



# A helping hand is hard at work: Help-seekers' underestimation of helpers' effort



Daniel A. Newark<sup>a,\*</sup>, Vanessa K. Bohns<sup>b</sup>, Francis J. Flynn<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>HEC Paris, France

<sup>b</sup>Cornell University, United States

<sup>c</sup>Stanford University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Whether people seek help depends on their estimations of both the likelihood and the value of getting it. Although past research has carefully examined how accurately help-seekers predict whether their help requests will be granted, it has failed to examine how accurately help-seekers predict the value of that help, should they receive it. In this paper, we focus on how accurately help-seekers predict a key determinant of help value, namely, helper effort. In four studies, we find that (a) helpers put more effort into helping than help-seekers expect (Studies 1–4); (b) people do not underestimate the effort others will expend in general, but rather only the effort others will expend helping them (Study 2); and (c) this underestimation of help effort stems from help-seekers' failure to appreciate the discomfort—in particular, the guilt—that helpers would experience if they did not do enough to help (Studies 3 & 4).

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## 1. Introduction

If a friend agreed to help you find a job, would you expect her to distribute your resume widely and offer a strong endorsement, or simply mention your name in passing to a couple of colleagues? If a coworker said he would give you feedback on an important presentation you were preparing, would you expect him to pore over it in detail, or just give it a quick skim? Questions like these highlight the extent to which help quality can vary. Yet despite this variability, questions about the quality of assistance one expects to receive should someone agree to help have drawn little research attention, even from studies aimed at understanding help-seekers' estimates of help outcomes. Rather than examine help-seekers' expectations of help quality, past research has examined help-seekers' expectations of whether help will be given (Bohns, 2016; Bohns, Newark, & Xu, 2016; Bohns et al., 2011; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark, Flynn, & Bohns, 2014; Roghanizad & Bohns, 2017). But just as whether one anticipates rejection or acceptance influences one's decision to ask for help, so too does one's assessment of the quality of help at stake. Like expectations of compliance, expectations of help quality play a critical role in explaining an individual's motivation to seek assistance.

### 1.1. Help quality and the expected value of receiving help

Most conceptions of intendedly rational or intelligent decision-making see action as guided by the anticipation of consequences (March, 1994). According to expected utility theory, satisficing, and other models of purely and boundedly rational choice (March, 1994; Mas-Colell, Whinston, & Green, 1995; Simon, 1955), decision-makers identify their alternatives, consider the consequences that may result from each of those alternatives, and then evaluate the desirability of each potential consequence according to their preferences. Fundamental to these models is the notion of expected value. In evaluating the desirability of decision alternatives, one must consider both the likelihood and value of each of the consequences that may result from each alternative. For example, in deciding whether a particular lottery is attractive enough to justify the costs of playing, an intendedly rational decision-maker considers both the odds of winning and the amount he or she stands to win. Both pieces of information are vital.

To make rational decisions, an individual must account for both the probability and value of the potential consequences of his or her actions. This tenet of rationality holds across a variety of decision-making contexts; deciding whether to ask for help is no exception. Predictions of compliance and help quality should factor into the decision to request help. However, research on help-seeking has focused solely on help-seekers' estimations of

\* Corresponding author at: HEC Paris, 1 rue de la Libération, 78350 Jouy-en-Josas, France.

E-mail address: [newark@hec.fr](mailto:newark@hec.fr) (D.A. Newark).

the likelihood of receiving help, should they request it (Bohns et al., 2016). Help-seekers' estimations of the value of that help, should they receive it, have largely been ignored.

Identifying whether help-seekers accurately predict the quality of help they might receive is part and parcel of determining whether help-seekers are unduly reluctant to request help. For example, help-seekers often underestimate the likelihood that their requests for help will be granted (Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark et al., 2014), suggesting that help-seekers may be better off requesting help more frequently. However, if help-seekers underestimate the likelihood of receiving help but simultaneously overestimate the quality of help they are likely to receive, then encouraging help-seekers to seek help more often may be misguided. For instance, unexpectedly poor quality help might leave help-seekers regretting their decision to seek assistance, wishing instead that they had avoided the stresses, anxieties, and feelings of indebtedness often associated with asking for, and receiving, help. Moreover, helping takes time and receiving one form of help sometimes means that other avenues for addressing a problem will not be pursued. If in the end one is not much better off than one was at the beginning, that time may feel wasted and one's overall position may feel worse.

Conversely, if those in need of help underestimate the quality of help they would receive, in addition to underestimating the likelihood that helpers will agree to their requests, then the consequences of not asking for help are worse than previously thought. Not only would individuals who need assistance be leaving help on the table, so to speak, but that help would have been worth more than they think. Simply put, to make a sound decision about whether to seek help, a person must have an accurate sense of both the likelihood of receiving that help and its value.

