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"Why Didn't You Just Ask?" Underestimating the Discomfort of Help-Seeking

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Abstract

Across four studies we demonstrate that people in a position to provide help tend to underestimate the role that embarrassment plays in decisions about whether or not to ask for help. As a result, potential helpers may overestimate the likelihood that people will ask for help (Studies 1 and 2). Further, helpers may be less inclined to allocate resources to underutilized support programs than help-seekers because they are less likely to attribute low levels of use to help-seekers' concerns with embarrassment (Study 3). Finally, helpers may misjudge the most effective means of encouraging help-seeking behavior - emphasizing the practical benefits of asking for help, rather than attempting to assuage help-seekers' feelings of discomfort (Study 4).

Keywords

help-seeking, prosocial behavior, egocentrism, perspective-taking, altruism

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Across four studies we demonstrate that people in a position to provide help tend to underestimate the role that embarrassment plays in decisions about whether or not to ask for help. As a result, potential helpers may overestimate the likelihood that people will ask for help (Studies 1 and 2). Further, helpers may be less inclined to allocate resources to underutilized support programs than help-seekers because they are less likely to attribute low levels of use to help-seekers' concerns with embarrassment (Study 3). Finally, helpers may misjudge the most effective means of encouraging help-seeking behavior - emphasizing the practical benefits of asking for help, rather than attempting to assuage help-seekers' feelings of discomfort (Study 4).

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Introduction

Asking for help can be awkward and uncomfortable. Even a minor request can invite rejection, expose inadequacies, and make a help-seeker feel shy, embarrassed, and self-conscious. These psychological barriers to help-seeking are well understood by people who need help. But, what about people who can provide help? Are they equally aware of the discomfort that often discourages help-seeking? Such awareness would be useful to individuals in a position to provide assistance (e.g., social workers, instructors, counselors) because they must often make decisions regarding funding for support programs and the framing of outreach messages to encourage program utilization. Their insight on help-seekers' face-saving concerns could play a large role in determining whether much needed help is ever provided.

Given that most people have ample experience asking for help, one might assume that helpers can easily empathize with the concerns of others in need. However, research on egocentrism and perspective-taking has demonstrated that, in fact, individuals have difficulty seeing beyond their immediate circumstances and tend to overuse information gathered from their own perspective when making judgments about what someone else might think or do (Caruso, Epley, & Bazerman, 2006; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Such egocentrism occurs even in highly familiar contexts. For example, Kruger, Epley, Parker, and Ng (2005) found that people had difficulty predicting how others would interpret their email communications, even though the participants in their studies had abundant experience both sending and receiving email.

Perspective-taking typically involves anchoring on one's own perspective and adjusting as needed (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). But insufficient adjustments often lead to mistakes in judgment. These ''empathy gaps'' are particularly pronounced in situations involving ''hot'' emotions like embarrassment. According to Van Boven, Loewenstein, and Dunning (2005), this is because people asked to judge another person's behavior in a highly emotional situation must make not one, but two adjustments: one adjustment from ''self in non-emotional state'' to ''self in emotional state,'' and another from ''self'' to ''other.'' Given that people are particularly unlikely to appreciate the extent to which *both* the self (Van Boven et al., 2005) and others (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001) are motivated by a desire to ''save face,'' situations involving embarrassment should be especially prone to perspective-taking errors.

Embarrassment concerns are particularly relevant to helping contexts in which help-seekers, by simply asking for help, risk exposing their vulnerabilities (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Goffman, 1955; Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Ryan & Solky, 1996). Such concerns often lead individuals to resist imposing on others for valuable forms of assistance. For example, in one study of middle-school peer support systems, 87% of bullied students who used the system (spoke with a peer supporter) reported that the experience had been useful. Nevertheless, only a small portion of bullied students (7-9%) actually chose to take advantage of the support offered (Cowie, Naylor, Chauhan, & Smith, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999). According to the researchers, children with access to peer support often refused to request assistance because of their ''fear of derision or contempt from others'' (Cowie et al., 2002, p. 456).

For these reasons, not only are errors in social judgment particularly likely to occur in helping situations, but such errors

may have important consequences. Without a sufficient appreciation of help-seekers' concerns with embarrassment, potential helpers may passively sit back waiting for those in need to ask for help, engage in misguided attempts to encourage help-seeking without directly addressing help-seekers' discomfort, or mistakenly attribute underutilization of available help to a lack of need rather than a lack of confidence. In each case, a likely outcome is that critical support is never provided. Instead, although most helpers may have considerable experience as a help-seeker, egocentrism may cause them to inadequately attend to the embarrassment concerns that are so salient to someone in need.

