The Role of Social Goals in Students' Academic Help Seeking and Giving with Peers

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Abstract

This study examined the role of social achievement goals in academic help giving among peers within a high school. Students (n = 794) filled out surveys assessing their social goals, how often they are asked for help by their peers, and the type of help they gave to peers (instrumental vs. expedient). Controls included students' grade point average, popularity, and personal help seeking preferences. Results demonstrated positive benefits of social development goals on students' reports of how often they were asked for help and type of help given to their peers and negative impacts of social demonstration-avoidance goals on help giving. The findings complement achievement goal theory and provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic help seeking.

The Role of Social Goals in Students' Academic Help Seeking and Giving with Peers

Academic help seeking (HS) is considered an adaptive self-regulated learning strategy (Butler, 1998; Karabenick, 2003; Newman, 2000; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Given the salience of peer relationships during adolescence (Berndt, 1999; Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2010), it is not surprising that students often turn to their peers for help at school when facing academic challenges or questions about their schoolwork (e.g., Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Scheib, 1986; Knapp & Karabenick, 1988). Peer HS may positively impact students' success in school in various ways. For example, a student's classmates may have just experienced similar problems in their own schoolwork and thus can provide help that is at a cognitive level appropriate for the student, peers may have more time to help the student than the teacher, and peer interaction while HS can result in modeling motivation as well as foster students' perception of peer support and feeling of belongingness in the classroom (Ryan & Shim, 2012). Despite the unique benefits that peer HS can provide, there may be several costs that inhibit students' willingness to seek help from their peers, including the requirement of social interaction, possible implication of incompetence, and feelings of indebtedness (Karabenick, 2006).

Extant research on HS largely examines help seeking rather than help giving, and little is known regarding what factors influence academic helping behaviors because research focuses extensively on help seekers rather than on the people who are turned to for help (Butler, 2006). Students may be both help seekers and help givers with their peers. Knowledge of what factors are associated with students' likelihood of providing help and type of help given to their peers in school is critical to helping teachers support a cooperative classroom and promote collaborative learning among students. Accordingly, this study provides a better understanding of help giving within the context of peer-to-peer academic help seeking and examines students' social goals as

potential predictors of the likelihood of students being asked for help by their peers. The study is guided by two questions: 1) Are students' social goals associated with how often they report being asked for academic help by their peers? and 2) When asked for help, are students' social goals associated with the type of help given (either instrumental or expedient) to their peers?

Academic Help Seeking

Academic help seeking is typically conceptualized as a process. Various models of the HS process include some combination of the following seven decisions or actions that students must make in order to successfully seek help: a) determine that a problem exists, b) determine that help is needed, c) decide to seek help, d) establish the purpose or goal of seeking help, e) decide whom to ask, f) solicit help, and g) obtain the requested help (Karabenick, 2011). When establishing the purpose of goal of seeking help, help-seeking researchers distinguish between two major types or purposes of seeking help (e.g., Karabenick, 2003). Students may prefer *expedient* help, which is asking for help to get the answer quickly or to have to do less work on their own, or *instrumental* help, which is asking for help to get an explanation of how to arrive at the answer on one's own. Instrumental help is considered more effective than expedient help for long-term learning (e.g., Karabenick & Newman, 2006; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997).

Research on personal factors that impact students' HS has largely focused on students' academic and social achievement goals as well as perceptions of benefits and costs of help seeking (e.g., Karabenick, 2003; Newman, 1990; Newman, 1998; Newman & Goldin, 1990; Roussel, Elliot, & Feltman, 2011; Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997; Ryan & Shin, 2011). For example, Karabenick (2003) found that students who have high levels of instrumental HS also tend to have higher self-efficacy, task value, intrinsic interest, lower anxiety, higher mastery goals, lower performance-avoidance goals, and higher use of self-regulation strategies than

students who have lower levels of instrumental HS and higher levels of HS threat and avoidance. Across studies, mastery goals lead to perceptions of benefits of HS and adaptive HS and decreases in avoidance of HS, while performance-avoidance goals are associated with avoidance of HS (e.g., Ryan et al., 1997, Tanaka, Murakami, Okuno, & Yamauchi, 2002). Students' gender, ethnicity, and prior academic achievement also predict their adaptive HS (Ryan, Shim, Lampkins-uThankdo, Kiefer, and Thompson, 2009; Ryan & Shin, 2011). Unfortunately, students who need help the most (i.e., those with lower grades) are less likely to seek help (Ryan & Shin, 2011), especially when also concerned about their relative ability to others (Ryan et al., 1997).