### 1.2. Predictions of helper effort as a key determinant of predictions of help quality

Help-seekers' predictions of help quality likely draw on the same factors that inform people's assessments of others' task performance more generally. Classic work on this topic (e.g., Dugan, 1989; Rotter, 1966; Weiner, 1979; Weiner et al., 1987) has shown that the three most salient factors in assessing task performance are: (1) characteristics of the task, (2) competence of the person performing the task, and (3) effort of the person performing the task. An individual attempting to predict the quality of another's performance on a particular task would consider the difficulty of the task, that person's specific competencies, and the amount of effort that person was likely to put into succeeding at the task. For example, if you knew that a colleague was working on a job application and you were to guess the quality of his or her cover letter, you would likely consider the nature of the task (How difficult is it to argue one's worth to a prospective employer in a cover letter?), that person's competencies (How capable is your colleague of making persuasive arguments in general?), and the amount of effort you would expect your colleague to put into writing the cover letter (How motivated is your colleague to get this job?).

Though a help-seeker would likely rely on these same three factors when predicting the quality of help he or she would receive, a helping interaction has unique dynamics that may bias help-seekers' predictions of a helper's motivation to expend effort. That is, while assessment of a task's difficulty and a person's competencies to perform it should not be systematically influenced by whether the task is being performed for oneself, for the person performing the task, or for a third party, assessment of the amount of effort a person will put into a task is likely to be subject to bias in the context of a helping interaction. This bias results from help-seekers having to judge not how motivated a person is to complete

a task well, but how motivated a person is to complete a task well *for them*. For example, consider the job application scenario described above, but this time imagine your colleague is writing you a letter of recommendation rather than writing his or her own cover letter. If you were to guess the quality of the arguments he or she were to make in a letter written for you, you would once again consider the nature of the task (How difficult is the task of writing a persuasive letter?), your colleague's competencies (How good is your colleague at making arguments in general?), and the amount of effort you would expect your colleague to put into writing the letter. However, while in the former scenario effort was tied to your colleague's self-interest (How motivated is your colleague to get this job?), in this scenario, effort is tied to your colleague's prosocial motivation toward you (How motivated is your colleague to write *you* a good letter and help *you* get this job?). Here, we focus on help-seekers' estimations of helper effort because estimations of helper effort are the key determinant of estimations of help quality that are likely to be misjudged by help-seekers.

### 1.3. Overestimating versus underestimating help effort

The accuracy of help-seekers' predictions of help quality hinge on their expectations of how much effort another person is willing to invest in helping them. At first pass, the possibilities that help-seekers will either overestimate or underestimate help effort seem equally plausible. However, we contend that help-seekers are more likely to underestimate the effort helpers are willing to provide. In the sections below, we outline the arguments for both predictions, and why we expect that help-seekers, in general, will underestimate the effort helpers are willing to exert on help-seekers' behalf.

#### 1.3.1. The case for overestimating help effort

Previous research on estimating the likelihood of saying "yes" to help requests has demonstrated that helpers often agree to provide assistance because of the discomfort they associate with refusing to help (Bohns et al., 2011; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark et al., 2014). Help-seekers struggle to appreciate this discomfort; instead, they attribute the helper's compliance to that person's stable disposition as a "helpful person" (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967; Newark et al., 2014). This line of research suggests two important dynamics that could result in help-seekers overestimating help effort. First, if potential helpers are driven primarily by the discomfort of refusing a request for help, their motivation to exert effort may be low once they decide to comply and their discomfort has been alleviated. Helping behavior driven by discomfort may feel partly coerced, leading helpers to provide assistance that is merely perfunctory. For instance, in one study, participants who felt coerced to comply with a request to volunteer at an event by the fear-then-relief compliance technique signed up for fewer volunteering hours than those who did not feel coerced (Dolinski & Nawrat, 1998), which suggests that feeling obligated to comply with a request may result in low effort and, therefore, low quality help.

Second, if help-seekers assume that anyone who agreed to help must be a helpful person, they would likely believe that such a person would behave accordingly when it came time to perform the helping task. That is, a "helpful person" would not simply agree to help, but would also work hard at helping. However, this assumption may not be merited. Work on moral licensing suggests that helpers' need to feel like a "helpful person" could be fulfilled by simply agreeing to help. Helpers could feel that they have already obtained "moral credits" just by saying "yes," affirming their sense of self-worth and reducing the pressure they feel to demonstrate their morality through subsequent behavior (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). In addition, help effort may be

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