In our first two studies, we gathered initial evidence for this bias and explored its potential origins. In Study 1, we enlisted two field samples of potential helpers to assess whether they would overestimate incidences of help requests. In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated participants' perspectives as ''helper,'' ''help-seeker,'' and ''neutral observer'' and asked them to predict both the likelihood that someone would ask for help and the discomfort someone would feel asking for help. In our last two studies, we explored some potential consequences of this bias. In Study 3, we predicted that helpers would be less likely to invest resources in an infrequently used social support program than help-seekers because helpers would be less likely to attribute the program's underutilization to help-seekers' concerns with embarrassment. Finally, in Study 4, we focused on the framing of messages intended to promote help-seeking behavior. Specifically, we considered whether appeals that emphasized the practical value of help would be more strongly endorsed by ''helpers,'' while appeals that addressed the discomfort of asking for help would be more strongly endorsed by ''help-seekers.''

Study 1

In an initial field study, we examined whether potential helpers would overestimate help-seeking by surveying two groups of individuals who were in a position to provide help to others - members of a peer advisor program and teaching assistants. We asked participants to predict how many students would approach them for help over the course of a semester. At the end of the semester, participants were asked to report the number of individuals who asked for help, and we compared these reports to their initial predictions.

Method

Participants

Our participants consisted of 35 Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students who volunteered to join a Peer Advisor Program and 91 undergraduate teaching assistants. Participants were entered in a raffle to receive a free iPod.

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, participants were asked, ''How many students (of those in your assigned cluster/course) do you think will approach you for help before the end of the semester?'' Peer advisors (but not TA's) then kept a weekly log chronicling the number of students who sought their help. A follow-up questionnaire was sent to both

samples at the end of the semester asking participants to report the actual number of students who approached them for help during the semester. The percentage of participants who completed the follow-up survey was 86.5% (88.6% peer advisors; 85.7% TA's).

Results

We were interested in whether people in a position to provide help would overestimate the likelihood that others (their students) would ask for help. To address this question, we conducted two paired *t*-tests comparing our participants' predictions to the actual number of students who requested their help. Peer advisors predicted that 12.6(SD = 8.5) of their advisees would approach them, but were approached by only 7.6(SD = 6.2) students on average, t(30) = 3.57, *p* = .001, *d* = .69. The teaching assistants predicted that an average of 17.8(SD = 15.0) students would approach them, but were approached by only 14.7(SD = 13.2) students on average, t(71) = 2.13, *p* = .04, *d* = .31.

Discussion

These results provide evidence from two real-world samples that people in a position to provide help, such as peer advisors or teaching assistants, overestimate the likelihood that others will ask them for help. Due to the non-experimental nature of this study, it is difficult to rule out several alternative explanations, including selection bias, status differences, and memory artifacts. In Study 2, we use random assignment in a hypothetical scenario paradigm to eliminate the possibility of selection and recall bias, measure sense of power to cast doubt on an explanation based on status differences, and begin to test more directly whether this effect is the result of helpers' underestimation of the level of discomfort experienced by help-seekers. In addition, we test whether this bias is specific to individuals in the role of "helper" or whether a similar bias would be exhibited by neutral third parties.

Study 2

In our second study, we manipulated the roles of "helper" and "help-seeker" and had participants in each role respond to a series of hypothetical helping scenarios. Although we are primarily concerned with the biased perceptions of helpers (because helpers play an active role in a helping situation), the egocentric bias we have proposed could potentially apply to any outside observer. Therefore we also included a neutral observer condition to test whether our effect was limited to a direct comparison with the "helper" role.

We measured participants' ratings of (1) the likelihood that someone would ask for help, and (2) how uncomfortable someone would feel asking for help. We also included measures designed to rule out some alternative explanations. First, because power has been associated with egocentrism (Gruenfeld), differences in power between the roles of "helper" and "help-seeker" may explain this bias; thus, we included a measure of sense of power. Second, individuals in a "helper" role may view their help to be more valuable, leading them to predict increased rates of help-seeking. To rule out this possibility, we included measures of the usefulness and practicality of help. Finally, because help-seekers are confronted with the actual task of asking for help, they may simply be more attuned to the effort involved in asking for help. Therefore,

we included a measure of effort.

