



Dispositional differences in seeking autonomy- or dependency-oriented help: Conceptual development and scale validation



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents integrated sets of studies testing whether stable personal tendencies in help-seeking behavior: autonomy-oriented (asking for help to learn how to fix a problem) versus dependency-oriented (asking someone else to fix it) could be established and reliably assessed. We report on the reliability and validation of a new self-report, Likert-scaled measurement of autonomous and dependent help-seeking styles. The five studies in three different cultural populations include exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, cross-cultural comparisons, analysis of ecological and predictive validity in both academic and job settings, and an examination of the questionnaire's convergent validity (total $n = 1047$). Self-reported preference for autonomy-oriented help predicted higher ratings of performance by supervisors in job settings. Dependency-oriented help seeking was found to be associated with an avoidance temperament and a performance avoidance goal orientation, and autonomy-oriented help seeking with an approach temperament and a mastery approach goal orientation. Suggestions for further theoretical research and practical applications of the new scale are discussed.

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One of the core benefits of being a social animal is the ability to receive help from the social world around you. People consistently differ in how they request help: some look for complete solutions and answers from an expert (dependency-oriented help seeking); others look for information or advice that will lead them to their own solution (autonomy-oriented help seeking); and still others prefer to not seek any assistance and cope on their own. Despite the vast amount of research on helping (for a recent review, see, Schroeder & Graziano, 2015), relatively little is known about personality characteristics associated with the type of help preferred in a different life settings. The aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of these stable preferences and propose a reliable scale for assessing them. We will show that, contrary to the popular counsel, “teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”, some people may prefer receiving the proverbial fish expertly cleaned and cooked whenever they are hungry.

Since Darley and Latané's (1968) pioneering work, much research has addressed *why* and *when* people help others. Most has focused on the helper, examining evolutionary, motivational, situational, personal, and interpersonal factors that predict whether a potential helper would assist a person in need (e.g., Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Keltner, Kogan, Piff, & Saturn, 2014; Nadler, 2012).

Another influential line of research has concentrated on help seeking, attempting to identify personal and situational variables that predict when people will turn to others and when they will rely on themselves in educational settings (e.g., Butler, 1998, 2006). Nadler (2012) extended these perspectives and discussed *helping relations*, examining psychological processes that lead to a help exchange (e.g., willingness to seek help; Nadler, 1997), as well as post-help consequences for both the help giver (e.g., well-being; Brown, Hoyer, & Nicholson, 2012) and the recipient (e.g., dependence; Nadler, 2015).

Receiving help is a mixed blessing (Alvarez & van Leeuwen, 2011; Nadler & Fisher, 1986). Help can be experienced by its recipient as an expression of meaningful belongingness shared with the helper, eliciting positive self-perceptions and gratitude. However, it often leads to an aversive state of inefficacy where the recipient is dependent on the more resourceful helper (Nadler, 2015). Much of the research on the negative consequences of receiving help has been conducted within the framework of the threat-to-self-esteem model, which addresses short- and long-term consequences of receiving help (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Shell & Eisenberg, 1992). This model posits that the characteristics of the helper, the recipient and the help jointly determine whether a particular helping interaction will be self-supporting or self-threatening for the helpee. Thus for example, when the helper is a similar other, the recipient has high self-esteem, and the task is ego-central (e.g., reflecting on intelligence),

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self-threat perception is likely and motivates people to refrain from seeking needed help as well as respond negatively to its receipt (Nadler, 2015; Nadler & Fisher, 1986).

Just as most research on help giving has focused on the dichotomous distinction between giving versus not giving help, research on help seeking has tended to ignore the possibility of several kinds of help that people may seek. Yet, when in need of help people may seek either an expert solution or tools to solve the problem on their own. (Obviously, a third possibility would be avoiding any assistance altogether and we included this “avoidance of help” option in all our studies). These two help-seeking styles have been labeled dependency- and autonomy-oriented, respectively, and hold significantly different implications for the helping interaction (Nadler, 1997). Dependency-oriented help seeking meets the recipient’s immediate needs, but does little to contribute to his future independence in solving this problem in hand. Conversely, autonomy-oriented help seeking means investing more efforts to solve the problem at hand, but in return equips the recipient with tools to solve similar problems in the future.

To test helping relations, most studies have used a behavioral or situational assessment of the distinction between dependency- and autonomy-oriented help seeking (e.g., Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014; Nadler, Halabi, & Harpaz-Gorodeisky, 2009; Nadler & Halabi, 2006). In a recent study, Komissarouk and Nadler (2014) examined the possibility that more general coping mechanisms could be associated with these different help-seeking styles, and that these mechanisms could be affected by motivation and culture. Specifically, requesting help represents an outcome of negotiation between the recipients’ fundamental needs for belongingness and independence (Nadler, 2012). Individuals from different age groups or cultures, or with different motivations, may express and satisfy these basic psychological needs in different ways.