Research has also shown that contextual factors impact students' HS. Numerous studies have documented that students' HS is impacted by their perceptions of classroom goals, parent goals, and other contextual factors (e.g., Karabenick, 2004). For example, within an experimental paradigm, Butler and Neuman (1995) found that task-focused conditions lead to more requests for help while students in an ego-focused condition have more help avoidance. Specific to students' HS with peers, Ryan and Shim (2012) determined that students transitioning from elementary to middle school who perceive an emphasis on mastery goals and teacher support increase in adaptive help seeking from peers, while students who perceive an emphasis on performance goals and declines in teacher support increase in their expedient help seeking from peers. Shim, Kiefer, and Wang (2013) found that students' perceptions of positive peer climate decrease their maladaptive forms of HS from peers, such as expedient HS and avoidance of help seeking. Less extensively studied is the role of peer relationships as antecedents to students' academic help seeking and giving. Students' interactions with their peers should influence the development of their help-seeking beliefs and behaviors; high quality friendships should allow students to feel comfortable expressing need for help, while students who do not have high

quality friendships may be reluctant to seek help (Newman, 2000). Students' social goals—strivings for their interpersonal relationships with their peers—are therefore likely critical to the help giving process with peers at school.

Social Achievement Goals

The present research draws on the Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) framework of student motivation, which defines motivation as the goals students pursue in achievement contexts (Dweck & Legett, 1988; Ames, 1992; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The theory distinguishes between goals to develop or to demonstrate competence and whether these goals are focused on gaining competence or concerned with a lack of ability and demonstrating incompetence (approach vs. avoidance). As researchers tested academic goal orientations in classrooms, they hypothesized that if students have particular goals in the academic realm, they likely have goals in the social realm as well (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Blumenfeld, 1992). Social goals—students' strivings for their interpersonal relationships—have been conceptualized in multiple ways (e.g., Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Gable, 2006; Wentzel, 1994). In line with motivational goal theories, Ryan, Hicks and Midgley (1997) studied students' intimacy goals, which focus on forming and maintaining positive peer relationships, and social status goals, which focus on social visibility and prestige among peers.

More recently, Ryan and Shim (2006, 2008) framed social goals parallel to the three-goal AGT framework. Students with a social *development goal* focus on developing their friendships and maintaining high quality friendships, students with a social *demonstration-approach goal* focus on demonstrating their friendships by looking popular and comparing themselves to others, and students with a social *demonstration-avoidance goal* focus on avoiding looking as if they do not have friendships or avoiding being made fun of by others. Social goals are highly relevant to

students at school; students often place just as much (or even more) emphasis on social goals as they do on academic goals in the classroom setting (Covington, 2000). Development goals are generally most adaptive, having been associated with positive social relations, social competence, prosocial behavior, and academic engagement (Horst, Finney, & Barron, 2007; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006; Ryan & Shim, 2008; Ryan et al., 1997). Demonstration goals are generally less adaptive. Demonstration-approach goals are positively associated with perceived popularity, but also with social worry, aggressive and disruptive behavior, and negatively related to prosocial behavior (Horst et al., 2007; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim 2006; 2008; Shim, Cho, & Wang, 2013). Demonstration-avoidance goals are associated with negative relations with others, social worry, anxious solitary behavior, and are negatively related to perceived popularity (Horst et al., 2007; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006; 2008; Shim & Ryan, 2012; Shim et al., 2013).

Social Goals and Help Giving with Peers

Compared to research on help seeking from instructors or general help seeking, there is less research focused on how goals impact peer HS. However, there are a few studies that help to guide our hypotheses for the first research question. Ryan and Shin (2011) found that students' social demonstration-approach goals negatively related to students general help seeking at school. Specific to help seeking with peers, Roussel, Elliot, and Feltman (2011) found that friendship-approach goals (*similar to social-development*) reduced costs of help seeking and positively predicted adaptive academic help seeking from peers and friendship- avoidance goals (similar to *social demonstration-avoidance*) positively predicted costs of help seeking and negatively predicted instrumental help seeking. While these studies do not look at the likelihood that a student will be asked for help based on their social goals, the role of social goals should function

in similar ways through students' interactions with one another at school.