Our primary prediction was that participants assigned to the roles of both ''helper'' and ''neutral observer'' would rate someone as more likely to ask for help than those assigned to the role of "help-seeker," and that these effects would be mediated by ratings of perceived discomfort in asking for help.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and thirty two participants completed the study online for entry into a lottery drawing to win one of several $25 Amazon gift certificates.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to role: ''helper,'' ''help- seeker,'' or ''neutral observer.'' Participants in the helper and help-seeker roles were asked to recall a time that someone either asked them for help or they asked someone else for help and to write a few sentences about what that experience was like. Participants in the neutral observer condition were given no essay prompt. Participants were then presented with a series of four different helping scenarios (from Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008) written from the perspective of the person in need, the potential helper, or a neutral observer. The scenarios involved a wide range of helping contexts (see Appendix A for complete scenarios).

After reading each scenario, participants were asked to indicate the *likelihood* that an individual would ask for help and how *comfortable* (reverse-scored), *awkward,* and *embarrassed* (α = .72) someone would feel asking for help in the situation described. In addition, we included eight questions about the individual's *sense of power,* which were adapted from Anderson and Galinsky's (2006) general sense of power scale to be situation-specific (e.g., ''In this situation, I think I would have a great deal of power''). Participants in the ''neutral observer'' condition did not have an active role in the scenarios (they were asked to imagine they were simply observing each situation), so these power items were not included in this condition. We also asked participants to indicate how much *effort* it would take for someone to ask for help, and how *useful* and *practical* (α = .88) asking for help would be in each case. Participants responded to these questions on a scale ranging from 1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Extremely".

Results

We predicted that participants assigned to the ''helper'' and ''neutral observer'' roles would rate help-seekers as more likely to ask for help than participants assigned to the ''help-seeker'' role, and that both of these effects would be mediated by participants' ratings of how awkward and uncomfortable it is to ask for help. Our predictions were confirmed. A mixed-model ANOVA revealed no interaction of condition with scenario, $F(3, 224) < 1$, indicating that the pattern of results was similar across the four helping scenarios (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations); therefore, our results are reported collapsed across scenario. There was an overall main effect of perspective condition on likelihood of asking for help, $F(2, 229) = 9.81$, $p < .001$. As predicted, participants in the ''helper'' condition (M =4.02, SD=.77) rated help-

seekers as more likely to ask for help than did participants in the ''help-seeker'' condition (M = 3.44, SD = .69), F(1, 138) = 21.74, p < .001, d = .79. Participants in the ''neutral observer'' condition (M = 3.74, SD = .83) also rated help-seekers as more likely to ask for help than did participants in the ''help-seeker'' condition, F(1, 154) = 5.87, p = .02, d = .40. Further, participants in the ''helper'' condition rated help- seekers as more likely to ask for help than did participants in the ''neutral observer'' condition, F(1, 166) = 4.90, p = .03, d = .34.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for "likely to ask" variable and discomfort index by scenario and perspective condition in Study 2.

Scenario and condition	Likely to ask		Discomfort index	
	M	SD	M	SD
Cell phone				
Helper	3.67	1.36	4.13	1.05
Neutral observer	3.33	1.22	4.25	1.11
Help-seeker	3.29	1.22	4.35	.97
Car				
Helper	4.13	1.39	3.95	1.07
Neutral observer	3.90	1.32	4.02	1.04
Help-seeker	3.49	1.31	4.35	1.16
Final paper				
Helper	4.47	1.18	3.05	1.21
Neutral observer	4.24	1.24	3.00	1.05
Help-seeker	3.85	1.42	3.40	1.17
Train seat				
Helper	3.80	1.43	3.94	1.22
Neutral observer	3.50	1.37	4.17	1.13
Help-seeker	3.14	1.38	4.44	1.11
All scenarios				
Helper	4.02	.77	3.77	.70
Neutral observer	3.74	.83	3.86	.72
Help-seeker	3.44	.69	4.14	.59

N = 232.

We also found our predicted effect on the discomfort index, beginning with an overall effect of perspective on discomfort when comparing all three conditions, F(2, 224) = 5.50, p = .005. ''Help- seekers'' (M = 4.14, SD = .59) reported that it was more awkward and uncomfortable to ask for help than did both ''helpers'' (M = 3.77, SD = .70), F(1,134) = 11.19, p = .001, d = .58, and ''neutral observers'' (M =3.86, SD = .72), F(1, 154) = 5.87, p = .01, d = .43. There was no difference between ''helpers'' and ''neutral observers'' on the discomfort index, F(1, 163) < 1.

