



Academic help seeking from peers during adolescence: The role of social goals



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ABSTRACT

This study examined longitudinal associations among social goals and academic help seeking among peers during early adolescence. Students self-reported social goals (dominance, intimacy, popularity), efficacy (academic, social), teacher support, and help seeking among peers (adaptive, expedient, avoidance of help seeking) across the sixth grade ($N = 345$; 49% females, ages 11–12). Hierarchical regression analyses indicated social goals influenced subsequent expedient and adaptive help seeking (but not avoidance of help seeking) after controlling for efficacy, teacher support, and prior help seeking. There were gender differences in the mean-levels of constructs and the effect of goals. Popularity goals were positively related and intimacy goals were negatively related to expedient help seeking. For boys, dominance goals were negatively related to adaptive help seeking and positively related to expedient help seeking. For girls, intimacy goals were positively related to adaptive help seeking and dominance goals were negatively related to expedient help seeking. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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Students often encounter difficulties in the classroom and need help. Although seeking help from teachers is associated with desirable learning and adjustment outcomes (Karabenick & Newman, 2006), seeking help from peers has received less attention. Students often turn to peers for help when they encounter academic problems, as they provide valuable academic and social support (Altermatt, 2007; Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Scheib, 1986). Given the increased amount of peer interaction during early adolescence and the importance of peers in promoting learning and adjustment (see Ryan & Ladd, 2012; Wentzel, 2009), help seeking among peers is an important topic for early adolescent developmental research.

Help seeking has been examined in relation to students' motivational beliefs about academic work (e.g., achievement goal orientation; Butler, 2006; Karabenick & Newman, 2006; Newman, 1990; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). However, help seeking among peers involves social interaction between two parties and is likely to be affected by what students strive for among peers. Thus, we propose that examining the social motives students strive for in peer interactions will provide useful insights into adaptive vs. maladaptive help seeking exchanges among peers (Karabenick & Newman, 2006; Ryan & Shim, 2012). Consistent with our proposal, social goals (i.e., dominance, popularity, and intimacy) have implications for other academic indicators of early adolescents such as attitudes toward school, effort, engagement, and achievement

(Anderman, 1999; Kiefer & Ryan, 2008; Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005).

This study differentiated three types of help-seeking behaviors among peers: (a) adaptive help seeking, the tendency to ask for appropriate help when needed with the motive to learn, (b) expedient help seeking, the tendency to ask for help that expedites task completion without genuine interest in learning, and (c) avoidance of help seeking, the tendency not to ask for help when it is needed (Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005; Ryan & Shin, 2011). Given that individual differences (academic and social efficacy) and contextual factors (teacher support) influence help seeking (Karabenick, 1998; Karabenick & Newman, 2006; Ryan & Shim, 2012), we controlled for these variables, allowing us to examine the extent to which social goals make unique contributions to understanding help seeking from peers beyond these predictors.

Social goals and the nature of help exchanges among peers may change due to development as well as school transition-related factors (Eccles, 2004). Few studies have examined changes in help seeking from peers during early adolescence, especially during the first year of middle school (for exceptions, see Ryan & Shim, 2012; Ryan, Shim, Lampkins-uThando, Kiefer, & Thompson, 2009). Understanding changes in social goals and help seeking can provide insight into how students adapt to social and academic aspects of middle school. Additionally, extant research has documented that certain social goals (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996; Kiefer & Ryan, 2008) and help-seeking behavior (Marchand & Skinner, 2007; Ryan & Shim, 2012; Ryan et al., 2005) are more prevalent among boys vs. girls. We examined whether boys and

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girls showed different social goals and help seeking tendencies but we also wanted to explore whether particular goals may have a stronger influence on help-seeking behaviors of boys and girls. That is, if a particular goal is viewed normative and thus prevalent, will such a goal have stronger effect shaping the behavior of students in that gender group? Thus, an additional aim of the present study was to examine mean-level differences in the variables across gender and whether the relationship between goals and help seeking variables may be moderated by gender.

Help seeking from peers

Although help seeking from peers has not been examined as extensively as help seeking from teachers (Karabenick & Newman, 2006), these exchanges are quite common and learner-initiated (Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Scheib, 1986; Nelson-Le Gall & Gumerman, 1984). Adolescents often consider peers to be as, or more, important sources for help as teachers (Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992). Help seeking exchanges among peers allow students to gain valuable information and skills that support learning and performance (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Nelson-Le Gall, 1985; Newman, 1990) as well as accrue coping skills and emotional support (Altermatt, 2007). Values, expectancies, and effort modeled from and reinforced by peers during help exchanges may have lasting implications for student motivation, engagement, and achievement.

Engaging in adaptive help seeking is conducive to learning (Butler, 1998; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Newman, 2000; Ryan et al., 2005), as it involves requests for help that would further learning and promote independent problem solving (e.g., explanations, clarification, examples; Ryan & Shim, 2012), and it promotes sustained engagement and strengthens cognitive and social competencies associated with academic success (e.g., knowing when assistance is needed and how to frame a bid for help, knowing what peer may be best to approach and how to ask, and desiring to interact with more knowledgeable peers; Newman, 2000). Thus, adaptive help seeking tendencies are theorized to facilitate learning (Karabenick, 1998) and empirical data support this claim (Ryan & Shin, 2011; Ryan et al., 2005).