Belongingness is expressed in the expectation that people who share meaningful interdependent relations will help each other when the need arises. Hence, it is not always necessary to learn how to manage a problem alone – it is often more practical to outsource to trusted others. On the other hand, receiving a full solution to a problem might conflict with one’s self-perception of being independent and only temporarily in need. The tension between the desire to be part of a social cooperative circle and the desire to be self-reliant manifests itself in different self-construal and motivational orientations.

Komissarouk and Nadler (2014) argue that two different self-construals – interdependent and independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) – lead to two different means of motivational regulation – prevention vs. promotion foci (Higgins, 1997) – and that these in turn determine the kind of help requested. The interdependent self is concerned with harmony and stability, and is motivated to prevent negative consequences (i.e., failure, threats to the status quo), which leads to readiness to be fully reliant on others, expressed in stable personal preference for dependency-oriented help. On the other hand, the independent self is motivated to promote self-mastery, which results in a stable personal preference for autonomy-oriented assistance.

Is the type of assistance that a person usually seeks a *dispositional tendency* across time and situations? Komissarouk and Nadler (2014) research suggests so by viewing people’s receptivity to different kinds of help as anchored in relatively enduring self-construals and motivations; additionally, past research in the specific context of teacher-pupil interaction seems to have made this assumption too (Butler, 1998, 2006). However up until now, at least to our knowledge, there is no published research that fully assesses the dispositional nature of the preference for autonomy or dependency in help-seeking. We aimed to fill this gap by collaborating to develop, refine, and validate a scale for determining personal help-seeking preferences.

The present investigation consists of five separate studies that assess the reliability and validity of a new self-report scale measuring preferences for help. Because we are exploring help-seeking behavior, an avoidance of help option has been included in all of our studies, but

our main theoretical interest and predictions are focused on autonomy- and dependency-oriented strategies. The first study reports the results of an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of previous scale’s items used in the past to examine these behavioral patterns (Geller & Bamberger, 2012; Komissarouk & Nadler, 2014). In Study 2, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) further validates the factor structure of the new scale using three different cultural samples. Study 3 examines the fit between self-reported and actual help-seeking patterns, thereby establishing the ecological validity of our measure. Next, Study 4 assesses scale’s predictive validity by comparing employees’ self-reports of help-seeking preferences to their performance evaluations. The fifth and last study addresses the scale’s convergent validity, exploring whether help-seeking styles are correlated with approach and avoidance temperaments (Elliot & Thrash, 2010) as well as achievement goals (Elliot & Murayama, 2008).

With regard to the theoretical justification for our choice of the concepts to obtain scale’s convergent validity in the fifth study, we based our reasoning on Komissarouk and Nadler (2014) findings about cultural and motivational roots of help seeking. They argue that self-view and self-regulation predict the way individuals deal with difficulties and seek help, revealing the association of prevention and promotion focus with dependent and autonomous help, respectively. We propose that these preferences may be seen in terms of approach-avoidance motivations. Thus, the dependency style may reflect avoidance of risk and failure by relying on experts, whereas the autonomy style may reflect approach to new ways and solutions. We predict that individuals with dependency-oriented help-seeking style will have avoidant temperaments, whereas individuals with autonomy-oriented help-seeking style will have approach temperaments, as assessed by the self-report scale developed by Elliot and Thrash (2010).

Furthermore, we propose that the dependency- and autonomy-oriented help-seeking styles may be viewed as different strategies for achieving important goals. Since the pioneering work of Dweck (1986) and Nicholls (1984), two distinct tendencies have been recognized in achievement settings: orientation for performance or for mastery. Performance goal orientation concerns the desire to be evaluated positively by others and demonstrate one’s ability.

Performance-oriented individuals seek favorable judgments or avoid negative judgments of their competence. Mastery goal orientation is a focus on gaining understanding, insight, or skill, and individuals with this orientation seek to increase their competence, master new skills, and avoid incompetence (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). We predict that the dependency-oriented help seeking is associated with performance-avoidance goals, whereas autonomy-oriented help seeking is associated with mastery-approach goals.

1. Study 1: Construction of the questionnaire

We constructed a new questionnaire by selecting items from a working version of Harpaz-Gorodeisky and Nadler (2008) used in previous researches to measure help-seeking preferences (Geller & Bamberger, 2012; Komissarouk & Nadler, 2014) and submitted them to an EFA.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

A total of 200 Israeli respondents (48 men, aged 16–70, $M = 27.50$, $SD = 10.77$) volunteered to complete an online survey in Hebrew.

1.1.2. Materials and procedure

We relied on a help-seeking questionnaire originally developed by Harpaz-Gorodeisky and Nadler (2008). The first version included 48 items that referred to all three help-seeking styles. Expert judges (social psychologists) suggested we omit nine items. The resulting 39-item questionnaire was administered to 163 high school students. A factor

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