect ($F = 2.59, df = 2/143, p < .08$). *A posteriori* comparisons between individual cell means showed that when help was either offered or imposed, successful help produced a greater willingness to help other than when the help attempt was unsuccessful and costly for other ($p < .01$). However, when the help was requested, type of outcome did not affect the participants' willingness to help the other student ($p < .05$). An open-ended question designed to explore the reasoning underlying participants' willingness to assist the other student did not yield meaningful information.

DISCUSSION

Results of the present study showed that when a help attempt was self-initiated there was a greater liking for and feeling of obligation to help other than when the help attempt was other-initiated. These reactions occurred regardless of the outcome of the help attempt. The finding that the helper was liked more in the requested than in the offered condition is opposite to findings reported by Broll et al. (1974). Although this discrepancy may be due, in part, to the fact that the present study used a role-playing manipulation, there are also other important differences between the two investigations. Broll et al.'s participants worked on a difficult logic problem and were either offered assistance by a consultant or were given an opportunity to request it. Since help in this context represented the other's superior expertise, the help request thus constituted an open admission of the participant's inferior status *vis à vis* the consultant which in turn adversely affected participant's feeling of competence and self-esteem. In contrast, a request for help in the present study did not represent superior knowledge or expertise of the other but rather consisted of a material resource (i.e., a book) which the other had in his possession by chance. Thus, in a context in which the receipt of help does not involve the recipient's self-esteem, requesting help may produce more favorable evaluations of the help-giver than help that is either offered or imposed.

An explanation for the finding that requested help tended to generate more positive feelings than offered or imposed help derives from self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). According to this theory "Individuals come to 'know' their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs" (Bem, 1972, p. 2). In terms of the present study, participants' beliefs about their need for the book may have been an important mediator of their reaction to other's attempt to render help.

Participants in the present study, taking the role of the student, may have utilized information about the locus of help initiation to infer how badly they needed help. Those who requested help could have attributed the strongest need to themselves, their reasoning being, "If I asked for it, I must have needed it". This resulted in their feeling the greatest attraction and obligation towards the other when the other attempted to help them. In contrast, participants in the imposed help condition could have concluded that they needed little if any help since

they had told the other student that they did not have need for the book. Accordingly, participants in the offered help condition should have perceived that their need for help was intermediate to that inferred by participants in the requested and imposed help conditions.

Indirect support for this explanation is provided by answers to the question: "How helpful to you was the other student?" As indicated previously, both of the main effects as well as the interaction were significant. Comparisons between individual cells revealed that among participants receiving unsuccessful help, those in the requested condition rated the other as more helpful than those in either the offered condition or the imposed condition. Since in the unsuccessful help condition no tangible assistance was received, it is reasonable to assume that participants were evaluating the helpfulness of the other's gesture or intentions rather than how helpful the other had actually been. Participants in the requested help condition may have inferred from the behavior that they were in great need of help. They therefore perceived the attempt to assist them as constituting a more helpful gesture. In contrast, for participants who received successful help, there were no significant differences between the requested, offered, and imposed conditions. This is readily understood when one considers the unambiguous information they received concerning the helpfulness of the other. They were informed that "After checking through the book, you find that it contains a lot of useful material. You estimate that by having used the book you have saved about five hours of work." Given the unambiguous nature of this information, these participants did not have to rely on behavioral cues concerning the locus of help initiation in order to infer how helpful the other had been.

The results of this investigation, in conjunction with earlier findings, lend plausibility to the following interpretation concerning the relationship between locus of help initiation and obligation to help other. The obligation to reciprocate another's help attempt is weakest when the locus of help initiation is external to the donor, such as when the help results from the donor's role obligation (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966) or chance (Greenberg & Frisch, 1972). The obligation to reciprocate is stronger when the locus of help initiation resides in the donor (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966; Greenberg & Frisch, 1972) and, as the present study shows, it is strongest when the locus of help initiation resides within the recipient.

The present study also yielded data which indicate that the type of outcome of the attempt to help is a critical determinant of the recipient's subsequent reactions. Help that was successfully rendered and which involved minimal cost to the donor generated greater liking, obligation to help, and willingness to spend time helping other than unsuccessfully rendered help which involved considerable costs to other. These data support the findings of Greenberg et al. (1971) that rewards received from other are a more important determinant of the recipient's willingness to give help than costs incurred by other. The marginally significant interaction effect obtained on the willingness to help variable further suggests that successfully rendered help yields a greater willingness to help other only when the locus of help initiation is

external to the recipient (i.e., offered or imposed) and that when the help attempt is self-initiated (i.e., requested), type of outcome has no appreciable effect on willingness to help other.

One interpretation of this interaction can be made in terms of the concept of "guilt". As argued by Freedman et al. (1967), and Carlsmith and Gross (1969), participants who transgress are likely to feel guilty and therefore be more likely to comply with a subsequent request for a favor. Accordingly, participants in the requested-unsuccessful help condition, feeling somewhat responsible for other's costs, may have felt more guilt than participants in either of the other unsuccessful help conditions. Consequently, they showed a strong inclination to help other, whereas in the unsuccessful conditions where help was either offered or imposed, participants felt minimally responsible for other's costs (i.e., experienced minimal guilt) and therefore complied less.

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