We looked at perspective differences on our alternative variables. We found no significant differences between ''helpers'' and ''help-seekers'' in *sense of power* (''neutral observers'' did not receive power items), F(1,124) = 1.71, p > .19, but we did find differences on *effort* of asking for help, F(2, 224) = 3.08, p = .05. Specifically, ''help-seekers'' (M = 3.33, SD = .76) reported greater effort than did ''helpers'' (M = 3.06, SD = .73),F(1, 135) = 4.6, p = .03, d = .37, and ''neutral observers'' (M = 3.03, SD = .83), F(1, 150) = 5.11, p = .03, d = .38 (''helpers'' and ''neutral observers'' did not differ significantly, F(1,163) < .05). We found a marginally significant difference on our *usefulness* index, F(2, 219) = 2.69, p = .07. ''Helpers'' (M = 4.01, SD = .59) rated their help as more useful than did ''neutral observers'' (M = 3.81, SD = .73), F(1,59) = 3.7, p = .056, d = .31, and ''help-seekers'' (M = 3.80, SD = .49), F(1, 132) = 4.97, p = .03, d = .39 (there were no differences

between ''neutral observers" and ''help-seekers", $F(1, 147) < .01$). In the mediation analyses described below, we explore whether perceptions of *effort* and *usefulness* can explain our effects.

Mediation

We predicted that differences between the roles of ''help- seeker" and both ''helper" and ''neutral observer" on estimates of help-seeking would be mediated by perceived discomfort. To test these predictions, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommended procedures to assess mediation of both contrasts (''help- seekers" vs. ''helpers," and ''help-seekers" vs. ''neutral observers").

The above analyses demonstrated the effects of role on the outcome (likelihood of asking for help) and the proposed mediator (discomfort index) in each case. For the contrast between "help- seekers" and ''helpers," we simultaneously regressed likelihood of asking for help on role and the discomfort index. Discomfort remained highly significant, $ß = -.60$, $t(133) = -5.37$, $p < .001$, while the strength of role decreased (although it remained highly significant, suggesting partial mediation), $ß = .40$, $t(133) = 3.33$, $p = .001$. A Sobel (1982) test confirmed that the inclusion of the discomfort variable significantly reduced the direct effect of perspective (help- seeker vs. helper) on the likelihood that someone would ask for help, $z = 2.83$, $p = .005$. We conducted the same procedure for the ''help-seeker" vs. "neutral observer" contrast and again found that discomfort remained significant, $ß = -.60$, $t(150) = -5.57$, $p < .001$; this time the effect of role decreased to non-significance, $ß = .08$, $t(150)=1.26$, $p = .21$. Another Sobel test confirmed mediation of the effect of role (''help-seeker" vs. ''neutral observer") on likelihood of asking for help by the discomfort index, $z = 2.52$, $p = .01$.

Because we found significant differences of role on our effort and usefulness variables, we explored whether these variables could be driving our effects. For a variable to be a mediator, it must predict the primary dependent variable. While *effort* was not associated with likelihood of asking for help in either case of interest ($ß = .008$, $t(135) < .5$, $p = .91$ for the ''help-seeker" and ''helper" conditions; $ß = .10$, $t(150) = 1.29$, $p = .20$ for ''help-seeker" and ''neutral observer"), *usefulness* was significantly associated with estimated help-seeking in both cases ($ß = .39$, $t(132) = 3.31$, $p = .001$ for the ''help-seeker" and ''helper" conditions; $ß = .40$, $t(159) = 4.33$, $p < .001$ for ''help-seeker" and ''neutral observer"). However, when we simultaneously regressed likelihood of asking for help on role (''help-seeker" and ''helper") and the usefulness index, *role* remained highly significant, $ß = .56$, $t(131) = 4.48$, $p <.001$, while the strength of *usefulness* decreased, $ß = .30$, $t(131) = -2.62$, *p* $= .01$, a pattern suggesting suppression rather than mediation. Interestingly, usefulness appeared to weakly mediate the contrast between the ''helper" and ''neutral observer" conditions, remaining a strong predictor in the equation, $ß = .37$, $t(158) = 4.04$, $p < .001$, as the effect of role decreased to marginal significance, $ß = -.18$, $t(158) = 1.77$, $p = .08$. A Sobel test was marginally significant, $z = 1.73$, $p = .08$.

Discussion

Participants who adopted the perspective of either ''helper" or ''neutral observer" thought it was more likely that someone in need would ask for help than those who adopted the perspective of ''help-seeker." These effects were mediated or partially mediated by ratings of perceived discomfort in asking for help. Further, the effects were not explained by any of our alternative variables (power, effort, usefulness).

Because helpers clearly play a more active role in helping situations than neutral observers, our next two studies return our focus to differences between helpers and help-seekers (Study 2 suggests that neutral observers would likely look similar to helpers.) In particular, we explore the consequences this bias might have for the funding of helping programs and the framing of outreach messages.