In contrast to adaptive help seeking, expedient help seeking is likely to undermine learning (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Newman, 2000; Ryan et al., 2005). This type of help seeking often involves requests for a peer to do the work or just give an answer without explanation or elaboration (Butler, 1998; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Ryan & Shim, 2012; Ryan et al., 2005). It is problematic if students turn to peers for an answer without initially trying to figure things out on their own.

Avoidance of help seeking, the tendency to not ask for help when needed, is likely to hinder student learning (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001) and negatively influence achievement across time (Ryan et al., 2005). Approximately one out of five early adolescents display avoidance tendencies, according to teacher reports (Ryan et al., 2005). Various reasons can account for students' avoidance of help seeking, including perceiving there is not a competent helper to provide assistance, that it will take too long to receive help, competence concerns, or the desire to complete the task on their own (Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Ryan et al., 2001, 2001).

Social content goal approach to examining help seeking from peers

According to achievement goal theory, the predominant theoretical approach to the study of academic help seeking (see Butler, 2006), students approach an academic task with qualitatively distinct achievement goals. Research using this theoretical framework indicates the goal of developing competence is related to adaptive patterns of help seeking whereas the goal of demonstrating competence is related to maladaptive patterns of help seeking (Newman, 1990; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). It is not surprising that academic motivation affects help seeking as it is a form of academic engagement. However, help seeking from peers may be affected by students' social strivings as

well. What a student wants to achieve from a social relationship or interaction tends to affect the ways in which students interact with peers around an academic task. Social achievement goals (Ryan & Shim, 2008), which represent the different goal orientations toward social competence (developing vs. demonstrating social competence), are related to help seeking around academic tasks (Roussel, Elliot, & Feltman, 2010¹; Ryan & Shin, 2011). Based on these prior studies providing initial evidence that social goals are relevant to help seeking tendencies, we expand and supplement this line of inquiry by examining the role of social goals using a different theoretical approach.

In contrast to the achievement orientation approach (e.g., reasons *why* an individual is trying to achieve; Ryan & Shim, 2008), a content goal approach focuses on cognitive representations of *what* an individual is trying to achieve (Ford, 1992; Wentzel, 2000). Research has identified specific goals students strive for in social situations, including responsibility, intimacy, and status (Ford, 1992; Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002), and indicates such goals impact students' help seeking from teachers (Ryan et al., 1997). A content approach to social goals is likely to complement the achievement goal orientation approach and enrich our understanding of help seeking dynamics around peers. In this study, we asked students what they like to strive for when they are with people their own age (i.e., dominance, popularity, and intimacy), focusing on outcomes that would make them happy or feel socially successful (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996; Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989). Social goals defined this way are related to social and academic adjustment (Anderman, 1999; Kiefer & Ryan, 2008) and avoidance of help seeking from teachers (Ryan et al., 1997) during early adolescence.

Dominance goals refer to a focus on having power over peers, characterized by getting peers to comply with one's wishes and instilling fear in others (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Dominance goals have negative implications for adolescent adjustment as they are positively related to aggression and disruptive behavior and negatively related to engagement and achievement (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008; Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Students who strive for power over peers may be less willing to appear vulnerable and engage in adaptive help seeking exchanges with classmates and may be more willing to engage in expedient help seeking, as it involves completing tasks by delegating others to do the work *for* them. These students may also avoid help exchanges with peers in order to control the classroom environment and avoid taking risks (Jones & Gerig, 1994). Thus, we expected dominance goals to be negatively related to adaptive help seeking from peers and positively related to expedient help seeking from peers and avoidance of help seeking.

Popularity goals refer to a focus on establishing high status characterized by visibility and prestige among peers (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). Students who strive for popularity may view help seeking as socially threatening or as garnering unwanted attention (Anderman, 1999), given that effort is increasingly viewed as incompatible with status (Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002; Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Similar to research examining social demonstration-approach goals (Ryan & Shin, 2011), popularity goals may be negatively related to adaptive help seeking among peers. Popularity goals may be positively related to expedient help seeking, as it may serve as a means to communicate low values regarding academic effort (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995) and anti-achievement norms (Galván, Spatzier, & Juvonen, 2011). Based on prior cross-sectional research (Ryan et al., 1997), popularity goals may be positively related to subsequent avoidance of help seeking. Thus, we expected popularity goals to be negatively related to later adaptive help seeking from peers and positively related to later expedient help seeking from peers and avoidance of help seeking (although less so than dominance goals).

¹ Roussel et al. (2010) used a slightly different conceptualization of social achievement goals (social approach vs. social avoidance). A social approach goal is somewhat similar to a social development goal from Ryan and Shim's (2008) model.

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