Analogously, in the present study it is expected that students who are more oriented toward having meaningful and high quality relationships with their peers (oriented toward social development) should be more approachable and more likely to be asked for help. If a potential helper is unpopular and is anxious about how they appear toward others (oriented toward social demonstration-avoidance) they may not be willing to give help given the potential costs involved and therefore may be less likely to be asked for help by their peers. Students who are focused on looking popular (oriented toward social demonstration-approach) should also be asked for help less often, perhaps because they are intimidating to other students. Since the probability of being asked for help is likely related to number of friendships at school (e.g., Rose and Asher, 2004), we control for number of peer nominations. Furthermore, we control for students' GPA since it is expected that students with higher academic achievement will be asked for help more often.

The second research question focuses on how students' social goals impact the type of help they give to their peers. As mentioned previously, the type of help that a student seeks (or in the current study the types of help that students give to their peers) can be categorized as either *expedient* help or *instrumental* help. Magnusson and Perry (1992) determined that students with academic mastery goals are more likely to seek instrumental help, and students with academic performance goals are more likely to seek expedient help. We expect social goals to function similarly for the help giver—students with social development goals will be more likely to give instrumental help to peers, students with social demonstration-approach goals will be more likely to give expedient help, and students with social demonstration-avoidance goals will not be more or less likely to give any particular type of help. We will control for students' own preferences for types of help (expedient vs. instrumental) as well as students' GPA, since it is expected that

students with lower GPA will be more likely to give expedient compared to instrumental help.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Participants (n = 794) were 9th-12th grade students attending a suburban public high school in the Midwestern United States. Permissions were obtained from 72% of the school's students and their parents/guardians. Fifty-two percent of the sample was female, and students were 64.1% Caucasian/White, 11.2% African American/Black, 10.3% Asian, and 14.4% multi-racial or other. Hardcopy surveys were administered in February 2012 by teachers who read scripted instructions to students during homeroom. Students were told that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be confidential.

Measures

Social Goals. Social motivation was measured with the 13-item Social Achievement Goal Orientation Scale (Ryan & Hopkins, 2003, as cited in Horst et al., 2007). Social mastery contained five items (α = .90), e.g., "It's important to me to have friends at this school who really understand me." Social performance approach contained four items (α = .85), e.g., "I want to by friends with "popular" people at this school." Social performance avoidance contained four items (α = .83), e.g., "I'm often concerned that others at this school won't like me." Students responded to the items on a 5-point scale from not at all true of me to very true of me.

How Often Asked for Help. Students were asked, "Think about the times when other students at [your school] ask you for help with their schoolwork. On average, how often has this occurred during this school year?" They could respond on a 5-point scale, from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (often, e.g., daily or almost daily).

Number of Peer Nominations. Number of peer nominations was taken from the item:

"Please list the students at [your school] you hang out with the most, in no particular order. You do not have to fill in all the blanks. These names will not be seen by anyone at your school". Students were given 10 blanks to fill in. Number of peer nominations received was the number of times the student was listed by others on this section of the survey.

Help Seeking Preferences. Preference for instrumental HS was the mean of 2 items (α = .71), e.g., "Asking questions in my classes makes the material more interesting for me." Preference for expedient HS was the mean of 2 items (α = .51), e.g., "I think asking questions in my classes helps me to quickly get the answers I need." Students responded to the items on a 5-point scale from not at all true of me to very true of me. The items were adapted from Ryan and Pintrich (1997).

Type of Help Given to Peers. Students were asked, "If other students at [your school] asked you for help with schoolwork this year, what kind of help did you give them?" This was followed by statements indicating either instrumental help (2 items, α = .84), e.g., "You gave them help so that they could understand the material better" or expedient help (2 items, α = .71), e.g., "You gave them help so that they could succeed without having to work as hard." Students responded to each item on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Academic Achievement. Grade point average (GPA) for each student was used as a measure of academic achievement and it range from 0.00-4.00.

Results

The ranges, means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations of all study variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. The high correlation between demonstration-approach and demonstration-avoidance is a common occurrence in the goal literature, and researchers recommend that these two goals should remain separate factors and that suppression should be

examined when both approach and avoidance scales are included in regression analyses (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2012, Murayama, Elliot, & Yamagata, 2011). A confirmatory factor analysis found a good fit for the three-factor structure of the social goal items, $\chi^2(62) = 231.7$, CFI = .96, NFI = .95, RMSEA = .06, and the model fit significantly better than a two-factor model which combined demonstration-approach and avoidance goals, $\Delta\chi^2 = 294.60$, $p < .001$.