Study 3

In Study 3, we explored whether helpers' tendencies to overlook help-seekers' embarrassment concerns might affect decisions regarding the allocation of resources to a failing (i.e., underutilized) support program. We presented participants with two programs: one that was frequently used, and one that was used infrequently. We hypothesized that because individuals in the role of "helper" would be less likely to attribute the failure of the infrequently used program to help-seekers' concerns with embarrassment (presumably attributing its failure instead to a lack of need or usefulness), they would demonstrate relatively stronger support for allocating resources to the successful (frequently used) program over the failing (infrequently used) program than would help-seekers.

Participants

One hundred and forty eight participants completed the study online to win $25 Amazon.com gift certificates.

Procedure

Using a manipulation similar to that used in Study 2, participants were asked to adopt one of two perspectives - in this case, student ("Please take some time to imagine yourself as a student struggling with schoolwork and/or personal issues. You decide to ask a peer volunteer for help..."), or peer helper ("Please take some time to imagine yourself as a volunteer in a peer program. Your role is to advise other students on schoolwork and/or personal issues...") - and to write a paragraph about what their experience in that role might be like. Following this perspective induction, all participants read the following: "Imagine that as part of the Obama administration stimulus package, a certain amount of money has been allocated to peer programs in public schools. To decide where to best invest these funds, one school has conducted a review of the two types of peer programs currently offered to their students. The results of the school's review are as follows: Students use Peer Program A very *infrequently.* Students use Peer Program B very *frequently."*

Participants were then asked to respond on a 7-point scale to a series of six questions regarding the extent to which they thought the resources should be invested in the *frequently* used program (3- item index, α = .84), and the extent to which the resources should be invested in the *infrequently* used program (3-item index, α = .80) (see Table 2 for specific items). To determine whether any differences in participants' decisions about where to invest resources were due to the attributions participants were making regarding *why* each program was successful or unsuccessful in soliciting students, participants were also asked to indicate how *awkward, embarrassed,* and *self-conscious* they thought students felt using each program (α = .84 infrequently used program; α = .89 frequently used program).

Results

We predicted that participants in the role of ''peer helper" would be more inclined to invest resources in the successful program over the unsuccessful program than would participants in the role of "student."

Table 2
Specific items from resource investment indices in Study 3.

Program	Index items
Infrequently used program ($\alpha = .80$)	1. The resources would be best spent on *[the infrequently used program]*. 2. In general, more resources should be spent on *[the infrequently used program]*. 3. The school should invest resources into fixing *[the infrequently used program]*.
Frequently used program ($\alpha = .84$)	1. The resources would be best spent on *[the frequently used program]*. 2. In general, more resources should be spent on *[the frequently used program]*. 3. The school should invest more resources into *[the frequently used program]* because it is more widely used.

Our predictions were confirmed. As expected, there was a strong overall tendency for participants in both roles to invest more in the successful program ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.17$) than the unsuccessful program ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 144) = 150.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.44$. However, this main effect was qualified by an interaction, $F(1, 144) = 4.05$, $p = .05$. Specifically, participants in the ''student" role ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.31$) more strongly supported investing resources in the infrequently used program than did participants in the ''peer helper" role ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1,146) = 2.70$, $p = .10$, $d = .27$; conversely, participants in the ''peer helper" role ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.01$) more strongly supported investing resources in the frequently used program than did participants in the ''student" role ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.29$), $F(1, 144) = 4.42$, $p = .04$, $d = .35$.

Mediation

This interaction was mediated by perceived discomfort. Participants in the role of ''student" ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.20$) believed that students felt more discomfort participating in the infrequently used program than did participants in the role of ''peer helper" ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.22$), $F(1, 144) = 8.05$, $p = .005$, $d = .47$. There were no differences by role in how uncomfortable participants thought students would feel using the successful program. To determine participants' relative preferences for each program, we calculated a difference score of participants' willingness to invest in the infrequently used program minus their willingness to invest in the frequently used program. To test for mediation, we regressed this difference score on role and our embarrassment index for the infrequently used program. As indicated in Fig. 1, embarrassment remained a highly significant predictor, $\beta = -.47$, $t(144) = 3.31$, $p < .001$, while the role variable decreased to non-significance, $\beta = -.43$, $t(144) = -1.21$, $p = .23$. Mediation effects were confirmed by a Sobel test, $z = 2.15$, $p = .03$.

In sum, helpers were less likely than help-seekers to attribute underutilization of a support program to help-seekers' discomfort with asking for help. As a result, participants in the role of ''helper" demonstrated a greater discrepancy in allocating more funds to the highly utilized program.

Study 4

In Study 4, we investigated an additional consequence of the tendency of helpers to underestimate the embarrassment concerns of help-seekers. Namely, we examined the effect of this bias on messaging strategies intended to encourage help-seeking. In this study, one message emphasized the *practical benefits* of asking for help and the other addressed the *discomfort* involved in asking for help. We predicted that ''mentors'' would be more likely to endorse the message emphasizing practical benefits, while ''new hires'' would be more likely to endorse the message addressing potential discomfort.

Participants

One hundred and thirty one undergraduate participants completed the study as part of a questionnaire battery.

Procedure

Once again, participants were instructed to adopt the perspective of either a new hire in an organization (a help-seeker) or a mentor in charge of orienting new hires (a potential helper). Participants then read a memo purportedly written by a senior manager (a mentor) that was intended to encourage new hires to participate in the organization's mentoring program. The memo addressed either the discomfort associated with seeking help from a mentor (i.e., ''Receiving mentorship can feel a bit awkward when you are trying to get off to a good start. I hope that you will come to me for any guidance you might need without being concerned about appearing foolish or incompetent.''), or the practical benefits (i.e., ''Mentorship can be an invaluable resource when you are trying to get off to a good start. I hope that you will come to me for any guidance that you might need so that you can be productive and successful in your new role.''). Thus, the study was a 2 (Role: New Hire, Mentor) x 2(Message Framing: Comfortable, Practical) between-subjects design.

After reading the memo, participants were asked to estimate how inclined an employee would be to seek help from a mentor using a scale ranging from 1 = ''Not at all'' to 7 = ''Extremely''. They were also asked how embarrassed, awkward, and self-conscious an employee would feel seeking help from a mentor using the same scale (α = .74).

Results

Perspective x *message framing*

We hypothesized that participants in the ''new hire'' perspective condition would rate the ''comfortable'' message as more effective (i.e., associated with greater help-seeking) than the ''practical'' message. In contrast, because participants in the ''mentor'' condition would not appreciate new hires' concerns with discomfort, they would see no difference between these two messages. A 2(perspective)x2(message framing) ANOVA revealed an interaction of role
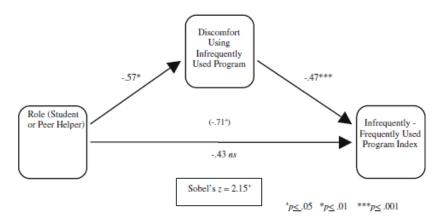
Fig. 1. Perceptions of discomfort with using the infrequently used program mediates the effect of role on funding allocation (difference score of infrequently-frequently used program) in Study 3.
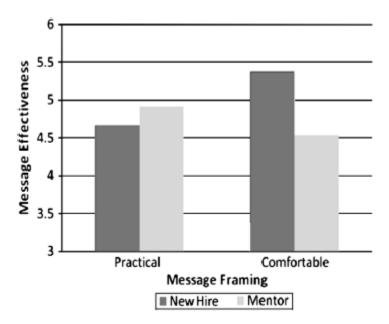

Fig. 2. Effect of perspective (new hire/mentor) × message framing (practical/ comfortable) interaction on "likelihood of asking for help" predictions in Study 4.

with message framing on ratings of how likely an employee would be to ask for help, $F(1, 127) = 5.94$, $p = .02$. As predicted, participants who adopted the perspective of a new hire found the "comfortable" message to be more effective (M =5.37, SD = 1.01) than the "practical" message (M = 4.67, SD = 1.45),$F(1,63) = 5.20$, $p = .03$, $d = .24$, while the same pattern did not emerge for participants who adopted the perspective of a mentor (Practical: M = 4.91, SD = 1.08; Comfortable: M = 4.53, SD = 1.50), $F(1,64) = 1.41$, ns, $d = .13$ (see Fig. 2).

We found the same interaction of role with message framing on our discomfort index, $F(1, 127) = 7.23$, $p = .008$. This interaction indicates that participants who adopted the perspective of a new hire believed employees reading the "comfortable" message would feel more comfortable asking for help (M = 2.78, SD = 1.33) than would those who read the "practical" message (M = 3.30, SD = 1.21), $F(1,63) = 2.73$, $p = .10$, $d = .17$ whereas participants in the mentor condition believed that the "comfortable" message would actually make employees feel less comfortable (M = 3.73, SD = 1.92) asking for help than would the "practical" message (M = 2.89, SD = 1.20), $F(1,64) = 4.57$, $p = .04$, $d = .25$.

Mediation

Once again, a mediation analysis was conducted. The results (depicted in Fig. 3) revealed that ratings of discomfort mediated the interaction of role and message framing on the likelihood that an employee would ask for help. These mediation effects were further confirmed with a Sobel test, $z = 2.53$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The results of Study 4 again demonstrate that participants in the role of help-seeker are more concerned than those in the role of helper with the discomfort of asking for help. In fact, helpers may mistakenly assume help-seekers are more concerned with the practica/ benefits of receiving help rather than the embarrassment they may feel in requesting assistance. As a result, participants assigned to the role of helper preferred a less effective approach at encouraging help-seeking because they misread help-seekers' motives.