We ran a hierarchical multiple regression to address the first research question. The model is significant at all three steps (F's = 15.50, 45.08, 23.04, p's < .001) and each step explains significantly more variance in the outcome (ΔR^2 at Step 2 = .09, $p < .001$ and ΔR^2 at Step 3 = .03, $p < .001$). As shown in Table 3, at step one, how often students reported being asked for help by their peers is positively predicted by their popularity at school ($\beta = .14$, $p < .001$). At step two, students are more likely to be asked for help if they have higher GPA ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) and number of peers nominations is no longer significant. At step three, controlling for number of peer relationships and GPA, students report being asked for help more often if they endorse social development goals ($\beta = .11$, $p < .01$) and to a lesser extent social demonstration-approach goals ($\beta = .09$, $p < .05$), and are less likely to be asked for help if they endorse social demonstration-avoidance goals ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .001$). Due to multicollinearity between social demonstration-approach and -avoidance, the regression model was rerun twice (omitting each goal), as noted under Table 3.

Next, we examined whether the type of help given to peers was related to students' own social goals and preferences. Students had the option to opt out of this question if they reported that their peers never asked them for help, thus the sample size decreased to $n = 681$ for this model. We ran two multiple regression models, one predicting likelihood of giving instrumental help ($F = 19.08$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .14$), the next predicting likelihood of giving expedient help ($F =$

7.14, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .06$). As shown in Table 4, controlling for the positive association of GPA ($\beta = .08$, $p < .05$) and instrumental preferences ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$) on instrumental help giving, social development goals positively predicted (and social demonstration-avoidance goals negatively predicted) giving instrumental help (β's = .27, $p < .001$ and -.13, $p < .01$, respectively). Controlling for the negative association of instrumental help preferences on expedient help giving ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .01$), social demonstration-approach goals positively predicted giving expedient help to peers ($\beta = .16$, $p < .01$). Due to the multicollinearity between students' own preferences for expedient and instrumental HS, the regression models were rerun twice (omitting each type), as noted under Table 4.

Discussion

The findings add to our understanding of academic help seeking processes in schools. Social goals matter for how often students report being asked for help, above and beyond their popularity at school and their academic achievement. The findings largely support our hypotheses. Students are more likely to perceive that they are asked for help by their peers when they have a goal to have high quality relationships, and are less likely to by asked for help by peers when they are concerned about looking unpopular. Not in line with our hypotheses, students who had a goal to demonstrate popularity at school (demonstration-approach) reported being asked for help more often by their peers, although this finding becomes non-significant when social demonstration-avoidance goals are removed from the model. The results for type of help given are also illuminating–having higher levels of social development goals and lower levels of social demonstration-avoidance goals predict the likelihood of giving instrumental help to one's peers. As expected, students who are concerned about appearing popular at school were more likely to give expedient help to peers. These results could be interpreted as suggesting that

whom students ask for help impacts the quality of help received. If seeking instrumental help, students should focus on asking students who have higher academic achievement, who themselves value instrumental help, and who are social development oriented.

The results complement achievement goal theory and past research on social achievement goals (e.g., Ryan & Shim, 2008); we found positive benefits of social development goals, mixed findings for social demonstration-approach goals, and maladaptive outcomes of social demonstration-avoidance goals on academic help giving with peers at school. One unanticipated finding was that students' own preferences for expedient and instrumental help were highly positively correlated. Both of these measures could be considered perceptions of benefits of HS, which suggests that high school students may only have a general view of HS as either beneficial or not, rather than differentiating between different types of benefits of HS. In contrast, the correlation between the two types of help given to peers (expedient vs. instrumental) was negative. Looking closely at the wording of the items, these scales for type of help given to peers (which were created by the authors of this study) seem to differentiate much more distinctly between expedient and instrumental forms of help.

Although there are some limitations of the research, the study begets some exciting new directions for future research. One such direction is the use of social network analysis in order to map which peers students are reaching out to for help, whether help is reciprocated, and the extent to which helping networks are similar or dissimilar from friendship networks. This study controlled for two types of students' beliefs about the benefits of help seeking (expedient and instrumental), but another direction for future research then is to consider both the benefits as well as the costs of asking peers for help (Newman, 1990). One such cost is perceived threat from peers regarding help seeking (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997), which may also be related to

students' social goals. Furthermore, the one school sample may limit generalizability, so these results should be replicated across different schools to determine whether these findings are normative. When filling out the measures of social goals and to what extent they were asked for help from their peers, students were instructed to consider all of their classes. It is possible that students may have variant experiences across classes and could vary in their social goals across different contexts, which should also be examined in future studies. Finally, while the social goal measures were self-report due to the fact that social goals by definition are subjective in nature (Shim & Ryan, 2012), the measures around help seeking could be triangulated in future work with either observational studies or peer reports.

In conclusion, students' social goals at school impact the extent to which they are asked for help by their peers at school. After students are asked for help from their peers, their social goal orientations also impact whether they provide instrumental or expedient types of help. In order to increase instrumental forms of peer help giving, educators should specifically focus on promoting students' social development goals at school, which can be fostered through promoting a mastery goal structure in the classroom (Shim et al., 2013). Meece, Anderman, and Anderman (2006) provide specific recommendations (called TARGET) for promoting mastery goal structure in classrooms, which in turn should promote greater development-focused goals and lower demonstration-focused goals, and subsequently more adaptive help seeking and help giving among peers. Encouraging students' preferences for instrumental help should also in turn make them more likely to provide instrumental help to their peers. Teachers may want to scaffold procedures for how peers can help one another in instrumental and supportive ways, model the provision of instrumental help giving, and facilitate a safe and cooperative classroom climate rather than one that fosters competition.

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Table 1. *Range, Means, and Standard Deviations of the Study Variables*

	Range	M	SD
1. How Often Asked for Help	1-5	3.37	1.15
2. # Peer Nominations Received	1-11	2.84	2.22
3. Social Mastery	1-5	4.01	.88
4. Social Performance-Approach	1-5	2.10	.84
5. Social Performance-Avoidance	1-5	2.31	.89
6. Grade Point Average	0-4	3.06	.95
7. Instrumental HS Preferences	1-5	3.43	1.01
8. Expedient HS Preferences	1-5	3.10	.95
9. Gave Instrumental Help	1-5	3.97	.71
10. Gave Expedient Help	1-5	3.08	.98

Table 2. *Pearson Intercorrelations of the Study Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. How Often Asked for Help	-								
2. # Peer Nominations Received	.15***	-							
3. Social Mastery	.17***	.22***	-						
4. Social Performance-Approach	-.02	.04	.01	-					
5. Social Performance-Avoidance	-.10**	-.01	.09*	.64***	-				
6. Grade Point Average	.34***	.27***	.19***	-.03	.01	-			
7. Instrumental HS Prefer.	.15***	.00	.08*	-.06	-.10**	.10**	-		
8. Expedient HS Prefer.	.11**	.03	.04	.04	-.04	.05	.64***	-	
9. Gave Instrumental Help	.23***	.04	.28***	-.14***	-.16***	.14***	.19***	.10*	-
10. Gave Expedient Help	-.02	-.03	.00	.19***	.14***	-.07	-.14***	-.03	-.14***

Table 3. *Predicting How Often Student is Asked for Help from Peers at School*

	Step 1 $R^2 = .02$ β	Step 2 $R^2 = .11$ β	Step 3 $R^2 = .14$ β
# peer nominations received	.14 ***	.06	.03
GPA		.31 ***	.30 ***
Social Development			.11 **
Social Demonstr. Approach[1]			.09 *
Social Demonstr. Avoidance			-.17 ***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. At every step the change in R^2 was significant at $p < .001$. The outcome variable was rated on 1 (never) to 5 (often).

[1] Social demonstration-approach is no longer significant if social demonstration-avoidance is removed from the model, indicating suppression. No other suppression is noted in the models.

Table 4. *Predicting Whether Students Gives Expedient or Instrumental Help to Peers*

	Gives Instrumental Help $R^2 = .14$ β	Gives Expedient Help $R^2 = .06$ β
GPA	.08 *	-.05
Instrumental HS Preferences	.16 ***	-.17 **
Expedient HS Preferences[1]	-.01	.07
Social Development	.27 ***	.04
Social Demonstr. Approach[2]	-.04	.16 **
Social Demonstr. Avoidance	-.13 **	.04

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

[1] Expedient HS preferences positively predict giving instrumental help (β = -.01 becomes β = .09, $p < .01$) once instrumental HS preferences are removed from the model. No other suppression is noted for expedient HS preferences in the expedient model, or for instrumental preferences in the instrumental or expedient models.

[2] Social demonstration-approach goals become a significant negative predictor of giving instrumental help (β = -.04 becomes β = -.13, $p < .01$) when social demonstration-avoidance goals are removed from the model. No other suppression is noted.