General discussion

People frequently encourage others (e.g., students, co-workers) to ''just ask" if they ever need help. Yet, those encouraged to ask for help often are reluctant to do so (as any instructor who has sat idle in office hours can attest). The current research suggests that this may be due to face-saving concerns that help-seekers confront and potential helpers overlook. In a longitudinal study of peer advisors and teaching assistants, we found that both groups overestimated the number of students who would approach them for help over the course of a semester. In a subsequent scenario study, we found that participants randomly assigned to the roles of ''helper" and ''neutral observer" thought it was more likely that someone would ask for help across a range of helping situations than did participants assigned to the role of ''help-seeker." Further, our third study suggests that when the rate of help-seeking is low, helpers may be less inclined to attribute such failures to help-seekers' discomfort and more inclined to withdraw resources from outreach efforts. And, as indicated by our fourth study, helpers' attempts to actively encourage help-seeking may fall flat because they fail to address the true barriers to asking for help (i.e., discomfort).

Considering the vast experience most individuals have had as help-seekers, it may seem surprising that this bias persists. Yet, many classic social psychology findings (e.g., Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1963), consistently bemuse students who find it difficult to appreciate how uncomfortable others may feel in social situations (cf., Sabini et al., 2001). We argue that this inability to appreciate others' aversion to embarrassment leads to errors in judging help seeking. Whereas previous research (e.g., Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008) has demonstrated that help-seekers underestimate help-giving because they fail to appreciate the role that discomfort plays in encouraging helpers to agree to help requests, the current research suggests that helpers overestimate help-seeking for a similar reason: they fail to appreciate the role of discomfort in discouraging the other party from requesting help. Together, the cumulative effect of these biases may be that there is less helping all around.
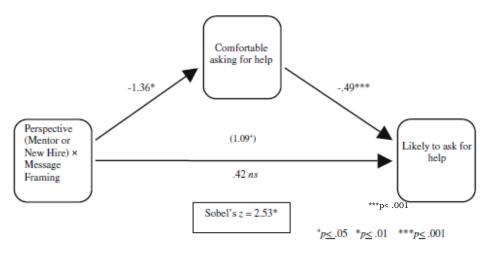
Fig. 3. Ratings of discomfort mediate the perspective × message framing interaction on "likelihood of asking for help" predictions in Study 4.

Limitations and future directions

It is worth noting some limitations of the current research and some promising directions. While we find strong support for discomfort as one mediator of our effects, it is likely that in real-world contexts there are other factors that may lead people to seek help less often than we might expect. For example, people may be discouraged from seeking help because they feel pressure to adhere to cultural norms of self-sufficiency, and such normative pressures may be easily overlooked by observers (e.g., Cialdini, 1993). We have chosen to focus on the discomfort involved in asking for help; however, this phenomenon may be multiply determined.

Another promising direction for future research is to turn our attention to the help-seeker's perspective. People often struggle to predict their *own* reactions to a different set of circumstances, such as predicting how they will feel in a "hot" emotional state as opposed to a ''cold'' non-emotional state (Van Boven et al., 2005). Such work suggests that, in addition to underestimating others' concerns with embarrassment, the participants in our studies would likely underestimate their *own* feelings of embarrassment in asking for help, particularly when thinking about their future behavior (i.e., expecting to seek help with a difficult course they plan to take *next* semester, but failing to do so when the opportunity arises).

Finally, help-seekers may often refrain from seeking help because they assume that helpers will resent such an imposition, but they may be mistaken. Research suggests that when we help someone, we tend to justify this action by convincing ourselves that the receiver is an attractive, likable, and deserving person (e.g., Jecker & Landy, 1969). Help-seekers may not recognize that requesting help can be a means of strengthening relationships, not straining them.

Practical implications

In a practical sense, the tendency for people to underestimate others' anxieties about help-seeking can bear important costs. Potential helpers may sit back passively waiting for others to approach them rather than making overtures to encourage help seeking. In addition, the messages helpers and outside observers craft to encourage help-seeking may miss the mark in addressing help-seekers' most salient concerns. And, if helpers are rarely approached, they may attribute low rates of asking to a lack of need or usefulness (''I guess they didn't need my help'') rather than feelings of discomfort.

These findings suggest that when students fail to show up to office hours, instructors may respond by decreasing their availability; and, when public support programs are underutilized, policy makers may be quick to cut funds.

Aside from documenting this problematic gap in perspective-taking, our studies simultaneously provide some potential solutions. Simply asking helpers and outside observers to temporarily adopt the perspective of a help-seeker (e.g., by imagining a time they had to ask for help) may make them more aware of the embarrassment concerns of help-seekers and thus more attuned to the kind of outreach messages that would be most appealing. Precisely because we have all likely been in the role of help-seeker many times ourselves, we should have plenty of experiences on which to draw. We may simply need a reminder to appreciate what it is like to be in the other party's shoes.

Appendix A

Cell Phone

Potential helper

Imagine the following case of a man who is stuck somewhere in a city downtown. He is running late for a doctor's appointment. He tries hailing a taxi, but he is not having much luck. He needs to call his doctor to let her know he is running late, but he does not have a phone. He looks over and sees that you are about to put your cell phone away. In order to call his doctor, the man could ask you for help – that is, he could ask to borrow your phone

Neutral observer

Imagine the following case of a man who is stuck somewhere in a city downtown. He is running late for a doctor's appointment. The man tries hailing a taxi, but he is not having much luck. He needs to call his doctor to let her know he is running late, but he does not have a phone. He looks over and sees a person who is just about to put his cell phone away. In order to call his doctor, the man could ask the person for help – that is, he could ask to borrow his phone

Help-seeker

Imagine the following case of being stuck somewhere in a city downtown. You are running late for a doctor's appointment. You try hailing a taxi, but you are not having much luck. You need to call your doctor to let her know you are running late, but you do not have a phone. You look over and see a man who is just about to put his cell phone away. In order to call your doctor, you could ask the man for help – that is, you could ask to borrow his phone

Car

Potential helper

Imagine that you are a college student. Also imagine that you are the only one of your friends with a car. It is Friday night and you have plans to go out with someone you have had a crush on for awhile. Unfortunately, the arrangements a friend of yours made to pick his grandmother up from the airport that same night just fell through. He does not have a driver's license, but he could ask you for help – that is, he could ask you to pick his grandmother up from the airport for him

Neutral observer

Imagine that you are observing two college students. Imagine that one of these students is the only one of his friends with a car. It is Friday night and the student has plans to go out with someone he is had a crush on for awhile. Unfortunately, the arrangements a friend of his made to pick her grandmother up from the airport that same night just fell through. This friend does not have a driver's license, but she could ask her friend for help – that is, she could ask her friend with the car to pick her grandmother up from the airport for her

Help-seeker	Imagine that you are a college student. A friend of yours is the only one of your friends with a car. Also imagine that it is Friday night and she has plans to go out with someone she is had a crush on for awhile. Unfortunately, the arrangements you made to pick your grandmother up from the airport that same night just fell through. You do not have a driver's license, but you could ask your friend for help – that is, you could ask her to pick your grandmother up from the airport for you

Final Paper

Potential helper	Imagine that you are a college student. It is the middle of finals and everyone is busy studying for exams. You have a final exam tomorrow that you really want to do well on, and you have been at the library all day studying. Your roommate also has a paper due the next day, and he would like someone to read over it and give him feedback. He could ask you for help – that is, he could ask you to read his paper
Neutral observer	Imagine that you are observing two college students. It is the middle of finals and everyone is busy studying for exams. One student has a final exam tomorrow that he really wants to do well on, and he is been at the library all day studying. This student's roommate also has a paper due the next day, and he would like someone to read over it and give him feedback. The second student could ask his roommate for help – that is, he could ask him to read his paper
Help-seeker	Imagine that you are a college student. It is the middle of finals and everyone is busy studying for exams. Your roommate has a final exam tomorrow that she really wants to do well on, and she is been at the library all day studying. You also have a paper due the next day, and you would like someone to read over it and give you feedback. You could ask your roommate for help – that is, you could ask her to read your paper

Train Seat

Potential helper	Imagine that a woman has just gotten on the train. She is not feeling well and she really wants to sit down. The woman scans the train in the hopes of locating a seat, but there are no seats available. In order to sit down, she could ask you for help – that is, she could ask you to give up your seat
Neutral observer	Imagine that a woman has just gotten on the train. She is not feeling well and she really wants to sit down. The woman scans the train in the hopes of locating a seat, but there are no seats available. In order to sit down, she could ask someone for help – that is, she could ask someone to give up his or her seat
Help-seeker	Imagine that you have just gotten on the train. You are not feeling well and you really want to sit down. You scan the train in the hopes of locating a seat, but there are no seats available. In order to sit down, you could ask someone for help – that is, you could ask them to give up their seat

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